

The Illustrated Fiction between 19th and 20th Century

Claudia Cao – Giuseppe Carrara – Beatrice Seligardi

Abstract

The issue *The Illustrated Fiction between the 19th and 20th Century* fits into the fields of the icono-textual and visual studies. It focuses on the publishing choices in the 19th and 20th centuries and their aesthetic implications. The contributions collected in this volume discuss both theoretical and methodological aspects, especially significant when the authors take part actively in the drawing process. The papers analyse national and international macro-trends, matters related to reception, contamination, influences in European production, and aesthetic issues regarding the relationship between word and image. This volume aims at examining case studies from a theoretical-comparative perspective, focusing on some successful illustrated novels published in Europe between the 19th and 20th century, in order to highlight their relevance to the above-mentioned field of studies.

Keywords

Illustrated novels; illustration; iconotextuality; visual culture.

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Introduction

Studying illustrated fiction

In their well-documented *Social History of the Media*, Asa Briggs and Peter Burke (2002: 31) note that the rise of a book market “was associated with the rise of the mechanically reproduced image, and especially of the ‘print’”, adding that “The rise of the print was the most profound change in visual communication in this whole period, since it made images so much more widely available than before. Printmaking quickly involved leading artists of the Renaissance”: very frequently, these images were illustrations, such as Sandro Botticelli’s engravings for *The Divine Comedy*. Production, reading and circulation of literary works are also a visual fact: this is a remark which may be more obvious to book historians than it is to literary historians; nonetheless, it is worth emphasising. Very often – for large sections of the population – reading is tantamount to looking.

The argument applies at all levels of cultural production: from *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which in 1761 was published with illustrations at the behest of Rousseau himself, to the highly successful *Penny dreadful*, which came out in richly illustrated albums in Victorian England. It is precisely the 19th century that represents one of the central moments in this history: the time when, as Philippe Hamon has written, “L’image devient mobile et diverse. Et le XIXe siècle littéraire doit donc être considéré comme un champ de bataille perpétuel mettant aux prises des systèmes et sous-systèmes de représentation à la fois complémentaires, solidaires et concurrent» (Hamon 2001: 20). In fact, the number of editorial operations, connections between writers and illustrators, and jeremiads against this “genre bâtard” (Pelletan 1862: 247) that is the illustrated novel, increased notably.

However, 20th century literary criticism barely acknowledged this phenomenon: in a 1982 study on illustration in English literature, for example, Edward Hodnett noted that, apart from a few remarkable exceptions, most of the studies were by experts in printing, book history or graphic arts. The situation, in the Francophone and Anglophone criticism especially, has since changed clearly: numerous studies, for instance, have been carried out on Victorian illustration (to name just a few, Buchanan-Brown 2000; Maxwell 2002; Goldman and Cooke 2012; Golden 2017, and the list might even be longer if Dickens and his illustrators – some of whom are also considered in this issue – are taken into account.)

A decisive influence has come undoubtedly from the institution of visual culture as a discipline in its own right – especially the studies on what we have been calling ‘icon-text’ since the 1990s. Particularly after the studies by Wagner (1995) and Montandon (1990), the acknowledgment of the complexity of the relationship between text and image has helped provide methodological tools which are beneficial to criticism on the illustrated book, i.e. a specific type of icon-textuality; the field has later been widened so as to include an extensive diachronic analysis of the relations between the tradition of the illustrated novel and other mixed forms such as the graphic novel¹, or the interference between the illustration of classics and film adaptations (is it still possible to assess the fortune of *Alice in Wonderland* in cinema without considering the obvious connections between Tenniel’s illustrations and the Disney feature film or Tim Burton’s adaptation?)

Therefore, a specific field of study began to emerge, which Paul Goldman labelled as a “New Academic Discipline” in 2012, in his pursue of a “visual history of the text” (Ionescu 2011: 8) that takes into account all the significant aspects of a book layout, and is imbued with the awareness that

illustrare una storia significa molto più che inserire immagini, perché vuol dire scegliere modelli, confrontare le fonti, e, soprattutto, comporre un nuovo corpo testuale, che diventa, anche rispetto alla sintassi dei capitoli, un organismo più dinamico, grazie agli effetti di campo e controcampo con cui si incontrano le illustrazioni finali e quelle iniziali dei capitoli. (Brogi 2018: 31)

Still, in 2014, in one of the (also theoretically) most important essays on novel illustration in the 18th century, Benoît Tane warned that “La plu-

¹ See, for example, Brandigi 2013.

part des spécialistes de littérature évacuent l'image: elle est alors perçue comme conjoncturelle et étrangère à l'œuvre" (Tane 2014: 23). Tane raised some of the problems which are crucial to scholars who study illustrated literature, which are also critical in the papers that this issue of *Between* seeks to highlight: the role played by image in shaping works of fiction; the modification of the relationship between reader and *œuvre*; the *status* of authorship; the role of publishers and the market; the development of typologies and methods of analysis which are appropriate for the subject matter; the importance of the technical and material dimensions (which determines the scope of expressive opportunities, the very nature of illustration as "art contraint"; Martin 2004: 31). A preliminary issue, though, lies in the definition of what literary illustration is about, within the icono-textual *continuum*².

This is not as much a definitional punctiliousness as the need to set the boundaries of an object of study which is elusive and insubordinate by nature, in order to facilitate its understanding and devise suitable methods of study. Is it John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* illustrated by Rébecca Dautremer (2020) still an illustrated novel or does it amount to a different object? The artist's personality exceeds Steinbeck's narrative to such an extent that a text of barely 100 pages is turned into into a work of more than 500 plates. Are we still confronted with Steinbeck's work? Is it a visual re-writing whose only author is Dautremer? Is this a co-authored illustrated novel? Any of these might well apply, which is not an isolated case: artist John Austen considered the novels he illustrated, starting in the 1920s (from *Moll Flanders* to *David Copperfield* to *Madame Bovary*), as his own work, expressing *his* idea of beauty and form.

Even such brief and cursory preliminary considerations make it clear that any analytical approach to illustrated novel implies the confrontation with several problems which are embedded in a complex cultural system (this is what the authors of the essays collected in here do indeed); these issues can be summarised without any presumption of exhaustiveness. First of all, it is a matter of considering how the individual illustrated works are placed within the icon-textual *continuum*: in other words, this is about questioning how the relationship between text and image works (in the case of illustration, this is not so much a *thing* as a *relationship*), while at the same time acknowledging that illustration in itself lies within a – changeable, dynamic and ever re-negotiable – rationale by which the

² See Carrara 2021.

two codes³ share their referent; second, it is about discussing the functions of images within the 'rhythm'⁴ of the text – i.e. the different types of images (frontispieces, vignettes, *fleurons*, *cul-de-lampe* and so on) and, in particular, their position in the text (what Le Men 1999: 10 calls “critère de localisation”) – from a necessarily interdisciplinary perspective which manages to integrate the formal features of illustration with those of verbal language (this is what Donata Meneghelli does in her contribution on the frontispieces in Henry James’s New York Edition, for example). Third, it is about exploring the issues related to authorship, which become decisive aesthetic questions (and also involve dynamics which are properly economic and legal, in particular those concerning copyright, as the story of *The Betrothed* illustrated by Gonin clearly shows): from the role of the publisher as commissioner, to the writer-illustrator co-authorship, to instances of different types of subordination (which also impose the re-shaping of both text and image: paradoxically, illustration can also act as a *contrainte* to the writer), up to cases of double talent or re-appropriation and quasi-re-writing by artists. These aspects sometimes concern the reception of works but may also involve genetic criticism on various levels: from Lewis Carroll expunging a chapter from his *Alice* for strictly iconographic reasons (this is Tenniel’s suggestion) to the long sequence of manuscripts illustrated by their authors themselves (just think of the best-known case of Kafka’s papers).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the need to consider these problems from the perspective of cultural history too: in this perspective, illustration plays a decisive role in the circulation and fruition of literature, and sometimes even modifies the way certain translated texts are received by the target polysystem, in which new illustrations can change radically the interpretation of the text, reverberating with other visual cultures and entering a complex network of representations.

Rise and fall of the illustrated fiction between the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth century

Early 18th-century fiction was not commonly illustrated, except for decorations and frontispieces: in the British cultural context, it is estimated that about one-sixth of the published works were illustrated. However,

³ See Baetens – Van Gelder 2006.

⁴ See Louvel 2011.

this figure does not take into full account children's literature: illustrated versions were probably published in greater numbers than it is currently quantifiable, because they were meant for temporary use⁵ rather than library collection. Moreover, as publishers' customary re-usage the same illustrations in different publications shows, it is commonly acknowledged that in the first decades of the 18th century the illustration was mainly conceived as a purely ornamental, rather than essential, part of the text. The main illustration techniques included carving, aquatint, etching, and – only in one out of ten case – woodcut⁶.

In the first half of the 18th century, the French aristocracy and royal house had developed expensive experimental technologies in the printing field, which were also adopted by private typographies and gradually influenced the European publishing market. This led to a wider diffusion of a taste for illustrated texts and a sudden increase in the circulation of lighter and smaller books, also in the case of works that were meant for a bourgeois audience.

The advance and prevalence of the bourgeoisie, in fact, combined with the decrease of printing costs and the increasing mobility of influential artists and engravers who were able to spread the taste for illustration throughout the continent, were the factors that led to a wider diffusion of French trends. In the case of England, for example, engravers from Netherlands and France – who had arrived for political or religious reasons – had a decisive impact on the taste of the British public and the illustration techniques adopted by typographers.

In the second half of the century more than a dozen English illustrators were active: the most famous is William Hogarth, to whom we owe the merit of merging ironically visual narration with the humorous and satirical literature emerging in England⁷. Despite its brevity, his *A Harlot's Progress* (1732) is in fact commonly recognised as the first graphic novel, capable of narrating through images, therefore combining text and illustration. His stories gave birth to a new genre in which journalistic information met literary narrative. The first versions of illustrated novels began to circulate in England especially in magazines; the drawings were intended mainly for novels which had already been successful. Among the most renowned works, there were re-editions of books illustrated by

⁵ See Bland 1958.

⁶ See Bland 1958; Levarie 1995.

⁷ See Smolderen 2014.

artists such as Thomas Stothard, and edited by Charles Lamb on *The Nine-list's Magazine* (1780-1788)⁸.

Between the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century, the rapid innovations in the engraving techniques were crucial to the diffusion of illustration in popular production; from 1820s, steel replaced copper and wood also in the production of books⁹. Let us consider, for instance, the trend of the publication of literary annals, in vogue between the 1820s and 1830s: they were real best-sellers containing “poetry, short stories, dramatic scenes, sheet music, travel accounts, political statements, historical renderings, classical references, descriptions of Europe, war accounts, artwork, portraits, lavish bindings, and bevy of famous authors,” and they introduced “a literary and visual genre that would be both scorned and embraced by England and beyond” (Harris 2012)¹⁰.

The 1830s are also known for another important turning point in the relationship between novel and illustration: the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) is generally recognised as a crucial moment in the history of illustrated novel, thanks to a set of factors linked to the increase in literacy, diffusion of mass culture, new technologies for printing, and serialisation, which began to replace the traditional issuing in three volumes. However, it was not the first successful illustrated novel: Scott's works accompanied by Cruikshank's drawings were among the most appreciated. The change that *The Pickwick Papers* introduced was the notion of the narration as the result of the “absolute synergy between the verbal and the iconographic component,” (Carrara 2021: 130)¹¹, along with the active collaboration between author and illustrator.

Therefore, Dickensian production can be considered as emblematic of the rise and fall of illustrated fiction in the middle of the century¹². While critics commonly recognise two conflicting styles dominating the first two phases of the history of illustrations – ‘the Cruikshank-Phiz era (1830–55)’, characterized by more humorous and caricatured representations, and ‘the Millais era (1855–70)’, characterised by greater realism –, less attention has been given to the following phase. During the 1870s the same illustrators

⁸ See Leighton – Surridge 2017.

⁹ Victorian Web ma cfr anche altre pagine <https://victorianweb.org/graphics/kinds/copper.html>

¹⁰ See also Harris 2015.

¹¹ Our translation.

¹² See Jackson 1981: 12.

as those who were active in the previous decade were still operating, but the influence of photographs and advertising, along with the different expectations of a more sophisticated audience, began to affect the style of illustration, and the relationship between writers, illustrators and publishers started to change.

Since the 1860s, Dickens's work had been showing the decline of the importance of illustration, which became evident during the following decades (he died in 1870): since when *Great Expectations* was published, he began paying less attention to the visual side of his work; this is all the more significant when compared to the collaboration with his illustrators – George Cruikshank and Hablot K. Browne, known as 'Phiz' –, often resulting in tensions and disagreements due to Dickens's interference in the selection of illustrations, choice of titles, or even single details of the images. The serialised version published in *All the Year Round* was not illustrated, by virtue of the interruption of his relations with Browne as much as the changes in readers' expectations. From the end of the Fifties, images began to be considered superfluous given the increasingly educated and demanding public¹³, and the new collaboration between Dickens and Marcus Stone for the volume edition did not produce significant results either. It is difficult to interpret the reasons for Dickens's choices, but it seems plausible that, as Davis proposes, he conceived *Great Expectations* as a more modern and autonomous work than the previous novels, and he tried to avoid simplified interpretations through illustration.

It was in this cultural context that, almost ten years later, Dickens conceived his last novel which, as Saverio Tomaiuolo points out in his contribution "Drawing the (Un)finished Line in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*", has generated an intense debate for the parallels between the visual opacity of Collins's illustrations and the textual opacity of the narration. This is a case of particular interest due to the openness of this work, which looks to be integrated by – and stimulates many interpretive possibilities through – the drawings: compared to what observed in relation to *Great Expectations*, *Edwin Drood* can be defined "a closed textual unity" in which "words and illustrations leave intact the enigma the title alludes to, since – through their specific style and semiotic density – they both construct a written and visual narrative that opens itself to multiple readings." (Tomaiuolo) With reference to Dickens's reception in Italy in the same years, and in particular the illustrated edition of *Memorie di Davide Copperfield* published

¹³ See Davis 1984: 139. See also Cohen 1980.

by Treves (1868-69), in her essay “Tears and middle-class decorum in the iconotext of the first Italian edition of *David Copperfield*”, Eleonora Gallitelli notes the “different iconotexts in the presentation of the characters, [...] especially [...] the female characters, who, in the Italian edition, invariably appear as daughters, mothers, wives and aunts, maids and orphans, who may sometimes be mistreated or tearful but are never shown as ‘fallen women’” (Gallitelli). This contribution ascribes the different treatment of female figures to the intention of emphasising “a moralising tone at the expense of irony and humour” (Gallitelli).

The Italian illustrated novel in the 19th century and its close link with the English production are among the pivotal points raised by Alejandro Patat in his essay “Rovani e il rapporto inter-iconico con *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*”, in which he focuses on the novels *Cento anni* (1868-69) by Rovani and *The Last Days of Pompeii* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1870). After introducing the Italian public’s inclination for historical settings, and the dense intertextual network generated by Rovani’s text, the contribution focuses on the “inter-iconic relationship” between the illustrated edition of *Cento anni* and Bulwer-Lytton’s novel. Patat aims at analysing their relationship with history and the illustrative strategies adopted to avoid both the effect of musealisation and idealisation of the past.

As for the French context, in the contribution titled “Illustrated itineraries in *Corinne ou l’Italie* by Madame de Staël”, Valentina Monateri analyses the 1853 Plon Frères edition by Victor Lecou, aiming to investigate to what extent the iconotextual dimension of the work makes it possible to “enlight its cultural, political and conflictual stratifications.” (Monateri)¹⁴ The essay examines the way in which, in the central chapters of the work, the “materialization and [...] the visualization of the protagonists’ romantic, cultural, political itinerary” (Monateri)¹⁵ assumes critical relevance with respect to the importance of travel literature’s visual dimension.

The endpoint of this investigation of the 19th century fiction is the first French edition of Zola’s *Assommoir*, examined in Nicole Siri’s contribution “The First Illustrated Edition of *L’Assommoir* (Marpon-Flammarion, 1878): Writing and Drawing the Time of Industrial Capitalism”. The essay concentrates on the most experimental illustrations in order to explore their relationship with the impressionist aesthetics, so as to “identify [...] the formal means through which illustrations and narration respectively

¹⁴ Our translation.

¹⁵ Our translation.

realise the [...] mutation of lived time,” (Siri)¹⁶ which took place between the 1860s and 1880s after the Second Industrial Revolution.

Illustration and New Media in the 19th and 20th Century

Important changes affected the mediascape in the second half of the 19th century; and, during the so-called *fin de siècle*, they got remarkable. First photography, then cinema had disruptive effects in the field of visual arts, as well as the literary field, which led to controversial reactions: the harsh criticism of photography as a medium expressed by Balzac and Baudelaire (who had their photographic portraits made by the most important Parisian photographer of the time, Nadar nonetheless) is a memorable example; later, Pirandello was so vocal about the seventh art that he wrote a novel, *Shoot! The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio*, which was a thorough accusation against the alienation caused by cinematography; his text, though, became an essential reading for scholars of the interaction between cinema and literature. As for the illustration, the progressive inclusion of photos in it (including stills and photos taken on the set of film adaptations) strengthened the inter-media and transmedia connections. Beside its theoretical implications, exchanges and intersections of evolving cultural industries were affected too, with far-reaching consequences on the cultural field, canonisation processes, and the parallel formation of specific audiences.

The inclusion of photography in the realm of illustration raises some questions, hinging on the allegedly referential foundations of the photographic medium: if we think of illustration as something based on a «logic of identity, that is, a close referential proximity between the scene being narrated and the one being photographed» (Carrara 2021: 141, my translation), using photography-as-illustration impacts on the relationship between the fictional world and its possible realemes. On the one hand, it might blur the boundaries between the two levels, thereby inducing an immersive illusion of sort in readers which might influence the ‘real world’ too, leading, for instance, to literary tourism. On the other hand, it might translate into an increasing “estrangement factor” for both media (word and image), thus producing a sort of critical distance which may also suggest a meta-critical reflection on the poetics of the authorship involved.

When dealing with photography-as-illustration, another theoretical

¹⁶ Our translation.

issue concerns the extent to which this phenomenon may overlap, or differentiate from, the other taxonomies formulated in the fields of literary theory and visual studies. How does the relationship enabled by illustration differ from the ones generally defined as ‘iconotextual’ or ‘phototextual’?¹⁷ While the distinction between iconotexts and illustration based on their greater or lesser consistency between images and text (Carrara 2021) is a first step to be taken, the general impression is that most of the *entre-deux-siècles* occurrences outline a liminal condition, where the degree of hermeneutic variability – as related to the different kinds of authorship, readership and cultural industries involved – should be taken into due account.

This liminality calls into question the relationship which, in the case of 20th-century illustrated texts, often arises between the different creative industries and the targetisation of different audiences, in terms of bibliomania, children’s literature and popular culture: the authorial and/or editorial aim to reach a specific target often affects significantly the way in which the illustrations are conceived and included, as for both content and layout – the latter being an aspect that should never be underestimated in the analysis of texts combined with images.

The invention of cinema and the development of a related industry since the early decades of the 20th century interact with the publishing market and the morphology of illustrated texts. Film adaptation, in the Hollywood industry and beyond, implies the inclusion of film stills in the new editions of the original literary work. This ‘rebound effect’ of sort is also often related to film photographs made for advertising purposes: these are pre-existing images created specifically to capture the attention of a potential spectator, in which significant moments of the film have been cherry-picked pre-emptively. In this case, the analysis of the co-authorship of an illustrated text highlights the interaction between cultural industries (publishing and cinema), in a transmedia perspective which takes into account the reciprocal exchanges between economic structure and cultural superstructure.¹⁸

This issue of *Between* includes several articles focusing on early 20th century case studies which provide different answers to the aforementioned questions. In her “Boring postcards. Spaces and places in the photographic frontispieces to Henry James’s New York Edition”, Donata Meneghelli

¹⁷ See, for instance, Cometa 2016; Carrara 2017; Carrara 2020; Marfè 2021.

¹⁸ See Jenkins 2006; Bonifazio 2020.

raises some theoretical questions related to the publication of James's complete works, as edited by the author himself between 1907 and 1909 for Scribner and arranged in several volumes with Alvin Langdon Coburn's photos on their frontispieces. The illustrations, supervised by Henry James himself, who had previously shown a certain scepticism about the new art, are analysed by Meneghelli within a complex discursive network, which includes "multiple fractures: a marketing enterprise (which will turn into a financial failure); a complex exercise in authorship; the construction of a literary monument reflecting/establishing the canonical status of the author; an autobiographical journey through one's experience and writing career; the foundations of a Jamesian aesthetic." (Meneghelli) These images are contrasted with Henry James's concept of "spatial imagination", which permeates the entire project at several textual levels. This helps outline the continuous exchange between James's literary theory (particularly, his definition of the point of view), the use of visual metaphors creating a link between images, prefaces and captions, and the overlapping of cultural imagery and novelistic construction.

The link between illustration and poietic reflection is also the centre of Viviana Triscari's article titled "An 'unheard-of and extraordinary monomania'. The *fantastic* illustrations by Alberto Martini for the stories of Edgar Allan Poe", which offers an insight on the relationship between images and short stories. Before literary theory designated the 'event' as the narrative core of the short story, Poe himself had identified the 'unity of effect' as the essence of this literary form. In view of this, Martini seems to have interpreted the American writer perfectly, by adopting a series of visual strategies related to that 'monomania', or *trance*, which the artist shared with Poe's characters. In the analysis of Martini's pen drawings for Poe's short story *The Tell-Tale Heart*, probably completed between 1905 and 1911, Triscari underlines the artist's accurate reading of Poe's short story, as shown through the emphasis on the crucial detail of the story – the eye of the old neighbour – but also through several diegetic choices applied by Martini. Within the illustration, the gaze looking at the spectator is able to convey that 'fantastic' way echoing the one displayed in the literary work, as is properly shown by Triscari's analysis of the point of view in a trans-media perspective.

Jan Baetens's article, titled "Quand l'illustration refait le texte: *Banalité* de Léon-Paul Fargue et les 'compositions' de Lorrin et Parry", focuses on the 1930 edition of *Banalité* (1928), a text by Fargue whose atypical structure included poems, prose, autobiographical reflections, etc. When André Malraux, Gallimard's director, decided to re-publish it, he chose to include

the photographic ‘compositions’ by the illustrator Fabien Lorry and Roger Parry, whose photographic career began on that very occasion. Baetens contextualises the publishing operation within a specific market, that of rare books, designed for a bibliophile and intellectual public that was still ill-disposed towards photography. The decision to combine Fargue’s text with pictures taken by two non-professional photographers moves in an experimental direction, also prompted by the suggestions of the magazine *Arts et métiers graphiques*. The result is one of the most interesting examples of an avant-garde book, in which the dialogue between text and image, font and layout, innovates one of the primordial and everlasting forms of the photographic medium (but also of life-writing), that is, the family album.

Finally, Valentina Abbatelli’s essay insists on the intersection between cultural industries, iconographies and readership. The title itself – “From paper to film: historical and cultural implications of Italian illustrated editions of *Little Women* (1908-1945)” – suggests a reflection on the transnational and transmedia nature of illustration. The reception of Louisa May Alcott’s most famous novel (1868) in Italy in the early 20th century and the *Ventennio Fascista* era is investigated by the author through the comparison of the iconographic – and ideological – aspects of the illustrated editions on either shores of the Atlantic. Their diachronic evolution is also taken into account, in light of its film adaptations. The homonymous film directed by George Cukor (1933), starring Katharine Hepburn as Jo March, becomes a new intertext – and a new medium – which Italian publishers are confronted with, in a historical period (the second half of the Thirties) in which intermedia and popular forms such as photo-novels and cine-novels spread widely, and different gender models – arising both from school education and the cinema-star imagery – started to collide.

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The editors

Claudia Cao

Serves as a contract lecturer in English literature at the University of Cagliari. Her publications pivot around rewritings, adaptations, family novels, and sisterhood. Among her most recent works, there is the book *I contro-spazi della narrativa di Ian McEwan. Teatri, carceri, giardini e altri luoghi* (Aracne, "Riverrun", 2022). She is a member of the editorial board of *Between*

Email: claudia.cao@unica.it

Giuseppe Carrara

Teaches Criticism and Literary Theory at the University of Milan. He is the author of the monographs *Il chierico rosso e l'avanguardia* (Ledizioni, 2018) and *Storie a vista. Retorica e poetiche del fototesto* (Mimesis, 2020). He co-edited, with Laura Neri, *Teoria della letteratura* (Carocci, 2022) and, with Silvia Cucchi, *Erotismo e letteratura. Antologia di scritti militanti* (Mucchi, 2022).

Email: giuseppe.carrara@unimi.it

Beatrice Seligardi

Beatrice Seligardi is Junior Assistant Professor (RTDA) in Literary Criticism and Comparative Literature at the University of Sassari. Her research interests focus on literary theory and the relationships between literature and visual studies. She has authored three monographs: *Ellissi dello sguardo. Pathosformeln dell'inespressività femminile dalla cultura visuale alla letteratura* (Morellini, 2018); *Finzioni accademiche. Modi e forme del ro-*

manzo universitario (Franco Cesati Editore, 2018); *Lightfossil. Sentimento del tempo in fotografia e letteratura* (Postmedia Books, 2020). She is part of the Governing Board of COMPALIT.

Email: bseligardi@uniss.it

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