

SILENT BOOKS

A SPACE

OF IMAGINATION

WHERE THE LANGUAGE

OF ILLUSTRATION

AND PHOTO-LITERATURE

MEET

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LITERACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
PHOTO-LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN
ETHICAL COMPONENTS IN IMAGES
VISUAL COGNITION
MULTILINGUAL PEDAGOGIES IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

By reading silent books with pictures and photographs, a space of imagination is created, that is suitable for the development of thought, logics and critical judgement already at an early age. I will show, by means of a case study, what happens within a visual book club in a European, multilingual primary school in Berlin.

The article draws a seamless line between some editorial projects implemented in Italy in the 1970s and more recent research and cultural mediation experiences in this field. In addition to the practical value of these initiatives, the ethics of vision is emphasised. Which material and reading

methods can be used to affirm visual models that can help children freely define the relationship between images and the interpretation of reality?

Finally, silent books include tactile and multisensory books. How can a visually impaired person participate in the visual reading experience based on wordless, tactile and multisensory books? Starting from this question, which may sound paradoxical, my article comes close to an extreme limit, a turning point and, at the same time, a bridge between the study of silent books and the latest developments in the field of reading accessibility.

INTRODUCTION

Silent books can be both with illustrations, with photographs, and with both features at the same time. By reading this very specific kind of literature, an imaginative space is created, suited for the development of thinking, logics and critical judgement since an early age. How can we mediate this cultural heritage, both material and immaterial, in such a way as to pass it on to those who go through the stage of perceptive, emotional, cognitive and social development in childhood?

My paper draws on two types of visual texts:

1. Silent books with photos
2. Silent books with illustrations

The 'book' element and the 'reading' element are to be viewed as intertwined. Out of these two elements, books represent the material used for the study and research work at the centre of this article. Reading, on the other hand, is the method used to communicate the general aspects of the above study. This research work is then complemented by observation, analysis, historical and archival research, and case studies. In the near future, I hope to extend this research method to video recording, photo-documentation and neuroimaging, also taking into consideration eye-tracking, electroencephalography, and electromyography.

Let us consider for a moment the existence of a third kind of material suitable for practising wordless visual reading: visual cards (Munari & Belgrano, 1977)¹. In 1977, the publishing house Danese promoted an initiative that is still worth studying today, to recognise some fundamental connections between childhood development and learning and the practice of reading wordless visual narratives. The title of this initiative is: *Progetto Scuola - Strumenti/gioco per programmare in modo creativo l'attività didattica* [School Project - Tools/Games for Creative Planning of Teaching Activities], and is designed for pre-school and early primary school. It is a series of games consisting mainly of silent visual cards, both with illustrations and photos. The project was curated by Giovanni

Belgrano, together with a research group set up by the same publisher and including Bruno Munari, Enzo Mari, IARD and Gruppo Materiali Didattici. The research team stated in the leaflet enclosed with the material that “it works in close collaboration with teachers and pupils” and “proposes the development of teaching material targeted to the different aspects of cognitive development, with particular attention to language and mathematics learning”.

The choice to focus my research work on silent books came about by carefully listening to the observations included in the introductory notes of *Progetto Scuola*. I will quote one of the paragraphs that best emphasises the awareness of the role of visual perception:

An important area of research concerns the activities of children with regard to visual perception, imagination, and communication through images. The widespread use of electronic communication tools has profoundly changed the lives of human beings, thereby significantly increasing the role of visual perception in the process of thought formation, logics and critical judgement. It is important to offer children objects that can stimulate their creativity, so as to help them freely define the relationship between images.

To date, the most useful study addressing the topic of silent books is *Meraviglie mute. Silent books e letteratura per l'infanzia* (Terrusi, 2017). I consider this essay as a starting point in an area of research that still has many steps to make, including so-called multiliteracy practices and multilingual pedagogies in early childhood. The study of the sources is based on examples of silent books from different countries and continents, in a global perspective, as the absence of written text indicates the disappearance of a dominant language. One further element should be considered: silent books also include tactile and multisensory books. A key example is *I Prelibri* (Munari, 1980).

In recent years, research activities and experiments in this field have had as their main reference the national competition *Tocca a te!* [It's your turn!] and the international biennial compe-

tion *Typhlo & Tactus*, at its 15th edition in 2022, and launched by the French publishing house *Les Doigts Qui Rêvent* in 2000.

This specific segment of wordless narratives focuses on a fascinating and problematic research field: the issue of blindness in relation to the experience of visual literature provided by silent tactile and multisensory books. My question about this topic is: How can a visually impaired person participate in the experience of visual reading? Starting from this question, which may sound paradoxical, we are moving closer to an extreme limit, a turning point and a link between the study of silent books and the latest research in the field of reading accessibility.

The history of photo-literature for children is currently in the making. The most recent studies in this field of research go back to Laurence Le Guen (2022). In Italy there is no such systematic work, although there are explicit signs of a growing interest, as seen in a number of conferences and publications concerning the pedagogical dimension of photography. In this regard, the *MuFoCo, Museo della Fotografia Contemporanea in Cinisello Balsamo*, plays an important role (Zannelli et al., 2021).

At the same time, some museums and libraries, through specific exhibitions and archives both at a national and international level, are emerging as leading actors focussing on this bibliographic repertoire in greater depth and based on scientific research tools. This is why the general focus on photo-literature as an area of cultural production and research is evolving and growing. An example of this is the exhibition *Vogelschau und Froschperspektive. Fotografie für Kinder*, scheduled at the *Museum für Fotografie* in Berlin from October, 9 2022 to February, 19 2023, and curated by *Kunstabibliothek-Staatliche Museen zu Berlin* (Kühn, 2022).

In Italy, *FOCUS, Fund of Photographic Books of the Trentino Library System*, set up in Trento in 2016, is the first fund focussed on the preservation, promotion and study of children's photo books. There is currently no publication that reflects the value of this heritage and its characteristics. I would also like

to mention the photography exhibition *Guardare è un gioco. I libri fotografici di Tana Hoban*², the first exhibition in Italy dedicated to the photo books of photographer Tana Hoban. In the field of photo literature, Tana Hoban's books (more than fifty titles published since 1970) are among the most comprehensive examples of 'primary school of the eye sight', performed through narratives that are predominantly wordless. At the same time, we can use Hoban's photo-literature production to work on the relationship between images and images of reality, from a perspective that gives the ethics of vision a key and unique meaning.

Both the studies by philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2012)³ and those by philosopher Marie José Mondzain (2017, 2018)⁴ are important sources that help understand the connection between visual literature, imaginative capacity, and empathy. One of the reasons behind my special interest in silent books is the choice to investigate which materials, research tools and practical methods can be used to foster reciprocity between imaginative capacity and public life, with an impact the well-being of society.

CASE STUDY

In 2022, I started to work as Italian mother tongue language mediator at the European bilingual Finow Grundschule SESB (Staatliche Europa Schule Berlin) primary school in Berlin. Here I have the opportunity to run an afternoon workshop in the second term. It is held every Tuesday from 2.30 p.m. to 4 p.m. It is called *Chamäleon Buchclub* and is made up of six eight-year-old children: Leonardo, Alumine, Zoe, David, Letizia, Anton.

Chamäleon Buchclub is one of the optional activities the school offers from grade I to VI. The courses are called *AG-Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (literally 'working community') and cover a wide range of activities. The AGs are not part of the school syllabus, they are however subject to a final assessment (Figure 1).

Fig.1 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.



Fig.2 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.

Alcuni esempi di libri utilizzati



The name *Chamäleon Buchclub* refers to the eyesight of the chameleon, an animal that has a 360° view. Our way of getting to know each other and communicating in several languages involves an object of mediation: the book with pictures. I select the books; in most cases they are silent books, with illustrations and photos. From time to time, instead of reading pictures, we have a talk with authors, artists, or publishers (Figure 2).

One Tuesday we got connected with the *Topipittori* publishing house and interviewed Giovanna Zoboli and Paolo

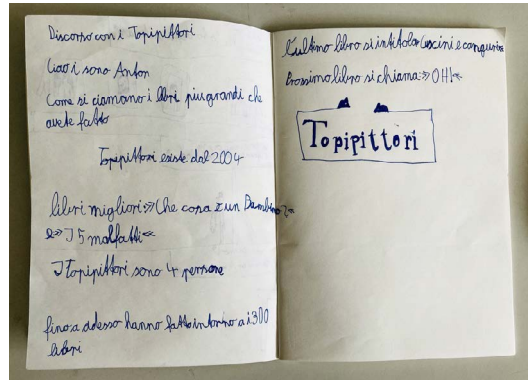
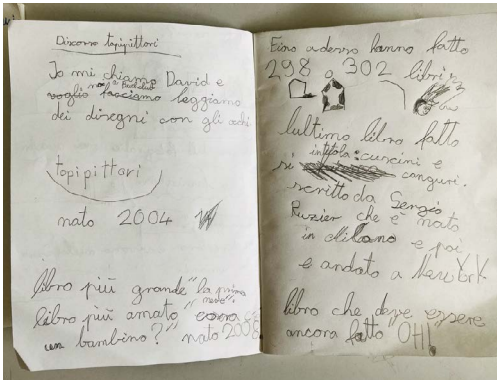
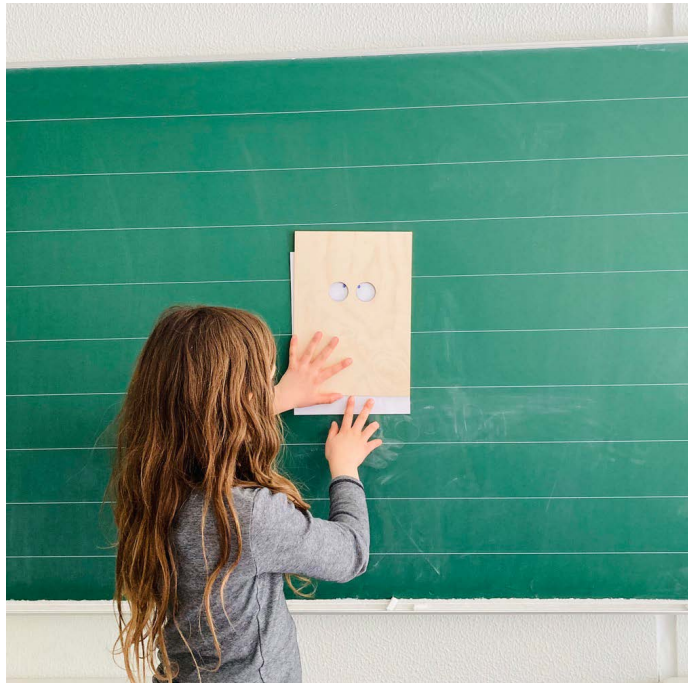


Fig. 3 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.

Fig. 4 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.



Canton. On another Tuesday, we welcomed to school Ingrid Hora, author of the *libro-gioco* [play-book] *Con la testa con i piedi* (Figures 3, 4).⁵

There are readings that engage us for a single session, others that can last several weeks. There are books that work as a warm-up for us, or others that we use as a basis for a meeting with the author(s).

The workshop usually starts with this series of actions: we put our hands over the eyes, massage them a little, open and close them first quickly, then slowly. We keep our eyes closed for a few moments, leaving the eyelids relaxed; finally we open them, ready to begin.

Below are some examples of situations within the club, based on the use of silent books, both with illustrations and photographs.

First example: THE LINE (Steinberg, 2011)

The book we use in this session consists in a single black and white image that opens and closes like a *leporello*. The image is several metres long, when the *leporello* is fully open. The children have never seen such a book before and are impressed by it.

We read this silent book starting with this question: “What do you see?”

Each child is asked to voice out an item and then hand over to the child next to them. This word-of-mouth exercise takes place at a certain speed.

- I see an arrow and a hand holding a pencil and drawing a line.
- I see a tiny village, the sea, a boat and not a line, but a clothesline.
- I see a small green village, a meadow and a train passing through, so the line is a railway.
- Here, I see windows and a woman with a flower.
- Then there is the desert with the sphinx.
- There is no longer a line but sand.
- Ah! It's not a pear, it's a man! No, it's a mouse! There's the face!
- I see a woman on the balcony, playing guitar and her shoes are too high.
- Maybe it is a bridge because behind it there are a boat, trees, and a lake. We don't know.
- There's a cat here. A window from which you can see houses, trees, towers.

- Here I see a little house and a bridge that takes two pages.
- Again three women as always with too high shoes.

Second example: CHIUSO PER FERIE (Celija, 2007)

We make a circle. We read the cover image together. We continue reading one image at a time, with this rule: each child, from their own place, reads the image I hand them while moving around. It is a different image for each child and, another rule, at this stage you must not say aloud what the image shows.

The children comment on what they see in their own personal way, showing either wonder, disbelief or a laugh. The round comes to an end and after closing the book, I ask them to describe what they saw. At this point, we take the book and resume the reading from the beginning. Everyone now has the opportunity to link the image they saw with those seen by the other children. In this way, together, we 'edit' aloud the story that, as we realise, has a start, a development and an ending (Figures 5, 6).

Third example: THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG (Beretta, 2008)

I show the book to the children, who note that it is a silent photo book. I ask them to read the inside pages, without saying aloud what they see. I warn them that at some point they will notice something strange. It takes a while for the eye to perceive the visual game on which the book is based.

When this happens, the children raise hands up, widen their eyes, make big sighs that mean "I got it!" I give them the word: "It's an alphabet made out of the things that I see!" Let's read together all over again, let's check if the assumption is valid, let's check single and sequential images to confirm that it is an alphabet. We decide to perform a similar experiment in the schoolyard. At the end, we put together our own alphabet made of images collected by the children and photographed by me on the basis of their input.

Fig. 5 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.

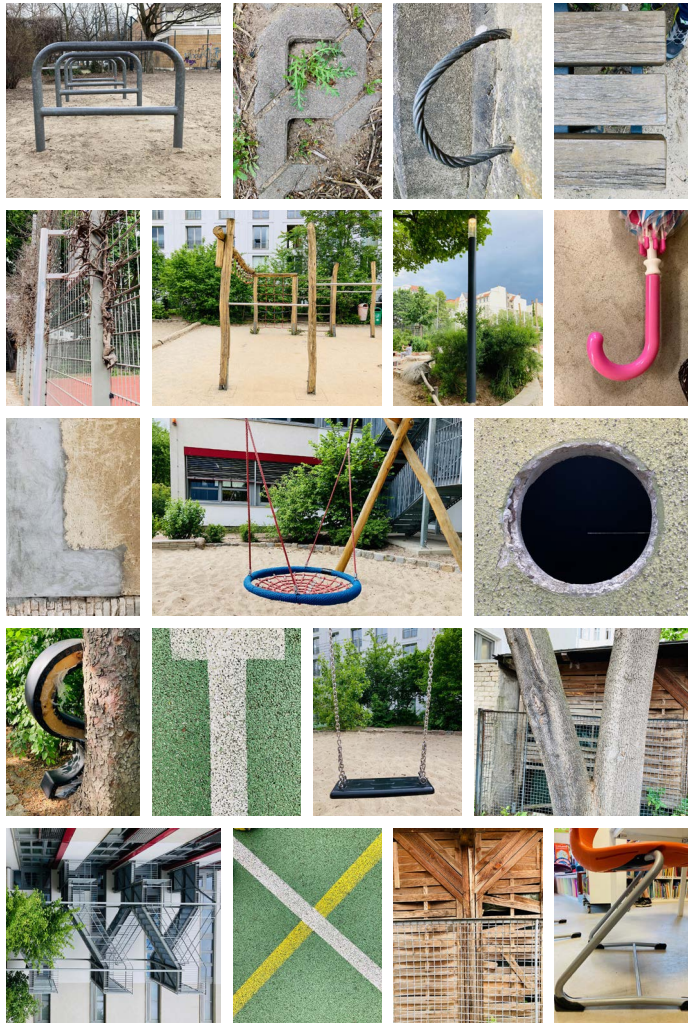


Fig. 6 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.



The outdoor experiment is based on the following rules: both lowercase and uppercase letters are valid. Everyone is free to search/find any letter. We repeat this outdoor activity three times, at different moments and for different purposes: the first purpose is to experience how this way of looking and seeing works; the second is to collect as many alphabetical letters as possible; and the third purpose is to search only for the missing letters. We figure out that some

Fig. 7 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.



letters are easy to find, others are difficult. Some letters are found more than once, some only once, some others never. Sometimes while searching for a letter, I don't find that one, but I find another that I was not looking for (Figure 7).

Fourth example: CON LA TESTA CON I PIEDI (Hora, 2020)

The book is chosen for its unusual characteristics: wooden pages, loose sheets, fixed handle, rubber band instead of bookbinding. This object allows us to experience the read-

Fig. 8 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.



ing of a *libro-gioco* [play-book], which involves making use of all the senses, not just eyesight.

The presence of unusual features is surprising, but no one doubts that it is a book. The children in turn open the 'book door', grabbing the red handle. Body and mind, simultaneously, begin their journey that is both play and discovery. The book is read using the whole body and can give rise to games to be played in pairs and in groups. Some examples: the page with the hands drawn on both sides suggests placing your hands on both sides of the paper and getting into a push position. Similarly, the page with the drawing of the feet requires you to read the page while lying down and with your feet on the paper, on both sides; the page with the dotted ear suggests listening to what the book is saying by physically placing your own ear on one side and that of another person on the opposite side. In this case, I ask the question "what did the book say?" (Figure 8).

One answer, in particular, is quite telling of the unfolding mechanisms that can be triggered by reading this book. The girl answers: "the book told me to play more with A. and then said that I will follow this workshop from beginning to end, I

Fig. 9 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.



Fig. 10 Photo by Giulia Mirandola.



didn't say that, the book said that." Two holes drilled in the back cover remind L. that they can be used to draw many eyes, with different expressions. The game in this case involves changing the book's face from time to time.

The following Tuesday, we have the pleasure to welcome to school the book's author Ingrid Hora. The author and the club talk together about the discoveries made by the children who

have read/played the book. The author expresses great interest and proposes that the club should make a new edition, enriched by the new ideas put forward by the club's children.

CONCLUSIONS

In a regular visual reading workshop in primary school, based on silent books, we have learnt that many different things can happen that appeal to children, make them feel good, make them think and enable them to build a more informed and free relationship with images. The continuity factor is essential.

Learning to read images is not so different from learning to play a musical instrument or walk on stilts. It takes time to gain confidence. It is necessary to repeat the same gestures many times until they become fluent. Over time, moreover, it is possible to see the relationship between the members of the club develop and grow, how children learn to trust images, as they experience confidence in themselves and in their schoolmates (Figure 9).

At the end of the school year, the club received an unexpected invitation: to participate as interviewers in a public meeting with author Antje Damm, in the framework of the exhibition *Vogelschau und Froschperspektive. Fotografie für Kinder*, at the *Museum für Fotografie*, curated by *Kunstabibliothek-Statliche Museen zu Berlin* (Figure 10).

The workshop held in the primary school can thus go out of the classroom and step into the sphere of public cultural life in the city of Berlin. It will do so with the help of two landmark institutions in the field of visual culture: the *Kunstabibliothek* and the *Museum für Fotografie*.

The assumption whereby silent books and photo-literature come together, not only finds its practical application, but is also recognised as valid within the workshop and just as valid outside, thereby suggesting an active role of imagination in the cultural processes of a community.

NOTES

- 1** “L'enorme diffusione degli strumenti elettronici di comunicazione ha modificato profondamente la vita degli uomini accentuando in modo determinante il ruolo della percezione visiva nel processo di formazione del pensiero, della logica e del giudizio critico. È importante proporre al bambino per i suoi giochi degli oggetti capaci di stimolarne la creatività così da aiutarlo a definire liberamente il rapporto fra le immagini [...] Questi giochi non determinano schemi precostituiti che si sovrappongono alla libera ricerca del bambino, al contrario gli forniscono, per così dire, un catalogo degli strumenti per la costruzione di modelli visivi che egli utilizza liberamente nell'interpretazione della realtà. (Munari & Belgrano, 1977)”
- 2** The exhibition is organised by Mutty and curated by Giulia Giazzoli and Élisabeth Lortic, in cooperation with CNAP/Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris and is based on the Les Troises Ourses Fund.
- 3** “Ma il bambino che si diverte ad ascoltare storie e filastrocche si fa l'idea che non tutto nella vita umana debba servire a qualcosa. Impara a stabilire un rapporto con il mondo che non è centrato esclusivamente sull'idea di utilità, ma che permette anche di apprezzare le cose per quello che sono. E impara ad assumere lo stesso atteggiamento nelle relazioni con gli altri esseri umani. (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 81)”
- 4** “Non c'è nessuna immagine che non sia tempesta o figura di pericolo. Nella tempesta bisogna saper governare la nave. Tocca a ciascuno di noi rispondere delle visibilità che mostra, che fa conoscere e che desidera condividere. [...] Difendere l'immagine vuol dire resistere a tutto quello che elimina l'alterità degli sguardi, costruendo l'invisibile del senso. La forza dell'immagine è commisurata alla potenza delle voci che la abitano. (Mondzain, 2017, p. 135); “Le operazioni immaginanti sono dei gesti energici che possono impadronirsi di tutti i materiali e di tutti i segni, per darci la parola e renderci insaziabili forgiatori del possibile [...] un altro mondo è pensabile. (Mondzain, 2018, p. 16)”
- 5** The book is published by *Les Cerises*, an editorial project which bases its catalogue only on artists' silent books.

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