
**ALTARS, STATUES, MURALS:
'RELIGIOUS' VISUALITIES OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SANTIAGO DE
CHILE**

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ABSTRACT

This photo-essay is the result of a three-year research project aimed at exploring the visual culture of eight, State funded, primary schools in Santiago de Chile. It presents classroom altars, statues and murals as recurrent visual events within school life, that seem to challenge both traditional pedagogical practices and youth's connections with modern visualities. Thus, questions regarding the relationship between religious visual symbols and education are problematized.

KEYWORDS

Visual culture of schools, religious visualities in schools, elementary schools, everyday aesthetics, Chile

BIO

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Visual culture of schools

For the past 15 years, the visual culture of schools has consolidated as a research area that brings together anthropologists, sociologists, artists and educators looking to problematize the roles and meanings of visual phenomena in education. According to Prosser (2007: 14), the visual culture of schools refers to a ‘scheme handed down by previous generations of teachers and authorities as an unquestioned and unquestionable guide to all observable events’ that take place on school grounds.

For example, the building façade presenting the school name and other institutional symbols, cabinets displaying sports and academic trophies, historic pictures showing past cohorts and other significant people, hallway bulletin boards with daily information, classroom wall images with instructional guidelines, holidays and birthdays celebration posters, among others, constitute the everyday scenario of many schools worldwide and yet, their pedagogical rationale and visual implications are elusive to identify and discuss. In this sense, different scholars speak today about a ‘visible yet hidden curriculum’ (Porterfield 2017).

Moreover, research about the visual culture of schools allows framing a paradox within present-day education: even though we live in an extremely visual world where students have already become producers more than mere consumers of visualities, it is not clear whether schools have the ability –or the interest– to take advantage of those new visualities in favor of more critical, democratic, and insightful pedagogical experiences. In other words, there seems to be a gap between the visual resources that students have at hand, and the capacities that teachers, administrators and the school as educational institution possess in order to make the most out of those same resources.

Visual culture of Chilean schools

In Chile, recent exploratory studies have approached the visual culture of schools from multi-layered perspectives such as feminism in visual arts education (Montenegro 2019), students’ interventions in art-based projects (Schwember 2018), the implicit pedagogical proposals of school facades (Errázuriz and Marini 2016) and the everyday visual aesthetics of school environments (Errázuriz 2015). All in all, these studies help characterize the visual culture of Chilean schools as comprising both continuities and discontinuities between extremely traditional educational practices and contemporary challenges:

On the one hand, Chilean classroom spaces still embody ‘the’ place for instruction. In there, students’ attention is typically guided towards ‘the front’ –a whiteboard, a smartboard, a television, a set of learning objectives and routines printed on color letters– In addition, student participation in crafting their own visual environment is minimal and, when it does take place, it usually follows pre-made templates. Moreover, figures of prominent people such as national heroes, artists or politicians are limited to male characters, commonly closer to European heritages than to Latin-American or aboriginal backgrounds.

On the other hand, Chilean schools seem to allow for some degree of student-managed, visual production in outdoor spaces such as playgrounds or sports fields. These may take the form of mosaics, murals, graffiti or photo-installations that portray relevant and complex themes such as the risks of global warming, the need to confront social inequalities and migratory crises, among others. As discussed by Schwember (2018), when students are given the power to modify their everyday environment, they recognize their neighborhood, their families’ traditions and their diverse ethnic origins as key dimensions.

Inquiring religious visual culture of primary schools in Santiago de Chile

For the past three years, the author of this photo essay has been registering the visual culture of eight primary schools in Santiago de Chile in a record that shows what teachers, students and administrators see on a daily basis. Throughout the process, classroom altars, statues portraying saints, and murals exhibiting religious messages emerged as habitual visual events.

This was unexpected. Fundamentally, because all of these eight schools receive funding from the Chilean national government which draws a constitutional separation between state and all religious organizations, and their students are increasingly non-religious (according to local statistics only 10% of youth participate in religious organizations (INJUV 2018: 79)). Thus, questions regarding the relationship between religious visualities and education have arisen, fundamentally concerning:

1. What do classroom altars, statues and murals reveal about the visual culture of these eight schools?
2. Are these objects a demonstration of obsolete colonial-based pedagogical practices or are they an opportunity to find new connections with youth?
3. Are these schools capable of challenging and refreshing the meaning of 'religious' visualities today?

Rather than pretending to solve these questions, the following figures problematize them, revealing the need to continue investigating relationships between religious visualities and the visual culture of schools.



FIGURE 1: This figure shows an archetypical classroom altar. The crucifix, an open book, a triptych, and a candlestick together with some dry flowers and the hanging rosary, all account for the 'must have' objects that schools present to students during class time.

Yet, nothing in this picture speaks explicitly about Chile nor schooling. This could be a hospital, a parish or a museum showing minimalist religious symbols from the XIX or XX century.



FIGURE 2: Less of a traditional altar, the elements in this figure are far more common in schools everyday life. One can only wonder about the origin of the trophy with the national colors stripes, or the purpose of such a small calendar next to it, or if anyone in the class will be capable of deciphering the escape route chart below. Along this line, the actual content of the melamine cabinet that supports all these elements, and the reason why the broom and trash are located to the right, remain a mystery.



FIGURE 3: Strategically, this altar takes advantage of classroom lockers, remaining visible to all students at all times. However, it is worth noting that the constant opening, closing and locking of the metal doors may easily put at risk the tryptic and statue's stability. This fact could help students take special care when using their lockers.



FIGURE 4: When the altar grows –or the classroom shrinks– it is also possible to find hybrid visualities such as these. The altar table, including its basic elements, seems to evolve into symbiotic relationships that incorporate the images of Mary on top, the trophies on the right shelf and the instruction-oriented whiteboards to the left.



FIGURE 5: The location of large figures in common spaces poses peculiar challenges to schools. Perhaps to allow for direct eye contact or for safety reasons, they are usually placed on top of pedestals and next to walls. When located in indoor spaces they are sometimes cornered, what generates a feeling of ‘surprise’ to anyone entering the room.



FIGURE 6: In the case of this figure, the whiteness of the statue's marble together with the floor and wall's materiality contribute to an uneasy sense of 'detention' or 'suspense'. Is this statue inviting to stand by and linger under its spell? Or is it a phantasmagoric resemblance of someone who used to be significant for this school community but was 'deposited' here?



FIGURE 7: Outdoor locations present other dilemmas, as statues may become invisible within a turmoil of visual stimuli.



FIGURE 8: Yet, this hand-painted plaster statue emerges as a distinct visual figure, interrupting an oversaturated window. Surprisingly, even though the statue and the flowerpot are located in a hallway that connects two classrooms with the main playground, no damage from crushes or soccer balls is visible.



FIGURE 9: On the edge of a gigantic playground, to the left of a metal kiosk and framed by large palm trees, this statue seems to indicate a usual meeting point. This is reinforced by the shade the entire group offers and the color lines on the floor alluding to children's games.



FIGURE 10: A solid-looking pedestal raises this statue well beyond students' height. However, the plastic roof and the right hand gesture seems to provide a feeling of 'welcoming' which is emphasized by the lower sign reading 'Let children come to me'.

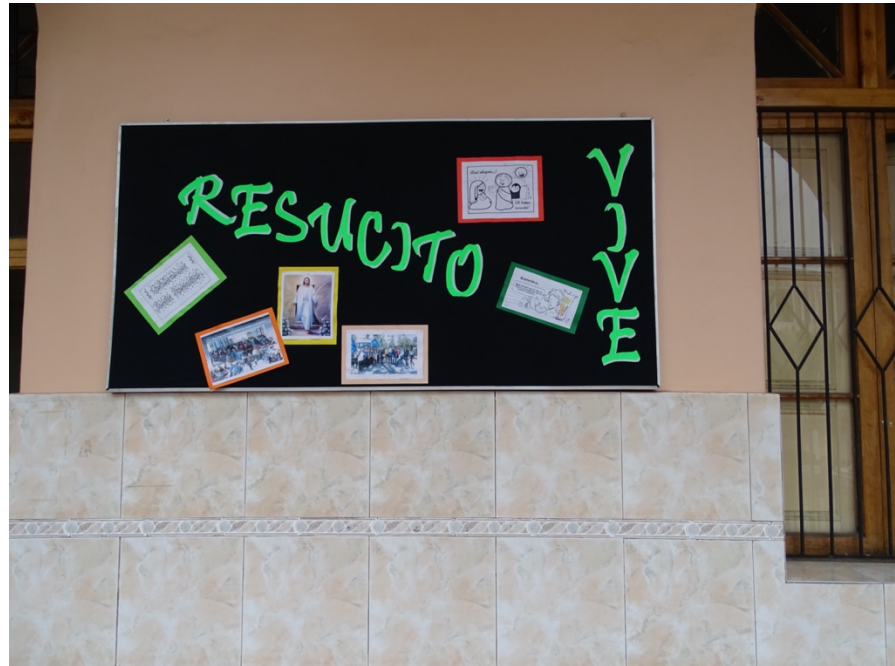


FIGURE 11: Besides from the strangeness caused by the text ‘RESUCITO’, literally ‘He resurrect’ written downwards, this hallway mural exemplifies the practice of adult-made images that try to capture students’ attention. Certainly, two pictures in the lower end of this mural do portray students, but there is no evident sign of children’s intervention in the production of the entire device.



FIGURE 12: These pre-modeled drawings echo that same practice. Rather than wondering what does Palm Sunday ‘Domingo de Ramos’ commemorates, the emphasis seems to fall on the different copies of the same image. It is not clear who got the chance to paint the central image, but it seems students only had the option to orientate their donkeys towards the left or towards the right. In addition, the reason why a donkey-less image appears to be floating on the right side of the board remains a mystery.



FIGURE 13: This mosaic has reduced religious symbolism to the least possible; just a tiny cross on the front of a small room. However, the presence of a young person holding the door to that place, surrounded by key representations of Chilean school life such as the soccer ball, the snowed mountain range and the national flag, among others, transform this image into a vivid example of syncretic relationships, which radiates student participation and everyday interactions.



The best day of my life
is today
seize the day,
thanks be to god
you are alive, breathe

FIGURE 14: A motivational statement, a first day of class welcome and a communitarian project, this mural has no pretension of becoming a religious sign whatsoever. Still, the continuity between 'making the most out of the day', 'being grateful' and 'breathing' speaks about a school that has made the effort to identify which are the key qualities that guide their educational project, merging transcendental references with everyday happenings.

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