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from the 1950s to the Present

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Fabrizio Bertolino
University of Aosta Valley - Italy

f.bertolino@univda.it

Anna Perazzone
University of Turin - Italy

Rural environments in children's picturebooks: Playing with errors and stereotypes to reflect on our ecological identity

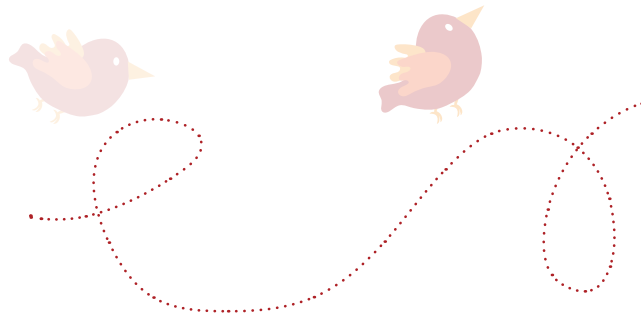
In the last century the rural environment, once the main place of life and source of livelihood, has for most people gradually become an unfamiliar space perceived through the car windows on the way to summer or winter holidays. Gradually this detachment has been metabolized and today we are witnessing a progressive idealization, often distorted or even fantasized, of the rural world.

This change in attitude to farms and countryside is reflected in several picturebooks for children that are published every year; also in movies, cartoons, video games and browser games for young children. With only few exceptions, puppies to pet or idyllic landscapes, paradoxical and problematic situations widely dominate these representations. Little or no space is devoted to the role played by the environment or on the daily urban life of people who still live and work there.

Although direct experience would be of the utmost importance to influence children's attitudes and feelings, virtual contact with remote and unusual realities may assume a relevant part in the child's education. Our critical analysis of 50 picturebooks (published in Italy, France and United Kingdom), enabled us to reflect on the cultural symbols and models that dominate children's imaginations concerning this increasingly alien environment, and afforded us the opportunity to unmask their limits and stereotypes.

We think that using, for educational purposes, images, stories and characters taken from picturebooks is an important opportunity to rebuild a genuine connection with the rural world that can – at least partly – compensate for the loss of children's ecological awareness, caused largely by a production and consumption system that has alienated our life from the rhythms and constraints of natural ecosystems.

This activity may provide the possibility of recognizing the bridging function that these didactic mediators may play with respect to direct experiences. Sometimes, fantastic and stereotyped depictions may hide interesting aspects of reality that can be revealed by means of irony, thus re-motivating not only school study but also a brand new immersion in the rural context.



References (preliminary)

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Fabrizio Bertolino, I obtained my degree in Natural Sciences. Since then I have directed my studies to human sciences and in 2003 I became a researcher in General and Social Pedagogy at the University of Valle d' Aosta, where I deal with the training of future teachers and educators. Over the years I have focused my scientific interests on areas that bridge between the "two cultures" by building specific skills in the field of environmental education and sciences education.

Anna Perazzone, Degree in Natural Sciences and researcher at the Department Life Sciences and Systems Biology, University of Turin. Member of the Inter-university Research Centre I.R.I.S. (Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability) at the University of Turin. Deals with Science Education and training of primary school teachers, particularly in the field of life sciences, environmental education and education for sustainable development.

