

## The Function of Play in Bruno Munari's Children's Books. A Historical Overview

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### Abstract

The ludic dimension of Bruno Munari's prolific children's book publishing activity plays an important role, as far as narration and visual arts are concerned. Since the 1940s, and for the following 50 years, books, play and education were fundamental reference points in the artistic production and critical thinking of this Milanese artist. Munari cultivated these influences with extraordinary results in his picturebooks. The following analysis of some of Munari's texts offers a historical-critical perspective on the value, function and representation of play in this vast production. The present research relies on three main analytical categories: co-authorship, disorientation and the experience of the limit.

Nel corso della sua prolifica attività editoriale destinata all'infanzia, Bruno Munari ha dedicato alla dimensione ludica uno spazio narrativo e visivo rilevante. Già a partire dagli anni Quaranta del Novecento, libro, gioco ed educazione si configurano come un incrocio fondamentale nella produzione artistica e nella riflessione critica dell'artista milanese. A questa contaminazione Munari rimarrà fedele per oltre cinquant'anni e l'espressione più compiuta sarà rintracciabile nelle pagine degli albi illustrati da lui creati. Nell'esaminarne alcuni esempi si intende operare una ricognizione storico-critica sul valore, sulla funzione e sulla rappresentazione del gioco in questa produzione. La prospettiva di ricerca adottata utilizza, quali categorie di analisi, la co-autorialità, lo spiazzamento e l'esperienza del limite.

**Keywords:** Bruno Munari, picturebooks, play, education, children's literature

**Parole chiave:** Bruno Munari, albi illustrati, gioco, educazione, letteratura per l'infanzia

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### Introduction

Books, play and education represented a fundamental crossroads in Bruno Munari's artistic production (Meneguzzo, 1993) and the Milanese designer went on cultivating this prolific union for five decades, starting from the 1940's. Munari paid special attention to the importance of play as a particularly helpful tool for the development of children's personality. He therefore started turning his interest to game- and toy-production. In 1951, thanks to a fruitful co-operation with the tyre manufacturing company Pirelli, he created the cat "Meo Romeo" and the monkey "Zizi" – two toys in foam rubber, which won him the ADI (i.e. Industrial Design Association) *Compasso d'Oro* award in 1954. In 1960, he invented a game called *ABC with imagination* for the Danese design company. This game is based on the theme of multiples and includes 26 linear and circular

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elements, thanks to which children have the possibility of writing any letter of the alphabet, or creating other imaginative shapes. In 1961, Munari designed *Aconà Biconbì* [*AwithA BwithB*], a game consisting of a series of round modules with a hole in the middle, which can be freely folded and combined, in order to create complex constructions. Between the 1960s and the 1970s, he created several didactic games in co-operation with the pedagogy expert Giovanni Belgrano. *Carte da gioco* [*Playing Cards*] is a series of picture cards that children have to arrange in time sequence; while *Più e Meno* [*Plus and Minus*] is a collection of cards made of different materials – white cardboard, punched cardboard, transparent and semi-transparent paper – which can be variously overlapped and combined, in order to create the most different stories and situations.

The function of play, however, appears in its richest representation in Bruno Munari's numerous picturebooks. This paper analyses some sample texts, which offer a historical overview and an in-depth account of the function and representation of play in Munari's editorial production.

### Munari's educational perspective

Bruno Munari was a designer, architect, sculptor, illustrator, graphic artist, writer, inventor, and experimenter of techniques and materials in the visual communication field. He was also a great player: “beside playing with children, he often played and offered people the possibility to play with words”<sup>1</sup> (Tassinari, Corraini, 1996/2006, p. 16).

He was born in Milan on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1907. After a few years, his family moved to the Polesine area in Veneto, southwest of Venice, where they started running a hotel. The artist spent his youth there, until his impulsive juvenile desire to expand his artistic horizons led him to flee his parent's hotel in 1926. He moved to Milan and placed himself under the wing of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, leader of the ‘Second’ Futurist movement, who considered Munari as the most brilliant figure of the new Futurist generation (Hájek, 2012, p. 13). His relationship with Futurism, however, was short. Towards the second wave of Futurism he felt a sense of discordance, a feeling which was not very sympathetic: there was certainly more discordance than involvement. And Munari was certainly not the kind of person who would remain trapped in an overly structured group (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 19).

It was after the Futurist experience that he initiated a lifelong exploration path, made of design, art, science, technology, and publishing. In his unceasing production activity, this founding father of Italian design constantly focussed on the didactic dimension of art and of visual languages, and he even held some lectures at Harvard University about this subject. Thanks to his child-like fascination for the reality that surrounded him, he was able to achieve a special bond with the world of children.

The 1960s and 1970s were probably the most fruitful period in Munari's children's book production. Historically, these two decades were dominated by a heated cultural debate about pressing political and environmental issues. The Italian society of the time was characterized by the presence of protest movements and discussions about demographic change, social progress, material prosperity, mass consumption, conformism, and many other innovative issues.

New educational policies and a growing attention towards didactic and methodological innovations, inspired by a progressive mass pedagogy, emerged in this period. Children's literature started dealing with the demands of civil society and with new “tricky” issues (Grandi, 2015, p. 26) including social difference, antimilitarism, worker alienation, pollution, diversity (Boero & De Luca, 1995/2007, p. 257). Education started acknowledging and promoting the children's right to entertainment (Pellerey, 1989), and this interest was soon fruitfully cultivated by important Italian children's authors and illustrators of the time. The pleasure of playing with words (Gianni Rodari), the pleasure of discovering (Bruno Munari), the pleasure of investigating nature (Iela Mari), the pleasure of engaging with children's writing (Mario Lodi), the pleasure of playing with different languages (Emanuele Luzzati), etc.: all of these interests found their place in Italian children's literature.

Munari was particularly aware of these issues and, throughout his artistic career, his investigation constantly concentrated in an educational method capable of combining knowledge and creativity. His approach can be summarised in three sentences: “taking time to observe; developing a deep understanding, and acting rapidly”<sup>22</sup> (Munari, 1968/2008, p. 69). The goal of this process is to promote children’s intellectual independence through an active and playful problem-solving exercise. This research process, however, can only be undertaken if some basic conditions are present: curiosity, simplicity – intended as an aesthetic and ethical value – together with a keen attention towards visual, tactile and auditory sensations (Tassinari, 1996/2006, p. 7). In Munari’s view, learning is an appealing, gradual and incremental process. It depends on children’s curiosity and self-motivated engagement and it may be reinforced thanks to the interaction of different elements: play, observation, imagination, intellectual liberty and rigor. In a sense, Munari’s educational approach creatively combined Pestalozzi’s and Froebel’s romantic views on the function of games, Montessori’s “constructive perfectionment” and attention to the education of the senses, Dewey’s exploration of reflective thinking and aesthetic experience and Piaget’s emphasis on discovery learning and on children’s intrinsic motivation to learn (Munari, 2000). Munari believed that children possess a natural interest for exploration and investigation, making and building, communication and social interaction, artistic expression and self-realization, and he claimed that children’s mental elasticity and ludic experimentation should be encouraged by artistic and educational research (Munari, 1981/2009, p. 247). The importance of education, in his view, also lies in the fact that it helps children to fight against the dangers of repetitive tasks and stereotypical verbal and visual patterns. It also puts a limit to the lack of aesthetic or educational purposes typical of unruly mass consumption. With reference to toy production, for instance, Munari was deeply concerned about the “money-making culture” applied to childhood (Munari, 1981/2009, p. 240). In his opinion, toy production had the double objective of satisfying consumer desires and increasing incomes, but it paid no attention to educational benefits. His sarcastic disapproval of poorly designed mass-market children’s objects, for example, was directed towards toys for girls, and in particular those “stupid dolls destined to sit on the bed”, or “consumer dolls destined to have their dresses, shoes [...]”<sup>23</sup> (Munari, 1981/2009, p. 240). He considered these toys as rather useless objects, incapable of promoting real engagement and of producing positive educational effects.

It is interesting to notice that Mattel, the gigantic American toy company, launched its famous fashion doll Barbie in 1959. This soon became the world’s most famous and profitable toy: a doll with a very appealing body (long legs, a thin waist, ample bosom) and make-up, which allowed girls to project fantasies of (false?) glamour and (false?) independence. Thanks to well-established marketing strategies, Barbie soon became a merchandiser’s dream, a doll that looked like a grown-up girl and “opened the way to scores of high-margin play accessories and clothes” (Clark, 2008).

Munari’s idea of the function of play was based on the opposite assumption that, besides offering children the opportunity to enjoy themselves, toys and games should also provide them with fruitful information and improve their knowledge of the world. They should include both “the natural environment that surrounds us” and “the nature of our bodies and of our senses”<sup>24</sup> (Munari, 1996, p. 4). In this educational perspective, playful activities help children to become creative, to develop an elastic mind, to learn how to use verbal and visual communication in an original, ingenious and critical way, to understand different art forms, to solve small everyday problems, and to build a social and well-balanced behaviour (Munari, 1981/2009, pp. 242-243).

This is the reason why, in his latest years, Munari devoted much of his research to defend children’s educational needs by creating clever books and engaging activities (Panizza, 2009), based on modern theories on childhood, particularly those developed by Piaget (Munari, 1981/2009, pp. 229, 248).

### **Play and books: a special relationship**

Munari carried out an in-depth investigation on the functions of children’s play by exploring two areas: children’s visual narration and children’s art laboratories. In both cases, his goal was to encourage children’s

creativity and complex thinking through ludic experimentation. This paper analyses his research on visual narration by means of his picturebooks.

Munari's entire life was accompanied by books, and the world of children's books was part of his work right from the beginning. It was already at the age of twenty-two (in 1929) that he produced his first illustrated volume. Throughout his long artistic career, he wrote over 70 fiction and non-fiction books, including a unique multi-lingual guide to Italian hand gestures. For Munari, books were an authentic register of events, theoretical ideas and thoughts. They gradually turned into a personal diary, in which he used to note down his experience (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 12).

Children's books also offered him the opportunity to play with many different combinations of visual narration, to experiment with the graphical and typographical possibilities of books intended as "physically explorable entities" (Negri, 2012, p. 67) and to build a tighter relationship with his young readers (Terrusi, 2012, p. 43). For Munari, books were a challenge within a challenge:

Different, colourful pages, die cut pages. Full of surprises, new emotions, different games in every opening. Bruno Munari's playful activity has always consisted in evoking emotions, gathering and manipulating little objects, transforming feathers, stones or paper clippings. He has always been interested both in rational planning and in the casual combination of ideas<sup>5</sup> (Rauch, 2012, p. 12).

His innovative creations are still very modern. Thanks to their innate curiosity, light-hearted irony, and aesthetic sense, Munari's ingenious narrative, visual and graphic solutions successfully overcome the traditional physical limits of books. These creations represent a playful combination of narration (narrative picturebooks, wordless picturebooks, science picturebooks, rewritings of classical fairy tales, etc.), paratextual elements (format, titles, covers, endpapers, title pages, back covers, etc.), graphic layout elements (page design, empty spaces, fonts, colours, dimensions, etc.), typographical elements (thickness, texture, holes, cuts, folds, pockets, flaps, etc.), materials (paper, cardboard, tracing paper, cotton, sponge, wood, plastic, fur, etc.), and objects (buttons, cords, strings, postcards, etc.). By examining Munari's rich and extensive editorial production, it is quite easy to understand his playful engagement while creating a book. In his continuous research, he experimented new original combinations, with joyful and ironical results. He enjoyed playing both with the book contents – i.e. text and images – and with its structure – i.e. graphical and typographical elements (Salisbury, 2015, p. 53). His aim was to make the invisible visible, to show the unknown sides of known things, the aspects of reality that are generally overlooked, to detect the smallest details of the universe. His idea of creativity did not imply the act of inventing something new, but it was rather a "revelation of the unexplored aspects of reality"<sup>6</sup> (Tassinari, 1996/2006, p. 10). As Boero and De Luca (1995/2007) sharply pointed out, Munari was

The most authentic interpreter of the "gratuity" of signs, "uselessness" of words, and "playfulness of art". This found its theoretical support in Gianni Rodari's work, which he skilfully illustrated for the publisher Einaudi. [...] Munari still continues to offer us [...] a plurality of ideas, stimuli, and provocations, which have opened up new pathways for the authors-illustrators of the following generations<sup>7</sup> (p. 303).

Books, in this sense, may be considered as some sort of "gymnastics for the mind" (Mirabel, 2006, p. 32).

Munari's research on children's books may be summed up in a few key-ideas. Firstly, books are a vehicle through which it is possible to promote a new concept of dynamic and total art, which engages all the senses. He himself stated that it is necessary to think in at least three dimensions (Hájek, 2012, p. 15). Secondly, children should concentrate on an essential concept and go on exploring it from all possible perspectives and in every possible form. Thirdly, his artistic research is based on the concept of learning from experience and from trials: the process has value, rather than the product. In Munari's view: "if I hear, I forget. If I see, I remember, but if I do, I understand". Fourthly, children are not passive receivers of facts and information, but active

agents, who construct their own reality and worldview in constant interaction with their environment. The playful use of paradox and the taste for irony helped Munari to undermine banal stereotypes and to stimulate mental agility. By thinking and doing, and by coping with new perspectives on impossible or problematic situations, children learn, retain and retrieve significant information. Fifth, the purpose of a book is to convey pleasure and the opportunity to increase one's world knowledge. After all, books have the power of improving human life (Munari, 1980).

Needless to say, Munari's witty picturebooks deeply innovated the Italian children's book market: not only thanks to their new narrative contents, the role of images or the ingenious graphic and typographic lay-out, but also thanks to their different objective characteristics. Munari's creations aimed at helping children understand how books work and explore the ways in which their combination of pages and tactile, visual and formal elements allow books to express things that elude words.

### The function of play in Munari's picturebooks

Munari had a very democratic and anti-elitist idea of art: for him, art was not an exclusive luxury-product made for the few, but a product destined to foster the cultural development of a wider, open-minded audience. He was aware that the visual culture was hardly accepted among the masses and that visual creations seemed incomprehensible to many, because of a general lack of education. Thanks to this awareness, however, he was able to anticipate and actively contribute to the visual revolution that took place in Italian children's books production between the 1960s and the 1970s (Farina, 2013, p. 70). In his long and constant research in the children's book field, he designed engaging children's editorial projects destined both to large audiences (including toddlers) and to single individuals, who were expected to give their creative contribution to the complex world of visual arts.

In an interview to Ann K. Beneduce – editor in charge of the company that published Munari's books in the USA and relevant figure in the world of children's literature (she chaired several committees of Children's Book Council USA, IBBY and Unicef) – the famous writer and children's book researcher Leonard Marcus asked her how she would describe Munari's picturebooks to someone who had never seen them. Her answer was revealing:

They are more than just picture books - they are innovative works of art, yet done so freshly and simply and boldly that children are instantly attracted to them. They are almost the first modern books for children to use die-cut effects - holes and flaps and unevenly shaped pages - not as gimmicks but as an integral part of the story and of the illustrations. They are handsomely designed and printed in gorgeous colours, but it is the witty surprises found as you lift the flaps or flip progressively smaller pages that make them so much fun (Marcus, 1983, p. 51).

From these words, it is unquestionably clear that many of Munari's editorial projects are based on a liberated sense of play, developed through the use of different and innovative materials, graphical and typographical settings, perspectives, narrative strategies, etc. Some of these playful mechanisms have been widely explored by national and international children's literature scholars, who variously dealt with the colour substitution game in Munari's Little Red Riding Hood retellings (Beckett, 2002), his witty visual, graphical and typographical elements (Terrusi, 2011, 2012), the new editorial rules of the "Tantibambini" [*Manychildren*] series published by Einaudi between 1972 and 1978 (Franchi, 2014), the sense of time and its perception (Varrà, 2012), the sense of space and its sensitive receptiveness (Campagnaro & Goga, 2014), the unreadability of his *Libri illeggibili* [*Unreadable Books*] (Mirabel, 2006), the appealing creativity of his book-objects, material-books, book-sculptures, artist books (Dallari, 2008; Mirabel, 2008; Beckett, 2012).



The present paper aims at exploring the functions of play in Munari's picturebooks through different research perspectives and by means of three phenomenological categories of analysis: co-authorship, disorientation and the experience of the limit.

The first research perspective refers to the process of co-authorship. It is a known fact that children are the real protagonists of Munari's picturebooks. Munari experimented innovative, playful strategies, capable of involving children not only as readers but also as co-authors of the story. As the art critic Miroslava Hájek (2012) pointed out:

One of Munari's best known techniques, in this regard was his employment of the mechanics of the game – a characteristic often used by his detractors to belittle his work. The nature of play is such that it leaves no-one indifferent and speaks to everyone's inner child, awakening the desire to learn in a joyful manner (pp. 21-22).

Like his interactive art objects (Hájek, 2012, p. 22), Munari's children's books are effective in playfully including the reader into the world of his visual narratives. Munari explored different ways of encouraging children's engagement in the co-authorship process. His characters, for example, have no name, and in books like *Nella notte buia* [*In the Darkness of the Night*] (1956) the first-person plural pronoun is used to pose questions to the readers. *Il merlo ha perso il becco* [*The Blackbird Has Lost Its Beak*], which was designed by Munari in dummy format in 1940 but published only in 1987, is characterized by the presence of the second-person singular narration to invite readers to freely explore the book. For the very first time a book was drawn on plastic, a development in terms of material on his previous use of cellophane and transparent paper (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 31). In the picturebook *Nella nebbia di Milano*, too, the child-reader becomes the protagonist of Munari's story and, as the author himself declared: "the protagonist is the child himself who looks at, who enters into the fog"<sup>8</sup> (Meneguzzo, 1993, p. 114). These narrative solutions, that are nowadays largely used by contemporary children's writers, were very unusual in Munari's time.

The visual research and original pictorial solutions created by Munari for Rodari's poems (1960, 1962) and tales and for his own famous *Libri Illeggibili*, designed between the 1950s and the 1960s (his first unreadable book, *Libro Illeggibile 1949*, was self-produced and displayed at the Libreria Salto in Milan in 1949) (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 237) represented useful experiments to test the function of books as playful co-operative storytelling devices. Munari also insisted on the hypothesis that this kind of playful narrative approach is suitable to very small children, too. At the age of three, children have already started to memorize and reuse their sensory interactions with the environment. Their sensory receptors are open and particularly responsive (Munari, 1981/2009, p. 243). At this age, however, visual narratives have to be skilfully designed to fit into small hands and satisfy the big curiosity of toddlers. The *Prelibri* (1980) consist of twelve small books, ideally dedicated to very young children who have not yet learned to read or write. These special books (10 x 10 cm) come in many different and unusual colours, bindings and materials. They are made of paper, card, cardboard, wood, cloth, sponge, black felt, transparent plastic, each one bound in a different way. They offer a variety of stimuli, sensations, emotions, perceptions, images and they contain a wide array of surprises, because, in Munari's view, culture is ultimately the result of surprises:

A: What is the purpose of a book?

B: To pass on knowledge or pleasure or, in any case, to increase our knowledge of the world.

A: So, if I get it right, to help us live better lives.

B: Yes, that is often the case.

A: So it might be better if children began to get to know books at the age of three, to find out about these instruments of culture or poetic games, and to make things easier later on.

B: Knowledge is always a surprise; if you see something you already know, there is no surprise<sup>9</sup> (Munari, 1980).

Once again, Munari was ahead of his time: while computers were making their entrance into young children's lives, his project helped children to smell, touch, watch and even taste the objects that surrounded them, so that they did not lose contact, literally, with concrete reality. Munari's *Prelibri* (*Prebooks*) provided toddlers with numerous challenging human experiences (seeing, touching, feeling, playing, telling, thinking) through which children could learn "that reading involves more than just the eyes" (Denti, 2013, p. 299). The subject of these stories is the young child's own existence, the invention of the story is left entirely to the child, who, working from the book, can construct stories and narrative inventions, using his or her own power of imagination and socialization (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 31). Readers assume a special role: by handling these object-books, by turning their pages, by wondering what kind of reactions they should produce, by actively reading them, children (and adults) can find themselves fully immersed in many narrative mechanisms typical of picturebooks, novels and tales. These readers are involved in the creation of stories by using processes of accumulation, subtraction, extension, prediction, repetition, variation, discovery, and it is a great pleasure to identify them and recognize them (Gramantieri, 2012, p. 218). The *Prelibri* are a demonstration of the possibility of co-authorship even with toddlers.

The second category is based on the relationship between play and disorientation. This relationship is based on the surprising effect of unexpected, unforeseen, fabulous aspects of everyday reality. The aim is combining the visual playfulness and irony with the formal linearity of a simple – but never banal – story. The result of this interaction is a continuous research on reality (Tisdall, 1970). Munari adopts this special mechanism in order to enable children to make sense of the world through their visual skills. Thanks to his multimodal books, like for instance *Nella nebbia di Milano* (1968) or *Cappuccetto Giallo* (1972), young readers have the possibility to explore ordinary places or "conventional" fairy tales in extraordinary ways: "Little Yellow Riding Hood's daddy is a car park attendant, and her mummy works at the supermarket. Their house is tiny, and her mummy keeps everything neat and tidy. She even has time to read odd books" (Munari, 1972).

As the critic and art historian Filiberto Menna points out, in 1966 Munari did not wish to "produce any kind of collective amazement [...] quite on the contrary, he wished to create little fantastic worlds for a domestic and everyday use, places which should be contemplated, psychically inhabited, enchanted"<sup>10</sup> (1966, p. 15). The stories of some objects like *Le macchine di Munari* (1942) or the adventures of Munari's characters like *Cappuccetto Giallo* or those created in 1945 for the Mondadori publishing house can be considered as experiences of disorientation, even though they take place in everyday settings. These settings are neither fabulous nor extraordinary, in the sense of fantastic, but their unusual and surprising dimension depends on Munari's choices as far as beautiful useless objects (useless machine), weather conditions (foggy or snowy places, etc.) or unconventional retelling are concerned. Munari makes careful choices about the surprising situations portrayed in his stories, to the extent that these settings somehow become characters in themselves, by attracting children's attention, testing their sensory receptiveness and questioning them about the limitless possibilities of transforming reality. Munari's picturebooks convey the sense of the fabulous in everyday life through simple devices: flaps, smaller pages inside normal pages, or bizarre perspectives for natural descriptions, such as the stones depicted in the picturebook *Da lontano era un'isola* (1971) that become little worlds containing oceans, islands, continents, etc. The analysis of two picturebooks can explain the interaction between play and the dimension of disorientation as a way to explore the world in Munari's work.

*Le macchine di Munari* (1942) were drawn when the author was still a student. His idea was simple: having fun together with his friends. The book was initially designed in an unusual format. It was 13 ¼ inches (34 cm) high and 4 ¾ inches (12 cm) wide with rather dense illustrations and writing. This format, however, was rejected by the publisher Einaudi and a more conventional 8 ¼ x 11 in. (21 x 28 cm) layout was adopted. Munari's machines are strange constructions. They move the tails of lazy dogs, forecast the arrival of dawn, make musical hiccups, and other silly things. They are based on the work of the famous American cartoonist Rube Goldberg, as Munari explains in *Arte come mestiere [Art as a Profession]* (1966). The brightly coloured volume, created during the tragic war period, displays unbridled creativity: it contains a series of tables showing obscure devices, which produce surreal and foolhardy reactions. The futurist myth of machinery is transformed into a collection of

merry objects, which serve no other purpose than creating playful surprise. The book steps outside everyday comfortable thought processes, goes beyond cultural stereotypes and ventures into the wonderful and almost infinite universe of possible alternatives. Useless machines are a wry oxymoron that attract the reader's attention on the usefulness of the useless (art) and the uselessness of the useful (the machine) (Zaffarano, 2014). This oxymoron refers to the fact that useful machines have an in-built obsolescence, in contrast with the beneficial utility of useless machines, which are simply intended to delight and entertain.

Another example comes from a collection of ten picturebooks that Munari designed and partly published with Mondadori (only seven of these books were actually printed, and translated in the United States soon afterwards) on the occasion of his son's fifth birthday in 1945. These picturebooks, too, call into question the idea of humorous disorientation. Illustrations and short sentences metaphorically chase each other across large coloured pages and small hidden inserts, thus representing a direct legacy of the surrealist *boîtes* (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 27). By opening a series of unexpected windows, children are involved in an ironical and surprising discovery game: they find special animals that reveal their desire of being other animals, and special suitcases that hide cats, lions, and giraffes. *L'uomo del camion* (1945/2004) is one of these picturebooks. Images and their independent ability to communicate are embodied in a set of striking graphic drawings. Some startling windows open up inside the few pages contained in the book. The protagonist of the story is Marco, a lorry driver, who wants to meet his son on his third birthday. He climbs into the cab and drives off. But, after ten miles, the lorry stops. Marco does not know what to do, but after a while, he opens the lorry bonnet and something surprising appears. The story continues and a sequence of different means of transport and other "unexpected events" slow down the delivery of the present. At the end, there is a parcel. What does it contain? Munari's book goes beyond ordinary and conventional storytelling. He conceived a quiet revolution (Finessi, Meneguzzo, 2008, p. 17) that "disempowered" words and gave the leadership to pictures, which established a direct dialogue with children and encouraged their curiosity through their own communicative autonomy. Besides narrating stories, books thus became surprise boxes.

The third category, in this analysis of the functions of play in Munari's picturebooks, corresponds to the experience of the limit. Elusiveness is probably the most precise and rigorous feature, on which the description and interpretation of Munari's works (Fossati, 1972) can be based, and it is deeply connected with his experimentation with limits. His work, in fact, reaches beyond traditional book categories, genres, artistic movements, aesthetic and visual issues, reader groups. Munari, for example, was successful in blurring the boundary between the child and adult reader, as his work "sets the childish side of us free and, at the same time, opens up the great issues of art and poetry to the world of children. After breaking down the object-book, he even moves beyond the idea of a «type of reader» and overcomes the last possible prejudice" (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 31).

Munari's work draws its inspiration from the very idea of playing, surprising children, creating irony and fun. These elements, however, would never have given origin to the fruitful and original results of his work, if they had not found a harmonious compromise with scientific logics and rational reasoning and with the rigorous application of a methodology developed by Munari himself (Ballo, 1965). This methodology refers to the experience of the limit (Meneguzzo, 2000, p. 23) What does this concept mean, in Munari's work? It basically refers to the capacity of "exploring to what extent an object, an idea, or a person may be altered, without losing their identity"<sup>11</sup> (Meneguzzo, 2000, p. 23). In Munari's view, people tend to replicate behaviours, ideas and thoughts that have been systematically codified by everyday routines. In this way, endless possibilities are definitely lost. A practical example may explain this concept. Books are usually conceived as word-containers: words are comfortably and unquestionably placed one after the other along the pages. What if we they were all placed in a single line? Would this kilometre-long book become too long, too uncomfortable and too unpractical to be handled and read? What about books that contain no words, is it still possible to call them books? (Meneguzzo, 2000, p. 24). This is the methodological approach that Munari used to experience, test and overcome limits in his editorial projects. Nowadays, scholars, teachers and educators are perfectly aware about the educational relevance of wordless picturebooks, often known as silent books, either in families and in



schools (Mirandola, 2012; Campagnaro & Dallari, 2013; Grilli & Terrusi, 2014). However, would it still be possible to read a pictureless picturebook? Would it be possible to create it? How would it work? Munari ingeniously created the story of *Cappuccetto Bianco* (1981/2008). In this unique picturebook, readers are warned right from the beginning that they will see nothing on the pages, because everything is covered in snow. Lots, and lots and lots of white and enchanting snow. In this pictureless picturebook, Munari leaves the pages completely white, with just few words placed at the bottom of each page. The lack of illustrations is justified by the overwhelming presence of snow, which has fallen during the night and buried everything beneath its whiteness. The limits of visual narration in picturebooks is thus overcome: the actions, the protagonist, the setting, the adventure, the reading emotions are all conveyed with the help of nothing else but paper. “No one knows how, but a bunch of blank pages actually turns into a wonderful book”<sup>12</sup> (Maffei, 2002/2008, p. 30). Munari dedicated this original silent visual retelling to Remy Charlip, who, at the end of 1957, had sent him a greeting card depicting something that looked like snow (Beckett, 2002, p. 91) and to John Cage, an absolute master of absence and silence.

In Munari’s view, the limit is both a physical and a conceptual boundary. This territory is extremely important, because it is the place where new things nestle. In his opinion, new possibilities emerge from the limit of things (Meneguzzo, 2000, p. 24). The possibility of challenging limits, for instance, offered him the inspiration for a habitable book, the *Libro letto* (1993), a very unusual, bulky volume, made of large colourful pieces of padded fabric in the form of soft sheets. With its short daily stories printed on the ribbon frame, this book is a toddler bed, a book to live in, a book where children can physically take a nap. Munari’s methodological approach engages and challenges children to think new ideas, invent new stories, design new characters, and draw new adventures. Munari even managed to overcome the limits of co-authorship. In books like *Tanta Gente* (1983) and *La favola delle favole* (1994) children can really create their own stories. *Tanta Gente*, which won the Bologna Children’s Book Fair Graphics Prize in 1984 and the Ulm “Spiel Gut” Prize in 1987, includes a plastic folder containing two book dummies. The first dummy includes various sheets of coloured paper and light cardboard, tracing paper, wrapping paper, which may be used to form a story about people and their everyday lives. The second one contains blank paper and offers several ideas for situations and images, which may be completed by expanding on the funny stories created in the first dummy. In this artistic creation, produced in partnership with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Munari invited his young readers to observe everyday reality from a different point of view, encouraged children to juggle with reality and make up their own stories (Grandi, 2015, pp. 43-44). Much like *Tanta Gente*, *La favola delle favole* goes beyond the very idea of “book”. It is again a selection of 57 pages made of paper and other materials, clipped together and contained in transparent plastic envelopes, which provide creative opportunities for manipulation. The passive method of using a book vanishes once and for all. It is now up to the reader to create the storytelling event, write and draw the stories. Thanks to the presence of clips, bindings are reduced to a minimum; pages may be removed and then assembled in a different order. The book contains Munari’s drawings, sheets with holes or other geometrical forms, transparent sheets that assume the colour of the pages underneath, coloured papers that offer different possible interpretations: green may represent a meadow, or the inside of a green room; yellow may represent the sun, a cornfield, a buttercup, or a dish of polenta and... children’s imagination. In the introduction, Munari (1994) writes: “The objective of the game is creating an invented story, without worrying whether it seems real or believable. Actually, the best stories are the most fantastic. Every single child can have his or her own book, a book of enormous value, which they can read over and over again, until they become great-grandparents themselves”<sup>13</sup>. Each book becomes a unique copy. The reader becomes an author.

## Conclusions

In his book *Fantasia [Fantasy]*, Munari (1977/2009) declared that the future society is already present in our children. The way in which children grow up and are educated has an impact on the future of freedom and

creativity. Children should therefore be sustained in cultivating education and growing free from any influence. By developing children's personalities, it is possible to offer a substantial contribution to collective growth (pp. 121-122). One of Munari's main concerns was, in this sense, to contribute to the education of citizens who should not only be in possession of up-to-date knowledge but also of the ability to create new knowledge as a normal part of their lives. This is the reason why his work was always characterised by a double-pronged orientation including both experimental research, i.e. the collection of new data about the world, and educational activity, i.e. the diffusion of knowledge to a large audience of adults and children through shared models or images (Munari, 1979). In the last part of his long artistic career, Munari concentrated his research on educational tools capable of communicating data and methods for cultural development. He aimed at sharing knowledge, democratising the world of art, making creative processes transparent, defining a new educational role for visual arts. In this sense, he looked for a developmental trajectory leading from the natural inquisitiveness of young children to the disciplined creativity of mature knowledge producers. His challenge was to attract both adults and children towards a common trajectory, which involved even toddlers. For him, it was important that children should enjoy complete freedom of action in this process of cultural construction, "a playful process of negotiation, imagination, orchestration, interpretation and experimentation, using visual strategies of noticing, searching, exploring, hypothesizing, comparing, labelling and strategizing" (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 79).

Munari reached these objectives by experimenting the mechanism of play in his children's books, using different educational strategies such as co-authorship, disorientation and the experience of the limit. As the present analysis pointed out, these three strategies were, and still are, able to broaden children's sensitivity, imagination, knowledge, mental and critical awareness.

Although art historians may now remember Bruno Munari for his immense contribution to modern aesthetics, it was not always easy for Munari to convince demanding critics about his credentials. He once declared: "It hasn't always been easy for me to make people take me seriously. I play with children. And, in a society like ours, anyone who plays or works with children runs the risk of being considered as eccentric" (Hanley, 1998).

Luckily, he never stopped designing children's books, playing and experimenting with them, he never contented himself with accepting things as they were, but – as every great scientist, artist and thinker does – he kept asking himself and his young readers: how is it possible to do things differently?

## Notes

1 "Oltre a giocare con i bambini, Munari ha molto giocato, e fatto giocare, con le parole" (translation by author).

2 "Osservare a lungo, capire profondamente, fare in un attimo" (translation by author).

3 "Bambole stupide da sedere in mezzo al letto" oppure "bambole consumistiche che cambiano vestiti, scarpe" (translation by author).

4 "l'ambiente naturale che ci circonda" e "la natura che è dentro di noi, nei nostri organi sensoriali" (translation by author).

5 "Pagine diverse, coloratissime, fustellate, tagliate, bucate. Ogni apertura una sorpresa, un'emozione nuova, un gioco diverso. Bruno Munari ha sempre giocato a suscitare emozioni, raccogliendo e manipolando oggettini minuti, trasformando piume, pietruzze o ritagli di carta, interessato com'era sia alla razionalità della progettazione sia alla casualità con cui le idee possono associarsi e mescolarsi tra loro" (translation by author).

6 "Rivelazione delle zone inesplorate dell'esistente" (translation by author).

7 "L'interprete più autentico di questa "gratuità" del segno, "inutilità" della parola, di questo "gioco dell'arte" che non a caso trova una sponda anche teorica in Rodari della cui opera con Einaudi si fa prodigioso illustratore. [...] Munari ci propone [...] una pluralità di idee, di stimoli, di provocazioni in grado di aprire molti percorsi agli illustratori-scrittori delle generazioni successive" (translation by author).

8 "il protagonista è il bambino stesso che guarda, che entra nella nebbia" (translation by author).

- 9 A: Ma a cosa serve un libro? B: A comunicare il sapere, o il piacere, comunque ad aumentare le conoscenze del mondo. A: Quindi, se ho ben capito, serve a vivere meglio. B: Spesso sì. A: Allora sarebbe utile che anche i bambini di tre anni cominciasse a familiarizzarsi con il libro come oggetto, a conoscerlo come strumento di cultura o di gioco poetico, ad assimilare quella conoscenza che facilita l'esistenza. B: La conoscenza è sempre una sorpresa, se uno vede quello che già sa, non c'è sorpresa (translation by author).
- 10 “destare stupori collettivi [...], quanto piuttosto creare piccoli mondi favolosi per un uso più quotidiano e domestico, luoghi cioè di contemplazione da abitare psichicamente, microcosmi incantati” (translation by author).
- 11 “andare a vedere fino a che punto un oggetto, un'idea, una persona possono arrivare senza esserne snaturate” (translation by author).
- 12 “Chissà come, un mazzo di fogli bianchi riesce a diventare un libro bellissimo” (translation by author).
- 13 “Il grande gioco è quello di inventare a ruota libera, senza la preoccupazione che la storia sia verosimile. Anzi, più è fantastica e più è divertente. Ogni ragazzo o bambino avrà così un libro unico, un libro di grande valore, da rileggere quando sarà bisnonno” (translation by author).

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