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DO TOUCH! HOW BRUNO MUNARI'S PICTUREBOOKS WORK

TOCCA! COME FUNZIONANO GLI ALBI DI BRUNO MUNARI

This essay is based on a historical corpus of Bruno Munari's picturebooks (from the Forties to the Eighties) in which content, shape, color, texture, material and graphic design transform his works into verbal, visual and tactile narratives, which are vital to children's reading pleasure and development. In an era when children were chided to "please don't touch", Munari groundbreakingly designed picturebooks in which touch became a key sense for reading and understanding. The purpose of this article is to examine methodically and in detail how Munari's picturebooks work and to identify the narrative mechanisms that are able to offer children tactility and a fulfilling reading experience. After a short introduction and an overview of the key role books and education play in Munari's oeuvre, a detailed analysis will look more deeply into the three narrative mechanisms designed by Munari for his picturebooks. The body of this analysis is divided into three parts, each dedicated to explaining one of the three narrative mechanisms that transforms the book page into a stage of everyday life, an active agent and a challenge of limits. The main findings of this investigation will reveal that Munari's picturebooks open up imaginary worlds in everyday settings that draw the reader into the action and push them to be challenged by limits rather than bow to them, even those books published to be understood and handled by toddlers.

Questo saggio analizza un corpus storico di albi illustrati di Bruno Munari (dagli anni Quaranta agli anni Ottanta) in cui contenuto, forma, colore, consistenza, materiale, grafica e design trasformano le opere in narrazioni verbali, visive e tattili, vitali per il piacere della lettura e lo sviluppo cognitivo delle bambine e dei bambini. In un periodo storico in cui l'infanzia veniva redarguita a "non toccare", Munari rivoluziona e innova la progettazione dell'albo illustrato, eleggendo il tatto a "senso" chiave nella lettura e nella fruizione del libro. Il saggio analizza in modo approfondito e metodico i meccanismi narrativi di albi, capaci di promuovere la valenza educativa della tattilità e della lettura quali esperienze gratificanti. Dopo l'introduzione e l'inquadramento storico-culturale rispetto al ruolo giocato dall'educazione e dai libri nel lavoro di Munari, il contributo si sofferma sul funzionamento di tre meccanismi narrativi presenti nei libri per l'infanzia dell'artista e designer milanese. Il primo meccanismo eleva la pagina a "palcoscenico" della quotidianità; il secondo meccanismo trasforma la pagina di un libro in un "agente attivo" e, infine, nel terzo meccanismo il piccolo lettore viene catapultato in esperienze di lettura che sfidano il senso del limite. L'analisi rivelerà come e perché questi libri, che mettono al centro del progetto editoriale la sfida intellettuale, anche nelle esperienze editoriali per i piccolissimi, siano in grado, ancora oggi, di alimentare l'immaginario di bambine e bambini.

Key words: Bruno Munari; History of Children's literature; Picturebooks; Tactility; Materiality; Education.

Parole chiave: Bruno Munari; Storia della Letteratura per l'infanzia; Albi illustrati; Tattilità; Materialità; Educazione.

Introduction

For its tenth edition, the Triennale Design Museum of Milan organized a special exhibition devoted to the relationship between design and childhood. *Giro giro tondo. Design for Children* (Milan, 1 February 2017 – 18 February 2018) presents a special selection of Italy's historical and contemporary tools or materials for children. Besides books and pedagogical tools for writing, drawing and thinking used by renowned Italian teachers Maria Montessori, Rosa and Carolina Agazzi, Alberto Manzi or Mario Lodi, the exhibit includes architecture, furniture, toys and games, animation, and food packaging. The books sections of the exhibition highlighted Bruno Munari's interdisciplinary approach that comprises art, architecture, science, technology, visual communication, and publishing (Dell'Acqua Bellavitis 2017), but it also focused on Munari's approach to education. Munari's response to the urgent educational needs of that time was to introduce children and adults to different perspectives and place them before the vastness of possibility using unconventional methods. In his empirical explorations, he studied contemporary childhood education theories, especially the theories of the American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey and Swiss epistemologist Jean Piaget. Dewey's theory (Dewey 1934)¹, that we are able to understand the full importance of a work of art only when, in our mental processes, we go through the same problems that the artist went through to produce his work confirmed some conclusions Munari had himself intuited. Piaget's theories (Munari 1981, 229) and revolutionary study on the cognitive development of children, proving children-centered activities that facilitate trial-and-error experiences are very helpful for early literacy and may help develop children a keen eye for imagination and creativity, deeply influenced Munari. Now aware of the devastating damage that is caused by adult indifference to and/or conformity with rigid education methods that can stunt children's development and their creativity, Munari started designing appropriate educational tools, such as his picturebooks. His goal was to encourage children's creativity and complex thinking through ludic experimentation and visual narratives. This paper examines the three unexplored narrative mechanisms Bruno Munari uses in his picturebooks to transform traditional graphic layout and book design and introduce innovative handlings of materials and objects into unconventional and thought-provoking narratives. The first narrative mechanism transforms the book page into a stage of everyday life. The second narrative mechanism considers the book page as an active agent. Finally, the third mechanism transforms the book page into a challenging experience of limits. Of Munari's vast array of picturebooks, I have selected five bodies of work for the basis of this paper: *Cappuccetto Giallo* (Little Yellow Riding Hood, 1972), *Cappuccetto Bianco*, (Little White Riding Hood, 1981), *L'uomo del camion* (The Lorry Driver, 1945), *Nella notte buia* (In the Darkness of the Night, 1956) and *I Prelibri* (Prebooks, 1980). Using these works as examples, I will reveal how Munari applies these three mechanisms to transform his books into multi-sensory objects.

¹ It is quite interesting to note that Munari contributed a review of the text *Art as Experience*.

The role of books in Munari's oeuvre

In Munari's career, there are a few constants: the role of play as a leading element in his projecting path (Meneguzzo 1993, 91); a deep interest for the generative power of natural forms (Antonello 2017) and elementary geometries (Munari 1960, 1964, 1976); delight in the small, the simple, the light-hearted, the whimsical, and the ephemeral (Schnapp 2017). With his focus increasingly on books, his interdisciplinary approaches granted him limitless possibilities to explore and create. Munari, either as a writer or as an illustrator and graphic designer, authored or contributed to «almost 180 books, ranging from essays on art and design to experimental books, creative writing, didactic books and children's literature» (Zanoletti 2017, 193). He devoted so much of his energy and resources to books because he believed that books represented a «personal diary» (Maffei 2008, 12). The ethical imperative underlying his books was the need to make his thoughts clear and his explorations shareable, which he did by taking notes, testing and recording field observations and writing down his research results and experiences. He wrote and illustrated masterpieces of children's literature: picturebooks, wordless books, pictureless picturebooks, illustrated books, book-objects, book-games, photo picturebooks, and material-books, including his surprising visual and tactile narrative hybridizations, such as *Libri illeggibili* [Unreadable or illegible books]² or *Libro letto* [Bedbook]³.

Study of Munari's picturebooks has been extensively explored by Italian and international scholars of children's literature, analyzing historical development (Terusi 2012; Restelli 2013), witty visual and graphical elements (Salisbury 2015), the color substitution game in Munari's retellings of Little Red Riding Hood (Beckett 2002), the sense of time and its perception (Varrà 2012), the function of play (Campagnaro 2016), the sense of space (Campagnaro 2017), the fascinating creativity behind his book-objects or artist's books (Mirabel 2008; Beckett 2012), and the cognitive and educational implications in Munari's picturebook design (Munari 2016). However, little attention has been paid to the narrative mechanisms underpinning Munari's polymorphic use of the page in his picturebooks that is studied in this article.

² *Libri Illeggibili* were displayed at the Libreria Salto exhibition in Milan in 1949. It was during this exhibition that the illegible books appeared for the first time. *Libri illeggibili* was a series of six illegible books, most of them lost except "Primo Libro 1949" (Maffei 2008: 236). Copies were handmade by Munari himself. In 1953, two thousand copies of a white-and-red 'unreadable' book with cut pages was published by Steendrukkerij de Jong & Co. in the Netherlands, edited by Pieter Brattinga in the Quardat Blatter series. A selection of *Libri Illeggibili* was also displayed at another exhibition – *Two Graphic Designers: Alvin Lustig and Bruno Munari* – which was organized by The Museum of Modern Art of New York on the museum's first floor galleries from 18th October to 27th November 1955. The exhibition aimed to present two different and highly singular approaches to graphic design: one American and one Italian.

³ The *Libro letto* (Munari and Ferreri 1993) is a baby's bed, a comfortable six-page picturebook, a book to live in, a book where children can physically take a nap (format: 70 cm x 70 cm x 2 cm).

Narrative mechanisms in Munari's picturebooks

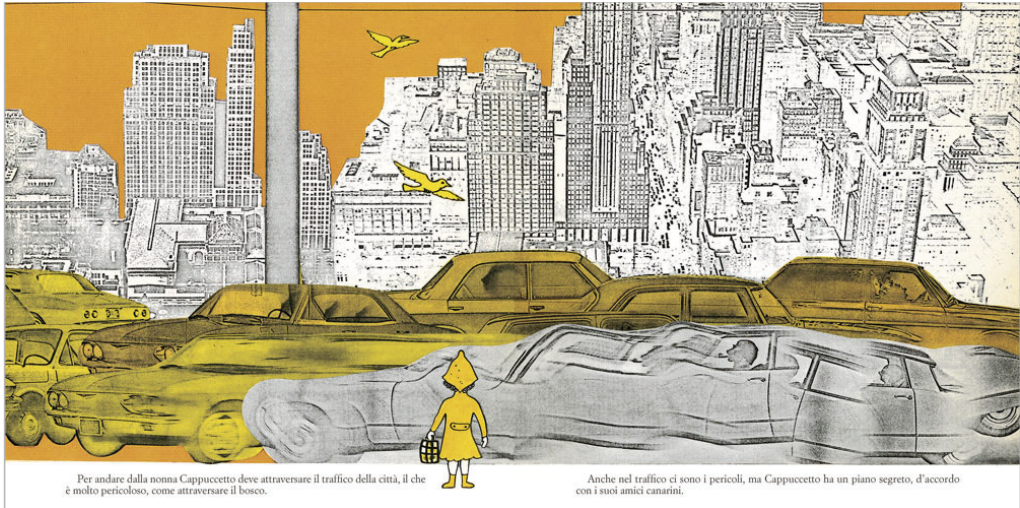
According to Jeffrey Schnapp, Munari used the page as «a generative unit» which serves «as a laboratory, play space and classroom, as a place of encounter and exchange» (Schnapp 2017, 116). Munari's approach to picturebooks aimed to promote children's intellectual independence through an active, sensorial and playful problem-solving exercise by using the book page as a laboratory unit. This "laboratory" uses three narrative mechanisms to transform the book page into a sensorial stage on which different settings perform and interact playfully (115); transform the book page itself into an active agent through tactile elements (thickness, texture, holes, cuts, folds, binding, pockets and flaps (115); transform the book page is into a space challenging the experience of limits (Meneguzzo 1993, 57). The combination of these three mechanisms in Munari's picturebooks revolutionized visual and aesthetic elements and expanded their use for different educational purposes.

First narrative mechanism: Book as a stage of everyday life

The source for Munari's creative ideas never ran dry because he drew his inspiration from everyday life that he used to re-create detailed miniatures of everyday settings (Menna 1966, 15). Though the settings of Munari's adventures not portray unreal, imaginary or fictitious places conjured up from his imagination, these books are "fantastical" because they plunge the protagonist (and the reader) into everyday situations that are anything but mundane. It is often his magnification of space or weather that makes the adventure fantastical or unique. In *Cappuccetto Giallo* (*Little Yellow Riding Hood*, 1972), his graphic collages and montages convey a chaotic setting, focusing attention on the frenzied city traffic that makes crossing the road more hazardous than traversing a forest. In *Cappuccetto Bianco* (*Little White Riding Hood*, 1981)⁴, Munari's use of absolute white conveys a heavy snow that covers absolutely everything, muffling sound and conveying peace. Munari believed that creativity was not inventing something new, but discovering the unexplored parts of what already exists. Based on the surprising effect of the unexpected, unforeseen and fabulous aspects of everyday reality, his aim was to combine the visually bewildering playfulness of a visual text with the formal linearity of the verbal text. Munari's choices of urban settings and weather in *Cappuccetto Giallo* and *Cappuccetto Bianco* create a tactile and sensory reading experience: the reader may "experience" the noisy traffic or the silence of a snowy place. Munari imbues the settings for his stories with so much at-

⁴ *Cappuccetto Bianco* was first published by Einaudi in a volume edited by Bruno Munari in 1981. The book *Cappuccetto Rosso Verde Giallo Blu e Bianco* belonged to the "Libri per ragazzi" series (no. 68) and contained a collection of five different versions of Little Red Riding Hood: Brothers Grimm's *Little Red Riding Hood*, Munari's *Little White Riding Hood*, Munari's *Little Green Riding Hood* and *Little Yellow Riding Hood*, which were first published in 1972, and *Little Blue Riding Hood* which was written and illustrated by Maria Enrica Agostinelli and published in 1975. These editions were all previously published by Einaudi.

mosphere and personality that they in themselves become characters that can attract children's attention and test their sensory receptiveness. In *Cappuccetto Giallo*, for instance, the graphic photomontage is dynamic and aggressive: the mass of dangerous, fast-moving, dirty cars take on the role of wild angry animals, and the enormous maze of tall, impenetrable black-and-white skyscrapers is the threatening forest, both positioned between the small, vulnerable cut-out drawing of Little Yellow Riding Hood and her destination (Figure 1).



Per andare dalla nonna Cappuccetto deve attraversare il traffico della città, il che è molto pericoloso, come attraversare il bosco.

Anche nel traffico ci sono i pericoli, ma Cappuccetto ha un piano segreto, d'accordo con i suoi amici canarini.

Figure 1 - Bruno Munari, *Cappuccetto Giallo* (Mantova: Corraini, 2014) - © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

According to Nikolajeva and Scott (2003), setting situates the actions in a time and place, but it can go far beyond this in establishing the genre expectations of the story. Setting can provide a pervasive affective climate that sets the reader's emotional response to a particular register (e.g. frightening, humorous, grotesque, nostalgic), as well as a plot device to move the story forward through changes to the setting (61). In *Cappuccetto Giallo*, the typographic collage has been organized into a powerful composition that readers are able to "touch" and even "feel" the instability and danger of this urban landscape. Unlike *Cappuccetto Bianco*, where images are not used to create the setting and words alone bring it to life. *Cappuccetto Bianco* (1981) begins like this:

Never seen so much snow.

This morning we woke up and opening the window we were blinded by so much white. The snow had been falling all night and had covered everything.

Never seen so much snow!

Even if you look carefully at all this snow, you can't see anything. You can't distinguish the dog kennel, the box hedges, the stone bench, the outline of the flowerbeds, the path

leading to the woods anymore. Even if you open your eyes wide you can't see anything.
 All you can see in the snow is Little White Riding Hood's Eyes.
 She looks very worried.

Munari offered children an innovative retelling of a classic fairy-tale, but above all a real and touching experience of a snowy landscape. The sensory receptiveness of this landscape is convincing and lifelike: we can see snow everywhere. In this case the negative white space, which is usually limited to the areas around an image, tells the story. The visual and emotional impact is surprisingly strong and the graphical empty and silent space becomes the dominant feature of the story. Unsurprisingly, Munari dedicated this pictureless picturebook to two of his peers and masters of silence and empty spaces: Remy Charlip and John Cage. Remy Charlip was multitalented (dancer, choreographer, playwright, stage director, costume designer, lecturer and teacher), and like Munari, he was quite interested in childhood and wrote and illustrated many picturebooks. Late 1957 or early 1958 Charlip sent Munari a greeting card of a silent snowy landscape that became one of Munari's sources of inspiration for his *Cappuccetto Bianco*. Another source of inspiration for Munari's work came from American avant-garde composer Cage, well-known for his unconventional ideas and compositions. Where Cage challenged the definition of "music", Munari questioned the meaning of "image". Munari appreciated Cage's research approach and poured into *Cappuccetto Bianco* Cage's most famous music experimentation: his 1952 composition "4'33" in which the musician does not play one note on the piano. Munari echoes the silence of this composition in *Cappuccetto Bianco* and presents a highly unusual work of art for a picturebook: a blank visual narrative. Despite the fact that the only images on the page are two, *Cappuccetto Bianco* is still deemed to be a picturebook. The protagonist of this story is the pure, silent and powerfully vibrant whiteness of the book page.

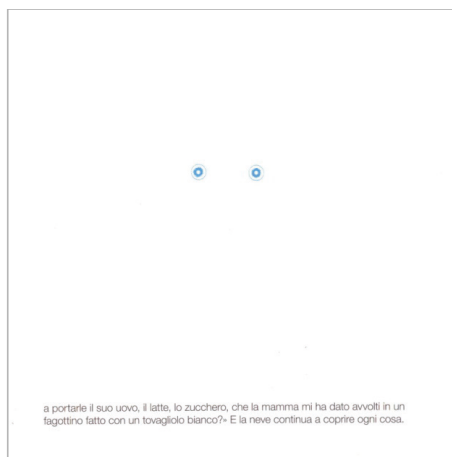


Figure 2 - Bruno Munari, *Cappuccetto Bianco* (Mantova: Corraini, 2017) - © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

Thanks to this narrative mechanism that uses the book page as a stage of everyday life, Munari expands the reader's visual and sensorial experience and helps him/her to glean significant information, whether the images be packed with overwhelming action or reduced to two blue dots on a page.

Second narrative mechanism: Book page as an active agent

In 1945, Munari was determined to give his son a book for his fifth birthday but couldn't find anything he felt was suitable, so he decided to design and write his own books. Munari fashioned the pages himself and they were full of cutouts, flaps, windows. As his son tested and enjoyed the set of books, it dawned on Munari that other children could be as entertained by them as his son was. Someone from Mondadori saw his dummies and asked him to print them. However, it was wartime and these books were considered too frivolous especially at a time when printing children's books was not a necessity. In the end, only seven of these ten books were actually printed, but those seven were translated and published in the United States soon afterwards⁵.

This picturebook series questioned the very foundations of children's books and took a design approach that is as revolutionary today as it was back then. The material and tactile elements (e.g. folds, binding, pockets and flaps) on the pages of these picturebooks become the real protagonists. *L'uomo del camion* [The Lorry Driver] is a good example of graphical and typographical components embodied in a set of striking illustrations with windows that open and pages that shrink and then grow in size. The protagonist of the story is Marco, a lorry driver, who wants to surprise his son on his birthday with a gift wrapped in red-and-white-striped paper. Marco has to get home on time, but when the lorry breaks down ten kilometers from his house, Marco is despondent. After a while, he opens the lorry bonnet and something surprising appears: a car. Marco happily travels by car until the 9 km sign when the car breaks down, as well. From the car a motorbike appears, but at the 8 km mark a nail causes a flat tire. The story continues with a calamity at each kilometer marker that slows down the delivery of the present but is resolved by a sequence of different forms of transport.

⁵ The series was originally designed with ten titles, but the publisher decided to publish only seven at that time. Today Corraini publishes nine of the ten. The tenth has disappeared without a trace. Bruno Munari, *Mai contenti* (n. 1) (Verona: Mondadori, 1945); Bruno Munari, *L'uomo del camion* (n. 2) (Verona: Mondadori, 1945); Bruno Munari, *Toc Toc Chi è? Apri la porta* (n. 3) (Verona: Mondadori, 1945); Bruno Munari, *Il prestigiatore verde* (n. 4) (Verona: Mondadori, 1945); Bruno Munari, *Storie di tre uccellini* (n. 5) (Verona: Mondadori, 1945); Bruno Munari, *Il venditore di animali* (n. 6) (Verona: Mondadori, 1945); Bruno Munari, *Gigi cerca il suo berretto* (n. 7) (Verona: Mondadori, 1945). In 1997, Corraini published a further two: Bruno Munari, *Il prestigiatore giallo* (Mantova: Corraini, 1997) and Bruno Munari, *Buonanotte a tutti* (Mantova: Corraini, 1997).

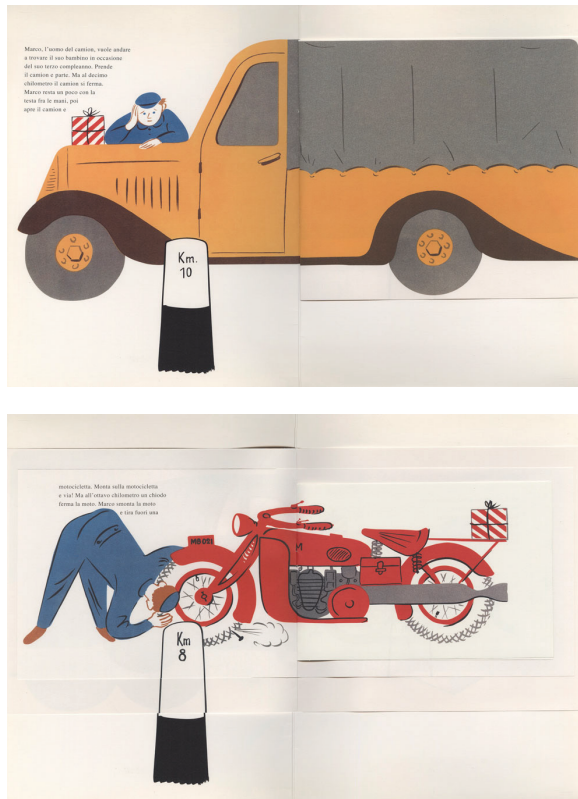


Figure 3 and Figure 4 - Bruno Munari, *L'uomo del camion* (Mantova: Corraini, 2008) - © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

Munari's graphical inventions are so well-conceived that the story enables its young readers to engage in a variety of sensory experiences: the sense of size (pages shrinking to fit as each successive vehicle becomes smaller), distance (the presence of mile-stones), and time (the sun grows yellower and has moved across the sky, becoming larger and orange by the time Marco reaches home). Munari conceived a «quiet revolution» (Finessi and Meneguzzo 2007, 1) that disempowered words and empowered the act of turning pages, which established a direct sensory dialogue with young readers and encouraged their curiosity through their own communicative autonomy. Munari's typographical solutions are the results of a special mixture of pleasure and knowledge, imagination and rigor, simplicity and detailed attention to the senses of sight, touch and hearing. In Munari's eyes, children are not passive recipients of facts, but active agents who acquire knowledge thanks to their continuous interaction with the pages of his picturebooks. While turning the pages of this picturebook, children become involved in the story and drawn in by the difficulties that this father has to overcome to reach home. They realize that Marco is a caring and resolute father: he faces multiple setbacks to reach his son on time for his birthday but he never stops,

even when he is forced to walk the last kilometer barefoot. The story alone is touching, but Munari's use of the shrinking pages to denote Marco's diminishing time and window of opportunity renders the page as an active protagonist, adding urgency to the father's trek to reach his child on time.

Another one of Munari's most popular picturebooks is *Nella Notte Buia* [In the Darkness of the Night], which was first printed in 1956 and is still published today. Through a spellbinding combination of different papers, transparencies and cutouts, a tale is told of an interconnected, personal yet wide-ranging journey across three backgrounds (a darkened scene, a meadow and a mysterious cave). There are drawings on black paper, holes punched out of pages, die cuts, layers of vellum, and a treasure chest with a lid you can lift to see its contents. The real performers in this picturebook are the innovative elements of design (paper thickness and texture, holes, cutouts, folds, bends, perforations, flaps), pioneering variety of materials (paper, cardboard, tracing paper) and «games of hide-and-seek and make-believe» (Schnapp 2017, 116).

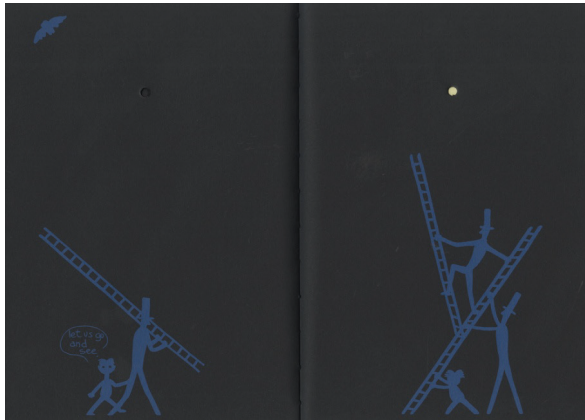


Figure 5 and Figure 6 - Bruno Munari, *Nella notte buia* (Mantova: Corraini, 2017) - © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

In the opening scenes, turning the pages enables children to track a yellow light through a small regular hole in the paper, perfect for a child's finger. Eventually children discover the light is a firefly, and through transparent central pages, children glimpse the tiny inhabitants of a meadow. In the last section, irregularly perforated pages, containing cave paintings such as prehistoric hunters, wild animals, such as bison, aurochs, deers and fossils engross readers in a fun, surprising discovery of human history. As with *L'uomo del camion*, Munari's innovative use of materials and of the page turning not only adds an extra dimension to the story but elevates the book page to center stage. The hole in the paper gives a glimpse of what is to come, the vellum both reveals and obscures the meadow, which trigger surprise, astonishment and the hands-on involvement of young readers, whose fingers are entranced by the unexpected ways the pages tangibly metamorphose.

Third narrative mechanism: Book page as a challenging experience of limits

In the 1970s, Munari started to strictly adhere to a mechanism (Ballo 1965) of his own creation that challenged the experience of limits. A "limit" is a boundary or dividing line that separates two territories, states, or situations, imposing containment, a reduction, or a narrowing that prevents progress. However, although a limit both restricts and contains, it is also a temptation that fires the imagination and drives it towards "the beyond", an unknown space waiting to be explored. Munari employed this mechanism to tempt the reader and play with a limit's boundaries. What does the application of this mechanism imply? When Munari himself was faced with limits, a state of deprivation or constraint, he used this as an impetus to seek knowledge, allowing him to see «the limit to which an object, an idea or a person can be taken without it becoming unnatural» (Meneguzzo 1993, 23). In the case of picturebooks, this involved investigating the possible options in which a narrative could be presented to a young reader. As a limit is also a challenge, it is an ideal way to stimulate readers' thoughts, encouraging them to look carefully at aesthetics and the events that occur inside, around or outside books from multiple perspectives. This is the case with Munari's *Prelibri* [Prebooks], a series of ingenious touch-and-feel sensory micro-narratives for very young children first published in Italy by Danese in 1980. Munari stated, the aim of *Prelibri* was to see

whether it was possible to use the materials that make-up a book (except the text) as visual language. The question is whether one can communicate visually and tactilely solely by using a book's production materials. In other words, as an object, can a book communicate something beyond the printed word? And if so, what does it communicate? (Munari 1981, 217)

Munari dedicated himself to the exploration of this concept and applied it to a diverse range of educational universes for very early ages. Discarding standard and often mediocre book formats, Munari tested and mapped out a path that would enable him to exploit books to their full potential.



Figure 7 - Bruno Munari, *I prelibri* (Mantova: Corraini, 2016) - © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

Prelibri expanded on Munari's experiments for the myriad visual and touch-and-feel possibilities for his *Libri illeggibili* (Illegible Books), experiments that began in 1949 and continued for forty years. Influenced by Piaget's theories, Munari believed that in the first years of life, children learned about and discovered their surroundings with all five senses. He thus designed a series of twelve 10 x 10 cm "object-books" small enough to fit into a child's hands and easily browsed and touched. Both front and back covers were printed with the title "libro" (book), giving complete freedom to begin from the front, back, top, bottom, right, left and center. The books have no beginning, middle or end, nor do they appear to have a plot, but they do offer children the opportunity to make free use of their senses to discover or build their own stories. Sensory reading is a completely personal experience, which takes place in a number of ways: brushing (Figure 8), touching (Figure 9), penetration (Figure 10), going beyond (Figure 11), skirting (Figure 12), and blocking out (Figure 13).

These books with massive communicative potential are designed mainly to involve the hands, but the face and entire body are also active participants: ears prick up at the sound of wooden pages clacking together; cheeks test the softness of cloth; fingers dig into holes in the page. The *Prelibri* books themselves are made up of materials that include wood, string, clear plastic, cardboard, sponge, cloth, buttons, threads, and some of these items have cutouts, are folded or spirals, all of which have the purpose of starting the narration, as well as revealing and hiding details that are not immediately noticed. The careful observer who takes the time to investigate more closely will discover these details: in a sense one might say that the children who do uncover the hidden details are the ones who test the perceived limits of the book and receive a range of information via all of their sensory receptors. Children's sensory receptiveness



Figure 8 - Reading *Prelibri* by “brushing”.

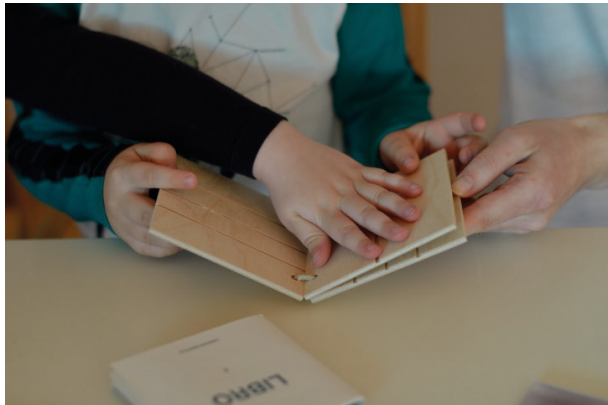


Figure 9 - Reading *Prelibri* by “touching”.



Figure 10 - Reading *Prelibri* by “penetration”.



Figure 11 - Reading *Prelibri* by “going beyond”.



Figure 12 - Reading *Prelibri* by “skirting”.

Stages of historical and educational research on Bruno Munari run during the 2016-2017 academic year on children aged 27-39 months. All reproduction is prohibited. Photographs © Piera Lombardo for Marnie Campagnaro (FISPPA), University of Padova.



Figure 13 - Reading *Prelibri* by “blocking out”.

is stimulated by these touch-and-feel experiences that help children to become more confident with their “reading” and “rereadings”. Thanks to the *Prelibri*, pre-readers learn not to rush, but push past the visual and physical limits to look for concealed elements a little at a time and not passively accept obstacles to greater knowledge. Apart from the title, which has a major visual impact, these “object-books” are wordless, yet they are packed with information. With *Prelibri*, Munari set himself a challenge to create books that truly tested the limits of the traditional book, and with them he challenged young children to push past the limits to constantly discover new things.

Conclusion

By experimenting with these three different narrative mechanisms, that transform the book page into a stage of everyday life, an active agent and a challenge of limits, Munari’s picturebooks help children to broaden their sensitivity, imagination and intellectual independence through active, sensorial and playful materiality and tactility. These mechanisms playfully combine different forms of expression, narratives, uses of paratextual elements, graphic layout, book design, innovative handlings of materials and objects. It is by playing with these combinations that Munari’s picturebooks never reproduce the same narrative or illustrative styles, and although his illustrated books sometimes feature recurring figures, animals, plants and objects, they do not have a single, clear-cut style.

Munari was without a doubt ahead of his time, and though today computers are becoming increasingly more important, Munari’s picturebooks encourage children to smell, touch, see and even taste the objects that surround them, so that they quite literally remain in touch with reality.

Munari’s narrative mechanisms transform his picturebooks in strange touch-and-feel and multi-sensory objects, which open up new imaginary worlds that can also be understood and handled by very young children, even toddlers, in the shape of delightful, playful devices. By reading, looking at, touching and turning the pages of these picturebooks, children can find themselves fully immersed in highly visual, tactile and educational experiences. More importantly, these mechanisms transform Munari’s picturebooks into basic tools for observing, classifying, analyzing, remembering, communicating and learning to be in the world. Today like yesterday.

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