

# UNSILENTLY *CRUSHING*: A DIDACTIC PROPOSAL THROUGH A WORDLESS NOVEL

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WORDLESS NOVELS

COMICS

ADOLESCENCE

DIDACTICS

The article, moving from the preference of young people for stories that are characterized by crossmediality and multimodality, focuses on a genre that enhances the iconic code, setting aside the verbal one: wordless novel. Born in the 1920s, it continues to be widespread, allowing you to explore narrative universes in a new and inclusive way.

The article focuses on a pedagogical reflection on *Crushing*, a recent work by Sophie Burrows (2021), which addresses key issues for adolescents: fear of

loneliness, lack of communication, desire to meet. Wordless texts have been promoted for years in the pedagogical field because they foster inferential processes and stimulate comprehension skills through the use of visual metaphorical constructs; they encourage the interpretive ability through five educational advantages: the adoption of a universal and democratic language; the activation of the reader's protagonism; hospitality understood as taking care of others; attention to diversity; and openness to beauty.



## INTRODUCTION

When we think about *Wordless* books in the educational context, our thoughts inevitably turn to the legacy of the great maestro Bruno Munari. His *Pre-books* (2002) and *Unreadable Books* (2000) support parents and educators who are aware of the importance of introducing small children to books not only through the verbal code, but also through the iconic code: colours, forms and symbols that can excite them and immerse them in stories.

But pre-schoolers are not the only group we can work with to ensure that readers are fascinated by silent books: adolescents, too, whose daily communications assemble, observe, comment on and place the image at the centre of what has been termed the “society of homo videns” (Cambi, 2019, p. 126), are consumers of stories characterized by multiple languages. Young people are looking for polyphonic and polymorphic narratives and they are no longer tied to the verbal code alone, they need to see and to share. Out of this urgency arises the increasingly widespread contamination between genres, such as graphic novels, visual and audiovisual narratives, whose ‘fluid’ forms of fruition represent a way to re-establish the link between adolescents and reading. As Chambers (2020) has argued, the real novelties for adolescent readers emerge from literary techniques centred on crossmediality and multimodality.

What remains unchanged is their desire to find answers to the big questions and the identity-related issues typical of their age group in stories. In fact, adolescents, “liminal” individuals (Bainbridge, 2010), have a strong need to find stability and security and consequently they seek in narratives the emotions which are roiling that difficult period of transition, and of which they are not yet aware. They want to read about differentiation and autonomy, about anxiety, sadness, sex and love, but also about joy and epiphanies and spirituality, in order to understand who they are, what they want, and what they will become (Cortiana, 2021).

As evidenced by publishers' sales and attendance at book fair stands, comics are one of the most popular genres amongst young people today. The present contribution will focus on a genre of comic that is little known to non-experts but which lends itself to interesting pedagogical investigations: the genre of the wordless novel.

## WORDLESS NOVELS

The wordless novel genre has its roots in the 1920s, when the German Expressionist movement chose this art form amongst others to protest against social injustices. The first book that can be ascribed to this genre is *25 Images of a Man's Passion* by Frans Masereel, successfully published in Europe in 1918. The genre also inspired the production of silent films, of which one of the most important was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) (Willett, 2005). Censored during the Nazi period, the genre resurfaced in the 60s and 70s, when wordless stories became a source of inspiration for several authors who have left their mark on the history of comics, including Will Eisner, the precursor of what today we call the graphic novel, and Art Spiegelman, whose acclaimed masterpiece *Maus* (1980) definitively consecrated the comic as a fully-fledged literary genre (Postema, 2014).

The wordless novel genre developed over the decades that followed in both America and Europe: some of these comics take the form of real graphic novels (Calabrese, 2017; Greco, 2014) that are stories of identity formation. One recent and particularly significant work, because of its reflections on intercultural identity formation (Forni, 2020, p. 101), is *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2006): a story of emigration, in which the absence of words brings the reader face to face with the incommunicability the protagonist experiences, highlighting by means of that semiotic choice "exposure to the unknown, to the diverse, to the other, as well as acceptance of their space" (Vacchelli, 2019, p. 70).

Indeed, wordless novels have another specific characteristic compared to other types of graphic novel: the absence of the reference point constituted by the verbal code allows the images to reappropriate their intrinsic narrative potential, because “the visual information becomes the key communicator” (Postema, 2014, p. 314). Since comic book narration classically proceeds through the interaction and integration of verbal and iconic codes, the choice to entrust the entire weight of the story exclusively to the graphics, omitting dialogue altogether, is a compelling one. Which testifies to the expressive force of the images and their signifying power. And which also leaves greater space for interpretive freedom on the part of the reader, who is not guided or ‘directed’ by use of the verbal code but, on the contrary, is called upon to engage during the reading in a notable level of activity and participation in the process of constructing meaning. This acquires even greater value with stories of identity formation for adolescents such as *Crushing*, a recent work by the artist Sophie Burrows (2021).

### CRUSHING

*Crushing*<sup>1</sup> is the story of two solitudes that brush against each other like millions of others in the indifference of a great metropolis. A romantic She who seeks love, a shy He who is afraid to face the outside world. The lives of the two protagonists run parallel, suffocated by the turmoil of city life to the point of shutting themselves away in the silence of their respective homes, where they are awaited by the only objects of their affections: a cat and a dog.

Burrows’ choice of the silent novel is particularly interesting precisely because the story unfolds in a ‘naturally’ noisy context like that of a large metropolis.

The chaos of the city is entrusted entirely to the graphic code which represents sound effects, according to the typical

**Fig. 1** The female character's pet (2021). Burrows, *S. Innamorarsi*. Milano: Rizzoli (2021).



**Fig. 2** The male character's pet (2021). Burrows, *S. ibidem*.



convention of the comic whereby a written text effectively resounds only in the reader's head.

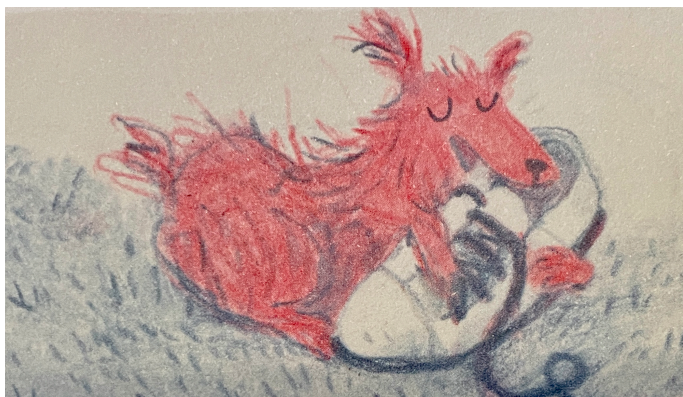
The total absence of dialogue also amplifies on the one hand, the feelings of loneliness and estrangement which the two protagonists experience; on the other hand, it reminds us of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of really talking to each other in a metropolitan context. Never has the expression 'deafening silence' been truly made visible the way it is in *Crushing*.





**Fig. 3-4** Urban alienation generated by both noise and silence (2021). Burrows, S. *ibidem*.

**Fig. 5** Red, the warm color of the man's beloved dog (2021). Burrows, S. *ibidem*.



Particularly masterful is the use of the colour red to define all the emotional, or at any rate characterizing, elements of the two protagonists. These red elements literally light up the underlying greyness –graphic, psychological and existential– of the external and internal world the two future lovers inhabit.

Thus red is devoted to the only affection of the solitary male protagonist (his dog) or to the romantic dream of the female one. But red is also what makes the two characters

**Fig. 6** Red, the warm color of the woman's romantic dream (2021). Burrows, S. *ibidem*.



uneasy, something that alters their colourless and repetitive daily lives, even if negatively, by 'setting them alight'.

Red is the singles chat from which she is hoping for a romantic encounter, but instead has to cope with explicit and offensive advances; red is the deafening atmosphere of the disco; and, finally, red is the chaotic and disordered traffic in which he and his bicycle find themselves trapped and from which the traffic accident that will lead to their meeting originates.

**Fig. 7-8** Red, the disturbing color of the unwanted sexual advances and of the noisy, chaotic traffic (2021). Burrows, S. *ibidem*.



## PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The story narrated in *Crushing* opens to multiple reflections: on incommunicability, solitude, the tendency to withdraw into the world of social media, the isolation that is felt most acutely in a crowd and which worsened during the months of the Pandemic (it is worth noting that the work was completed in that period, as the author pointed out in an interview<sup>2</sup>), the desire for real human contact. All crucial issues for adolescents, who can find answers to the inquietude that accompanies them throughout this difficult phase of passage in this story.

The usefulness of a wordless novel is rooted, as explained in the introduction, in the appropriateness of choosing a genre which, because of its semiotic characteristics, is congenial to an age bracket of resistant readers, as adolescents appear to be today. The use of its iconic code, with its fluidity, malleability and openness, leaves ample space for the interpretive and expressive freedom young people claim today. Indeed, courses devoted to understanding wordless texts have been promoted for years in the pedagogical field (Batini, 2022) because they foster inferential processes and stimulate comprehension skills through the use of visual metaphorical constructs (Cardarello & Contini, 2012), thereby encouraging the interpretive differences that are fundamental for the creation of an inclusive discourse community (Fish, 1980) that valorizes different approaches and exchanges about the text.

To conclude, it is worth recalling the guiding principles of IBBY Italy<sup>3</sup>, which puts into practice the idea of promoting reading in disadvantaged areas and with minors of different nationalities via the use of silent books. Zizioli (2017) reminds us that because of the way they are constructed and imagined, they present five educational advantages: the adoption of a universal and democratic language; the activation of the reader's

protagonism; hospitality understood as taking care of others; attention to diversity; and openness to beauty (pp. 45, 46). Silent books stimulate the initiative of the individual, by inclusively valorising their uniqueness and their interpretation, broaden their horizon of expectations and favour their acceptance of other points of view.

If this is possible in educational pathways with children who are non-literate because of their age or origin, it can equally be possible for young adults who choose to use words and images differently. The task of educators is to learn to observe and listen to this silent universe.

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### NOTES

**1** The work was published in Italy by Rizzoli with the title *Innamorarsi* [Falling in Love] (2021) which rather banalizes the sense of the original English title.

**2** *Crushing; A Conversation with Sophie Burrows*, Higher Education Channel TV (HEC-TV), available at: <https://m.facebook.com/hectv/videos/crushing-a-conversation-with-sophie-burrows/1037481683765107/>

**3** [www.ibbyitalia.it](http://www.ibbyitalia.it) retrieved June, 28, 2022.

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