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# Materiality in Bruno Munari's Book Objects: The Case of *Nella notte buia* and *I Prelibri*

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This paper reviews the primacy of materiality in Bruno Munari's work based on the case study of two of his picturebooks. Bruno Munari was one of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italy's most eclectic figures. Over the course of his lengthy career as an artist and designer, Munari explored the field of materiality in children's books with exceedingly favourable results. His picturebooks set a precedent in the field of children's literature, and they are highly valued even today. Children are fascinated by the opportunity to organise the experience of reading more freely thanks to innovative graphic and typographic mechanisms that fully exploit the editorial potential of materials such as paper, construction paper, and cardboard, but also transparent or semi-transparent sheets of acetate film, wood, plastic, sponge, and so on. In this paper, I describe the exclusive relationship that Munari developed over the years with the book as an object in all its various components (text and paratext). To do so, I discuss two of Munari's significant editorial projects, the picturebook entitled *Nella notte buia* [In the Dark of the Night] (1956) and *I Prelibri* [Prebooks] (1980). I analyse the ways in which the Milanese artist succeeded in exploiting all the communicative, aesthetic and educational potential of these books' material dimension.

**Keywords:** Bruno Munari, picturebooks, book objects, materiality, tactility, multimodal literacy

Bruno Munari was an Italian artist, graphic designer and illustrator who succeeded in combining art and design to great effect in his visual art pieces, as well as his books (Munari 1971). Right from his professional debut (1929), when he became an illustrator at the age of 22, Bruno Munari (Milan, 1907–1998) cultivated a very intimate and personal relationship with materiality and the book object (Beckett 2012; Maffei 2008;

Campagnaro 2016, 2017, 2019a; Antonello, Nardelli and Zanoletti 2017) by focusing on three specific aspects of picturebooks: first the capacity of the aesthetic properties of the book to transform sensitivity to colour or shapes into emotional narrative structures; second the book's dialogic configuration that constantly seeks a dialogue between the object produced (whether it was a work of art, a design object, or printed matter) and its end user; third the book's materiality. This third aspect plays a fundamental role in all Munari's design projects regardless of whether they are objects (an ashtray or a watch), furniture (a bed or lamps) or, as in this paper, books. His work stands as a testimony to his extremely meticulous attention to choosing the 'right' material for the object being made. In his own words (Munari 1971: 129):

[...] the right material, meaning the material that contributes to the functionality of the object being planned. A cupboard can be made of glass [...], but then your first thought is that it will be fragile, so in the end glass is not the right material. [...] Rubber shoes do not let your feet breathe. A straw lampshade does not provide much light. [...] Instead, we make good use of materials when we design a sofa covered with fabric or leather (though leather does not let the body breathe), or a bread basket made of straw or wood, or bamboo.<sup>1</sup>

Munari's position on the importance of materiality in creating functional art is even evident in his book objects. In this paper, I analyse the material dimension of Munari's *Nella notte buia* [In the Dark of the Night] (1956) and *I Prelibri* [Prebooks] (1980), emphasising the communicative, aesthetic, and educational potential expressed in these two books.

## **Book design, book objects and materiality in the poetics of Bruno Munari**

Munari was an author and illustrator, but he was also an editorial director, project manager, and graphics editor. His practical experience in the publishing world afforded him an in-depth knowledge of typographic processes and papermaking techniques, and due to his natural interest he continued to follow the technological evolution and changes in the publishing market throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Munari's notable experience and interests are so extensive that it is worth exploring his book design from a more general perspective before introducing the role and the characteristics of materiality in his books. By giving this insight into Munari's design philosophy, this allows the reader to better understand how his artistic development extends to his material selections and how the materiality of his picturebooks enhances the reading experience.

Munari was well-versed in all aspects of book production, having done everything from writing the text to drawing the illustrations, from selecting the graphic content to deciding on the page layout to devising solutions to various typographical issues, from choosing the materials for the pages and cover to picking out the binding that suited the book the most. He focused on producing books of the highest quality that only a

<sup>1</sup> All the translations from Italian in this paper are the author's.

well-established publishing house could print (between 1972 and 1978, for instance, he designed the *Tantibambini* [Many Children] series for the Einaudi publishing house). For example, Munari's *L'Anguria Lirica* [The Lyric Watermelon] (D'Albisola and Munari 1934) was an art book that tested the limits of publishing in a "printing revolution" as he experimented in creating a reproduction of an artistic medium in print. This book was printed on tin, "employing a lithographic technique used for biscuit tins" (Maffei 2008: 19), that gave the book an added aesthetic value, but as a book object it was greeted as an expression of the kind of Futurism reconstruction of the world involving art and everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Another valuable example of Munari's Futuristic poetics of technicalities (Antonello 2009) is the book *Il poema del vestito di latte* [The Poem of the Milk Dress] (1937), written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,<sup>3</sup> designed and illustrated by Bruno Munari, which in essence advertised *lanital*, a fibre manufactured from casein. In this book, Munari's graphics and illustrations were drawn on new cellophane overlays that combined with text and collages to create a graphic-visual composition. Munari did not confine himself to the limits of mass printing and experimented on his own, fashioning hand-crafted books such as *Libri illeggibili* [Unreadable books] (Fig. 1) that he started producing in 1949 and continued to produce right up until his death. The *Libri illeggibili* are books without words, and depending on the theme, the book could be one with pages cut in different ways, or pages of different colours. Through the act of turning the pages of these visual books, it creates and dismantles geometrical shapes and other abstract figures.<sup>4</sup>

Munari exhibited the same attention to detail in the design and meticulous selection of materials for the covers of books he was commissioned to produce for several of Italy's renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century publishers to ensure maximum visual impact. He was responsible for a number of the most visually revolutionary covers for Giulio Einaudi's children's books – books by Gianni Rodari, for instance, that occupy a special place in the history of children's literature in Italy, such as *Filastrocche in cielo e in terra* (1960) and *Il pianeta degli alberi di Natale* (1962) and *Favole al telefono* (1962).

<sup>2</sup> Futurism was a literary, artistic and political movement founded in 1909 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. In a series of "manifestoes" and sensational controversies, it proposed an art and a behaviour that aimed to do away with the past and all traditional forms of expression, inspired by the dynamism of modern life and the civilisation of machines, and focused on the future. It was a model for all subsequent avant-garde movements.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Munari began to move in the Futurist artistic circles during the late 1920s, "adhering to the 'Second' Futurist movement, led by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti – who immediately considered him to be the most brilliant figure of the new generation" (Hájek 2012: 13).

<sup>4</sup> Many of the *Libri illeggibili* – such as the *Libro illeggibile bianco e rosso* (1953), *Libro Illeggibile N. XXV* (1959), *Libro illeggibile bianco e nero* (1965), *Libro illeggibile 1966* (1966), *Libro illeggibile N.Y.1* (1967), *Libro illeggibile MN1* (1984), *Libro illeggibile MN2* (1988a), *Libro illeggibile 1988-2* (1988b), *Libro illeggibile NA-1* (1990), *Libro illeggibile MN3 Luna capricciosa* (1992), *Libro illeggibile MN4* (1994), *Libro illeggibile MN5* (1995) – were adapted for print and many copies were published. Others remained as single books or collections of (10 or 20) numbered and signed copies (like the set of six *Libri illeggibili* exhibited at the Libreria Salto in Milan in 1949, almost all since lost, apart from the first, or *Libri illeggibili* n. 8, n. 15 or n. 25); others were never even printed and exist only in draft form (Maffei 2008: 235–253).



**Fig. 1a, 1b, 1c.** Bruno Munari, *Libro illeggibile bianco e rosso* (An unreadable quadrat-print), 1953. © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.<sup>5</sup>

**Sl. 1a, 1b, 1c.** Bruno Munari, *Libro illeggibile bianco e rosso* (An unreadable quadrat-print) [Nečitljiva knjiga bijela i crvena (Nečitljivi kvadratni otisak)], 1953. © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

<sup>5</sup> The *Libro illeggibile bianco e rosso* is a poster that has been folded into triangles. Munari's biography is printed in eight languages on this folded poster. The cover is made of grey cardboard that finishes as a rhombus shape and white-and-red cut on double-spread pages.

Examining Munari's covers is as relevant as studying the contents of the books because the covers introduce two important elements relevant for this study of materiality. First, the dialogic configuration in a book is a "code" understood by the recipient.<sup>6</sup> Second, the relationship between colour and material is very strict and discriminating: not all colours are suitable for certain materials (Munari 1968/2008). His innovative covers for the essay series *Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi*, with its covers all divided into six squares, or the *Il nuovo Politecnico Einaudi* series, the covers of which show a single all-red square set against a white background "in the constructivist style" (Baroni 2017: 148), are often still studied in courses on editorial design to this day (Baroni 2017). Munari contributed to the graphic renovation of Rizzoli's *Jolly* series, the red-and-black graphic system fashioned for the Editori Riuniti, and the graphic design of book covers for the *Club degli Editori*, published by Mondadori. He instigated the modernisation of the graphic and typographic visuals of the most futurist literary adventures of the Italian 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *Almanacco letterario Bompiani* (1925–1980). In 1934, Munari became its new graphics editor, and put his remarkably modern visual creativity to use. For many years (he worked on this project until 1977), his works remained the most beautiful of the whole *Almanacco* (Tonini and Tonini 2015). Umberto Eco, a young editor for Bompiani at the time, wrote (Eco 1998: n.p.):

That pencil [Munari's pencil] moved with such extraordinary lightness and speed that it seemed to be drawing the dancing of bees in the air. And I use terms like 'lightness' thinking especially of Calvino's American lesson [...] because, while working alongside him, I came to understand many things about rhythm, empty space, and how we can 'see' to the millimeter, from a simple sketch, what the end result will be – a very rare virtue. Many times, with the illustrated books and almanacs, after Munari had interpreted a text (that he had not read) in the way he arranged the printing blocks and images, it became necessary to change the text itself to make it more consistent, as it were, with the concept expressed by the page layout. Those pencilled-in dots were ideas.

Munari was an inexhaustible experimenter and was always seeking out new and innovative ways to perfect the page layout of books and improve the way they were read. In his essay *Artista e designer [Design as Art]* (1971), Munari envisions the book in a manner entirely distinct from the traditional graphic layout discussed in many academic essays: he designs it as if it were a single continuous sheet as wide as a page but as long as all the pages placed one after the other (Munari 1971: 5):

I have tried not to interrupt the discourse that occurs between words, illustrations, notes, and captions, so that the reader may have different types of reading: only the main works, printed in the main column in ten-point, looking at the illustrations printed in a narrower column in eight-point. Or the reader may read the captions too, printed in

<sup>6</sup> Munari explained that "the problem with illustrations for children's books [and book covers] is a bit like the problem with toys and the 'code' understood by the recipient. Children do not like illustrations that do not speak to them, no matter how well done they may be. A child knows when an illustration is trying to play a game. For example, Einaudi asked me to illustrate a couple of books by Rodari, one of which was called *Favole al telefono*. All well and good, I did my drawings like a series of fairy tales told over the telephone" (as quoted by Maffei 2008: 103).

an even smaller column. All the words, illustrations, notes, quotations, additions, and captions are laid out in a continuous line without breaks or interruptions, and then cut to the same size and format as the pages so that readers can choose the type of reading they want, browsing or complete, according to their own interests.

This detailed description of Munari's works in his own words is fundamental to our understanding of his holistic approach to the book object that he developed over years. His incessant experimenting made him particularly adept at generating the specific circumstances necessary for a harmonious balance between four crucial aspects of the publishing process: (i) a smooth interaction between the text and the communicational support, or paratext; (ii) the value added by illustrations and, in general, the visual-perceptive apparatus of the book; (iii) the polysemic value of the materials used, and the way in which the book is printed; and (iv) the emotional analysis that accompanies the reading and handling of the book object by the reader. It is due to Munari's experience in publishing, and the good fortune to have been granted certain freedoms, that he was in a position to design children's books that were incredibly innovative at the time of their production. They were books conceived as genuine encounters, capable of holding attention and being absorbing reading experiences. Munari's two relevant projects, *Nella notte buia* and the *Prelibri*, that we shall go on to analyse in-depth, are also examples of another innovative element: they have a materiality that serves as a supporting character subtly reinforcing the story, be it literary or visual. Munari succeeded in giving the material primacy by revolutionising the architecture of the page, organising it according to a wholly new balance of power between text, graphics and materials. In these book objects, it is the materiality that "describes" the text. Munari also assigned to the materiality of the paper, cardboard and other materials used in his books an additional function: above all else, the purpose of materiality was to enable young readers to experience the sensorial landscape and emotional climax of the story. Ultimately, though, Munari saw the materials as an important vehicle for conveying a sense of beauty and aesthetic value. To him, books designed with "love" (Munari 1971: 124) and made from beautiful and aesthetically refined materials become a powerful means for countering the daily wretchedness in which so many children are obliged to live and grow up.<sup>7</sup>

### **Development of Munari's material sensitivity: three personal accounts**

To better understand the genesis of Munari's special attention to materiality and the communicative potential of materials, it is best to analyse three salient periods in Munari's life and artistic career. The first was the period of his childhood. Bruno Munari was born in Milan in 1907, but spent his childhood entirely in Badia Polesine, a little village deep in the countryside of north-eastern Italy, near the river Adige, not

<sup>7</sup> Munari thoroughly studied children's spatial life environment. In 1970 he designed a special and versatile children's domestic space called *Abitacolo*. This original suspended bed has been designed as a domestic space where children can organise different domestic domains such as playgrounds, reading or creative grounds and other different scenarios and use their imagination to transform quotidian reality (Campagnaro 2019b).

far from Rovigo and Padova. In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Munari was growing up, the bucolic countryside around Rovigo was still endless expanses of fields, long rows of trees, the gentle flow of a river, old wooden water mills, insects, and small animals. In his curious, playful wanderings with no particular purpose, his explorations and unexpected discoveries, his silent contemplations, Munari realised just how variegated, flexible and ductile nature was. His close relationship with the natural world (Antonello 2017) was an experience that became extremely important in his works in the field of children's literature. A childhood spent in the country, an open-air school teaching one to observe and appreciate the simple, frugal, little things of everyday life out in the fresh air, in close contact with nature, observing the plants and animals populating this world proved an extraordinary source for his remarkable stories.

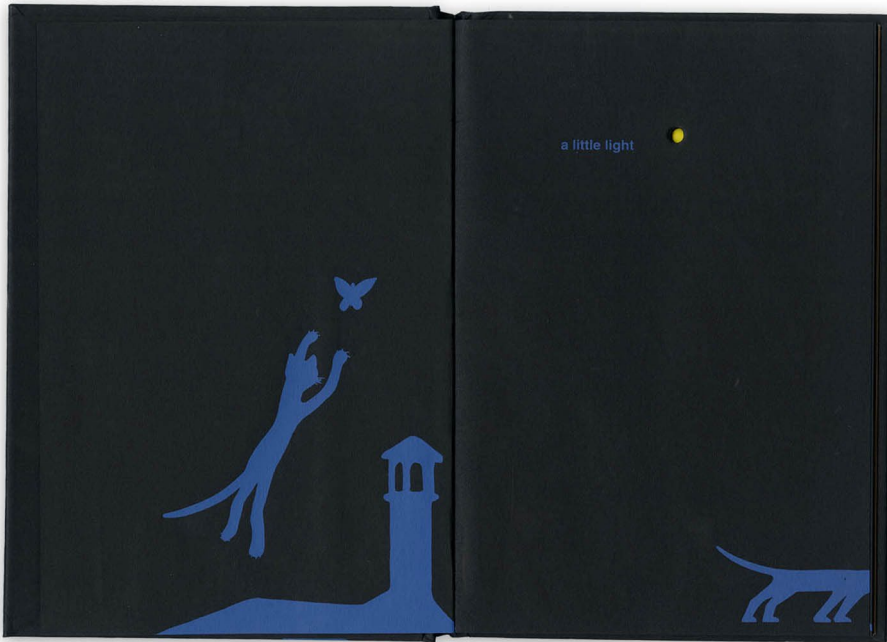
The second period of note in Munari's life concerns his artistic relationship with Futurism (Hájek and Zaffarano 2012). In 1926, at 19 years old, Munari left the countryside of the Veneto and moved to Milan, with the aim of becoming a painter. This was when he came into contact with some of the best-known exponents of Futurism – an encounter that, as mentioned earlier, was to make a significant mark on his artistic development, particularly its experimental aspect. In this cultural milieu, Munari learned to appreciate the Futurists' exploitation of heterogeneous artistic methods, their ability to combine different forms and techniques, and their untiring exploration of new materials and expressive channels. Although Munari moved away from the Futurist movement after a few years, this artistic movement's core objective of experimentation with different materials and for the cross-pollination of different visual and non-visual languages remained strong in his work. It was still having a beneficial effect, even 20 years later – as we can see, for instance, from his genuinely remarkable experimental use of paper and the printing process involved in his picturebooks *Nella notte buia* and *I Prelibri*.

Finally, the third period that profoundly influenced Munari's work in creating his picturebooks relates to his artistic project called the *Libri Illeggibili*. As mentioned earlier, this was an artistic endeavour that began in 1949, in which Munari proposed to experiment with different publishing materials, printing techniques and page layouts and their capacity for visual communication. This experimentation led him to produce book objects that owe their exceptionality to their highly unique and original use of paper and treatment of the paper's physical properties (format, colour, weight, texture, shape), bindings, different-coloured inks, typefaces and fonts, page margins, empty spaces, page numbering, and so on.

The following sections focus on Munari's use of materiality in *Nella notte buia* and *I Prelibri*.

### **The book object *Nella notte buia* [In the Dark of the Night]**

The picturebook *Nella notte buia* was first published in 1956 and continues to be published with great success by Corraini (Mantova, Italy) 63 years on. With the



**Fig. 2.** The first section of the picturebook *Nella notte buia* illustrated by Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

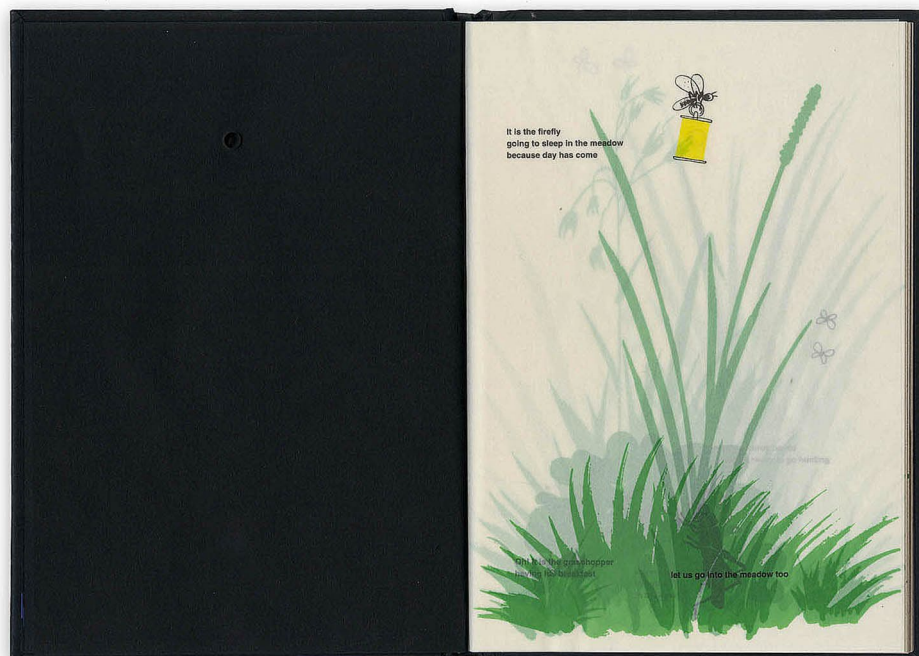
**Sl. 2.** Prvi dio slikovnice *Nella notte buia* [U mračnoj noći], ilustrirao Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

publication of this one picturebook, Munari effectively developed the practice of exploiting the opportunities offered by the materiality and physical properties of a book. His new approach to picturebooks was adopted and re-invented by numerous illustrators, including Komagata and Suzy Lee, who absorbed Munari's approach to colour, material sensitivity and typographic innovation and then imparted a highly personalised manifestation of his precepts into their picturebooks.

The first edition of the Munari's picturebook contained 56 pages. The story was almost exclusively visual and revolved around a story that continues over three settings (three "visual" chapters) featuring very different types of illustrations, paper and cut-outs. The first section is 17 pages long and made up entirely of black construction paper (which represents the night) that acts as a backdrop for the electric blue illustrations that give an account of the shadowy nocturnal activities in a city (Fig. 2).

Readers traverse the night-time cityscape accompanied by a resourceful blue cat that easily navigates the city along in the lower part of the page. In addition to the cat, there is a very bright yellow light that appears through a small hole that, due to its startling contrast with the black pages, has a powerful presence even though it is quite tiny. This yellow light continues the thread of the story started in the night scene into second section that consists of 16 pages where the nature of this yellow light is





**Fig. 3.** Second section of the picturebook *Nella notte buia* illustrated by Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.  
**Sl. 3.** Drugi dio slikovnice *Nella notte buia* [U mračnoj noći], ilustrirao Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

revealed: it is a firefly. The reader follows the firefly, who lived intensely during the night, to a field where it rests now that it is daytime (Fig. 3). For this second section, Munari chose to use a semi-transparent shiny paper very popular in architects' studios of the time. Utilising the somewhat transparent pages to reveal and conceal, Munari teases the reader with evocative hints of the mysterious microcosm of tiny beings that populate a field: fireflies, crickets, ladybirds, beetles, spiders and centipedes, all going about their daily business, barely visible amidst the giant tufts of green grass designed by Munari. This second section of *Nella notte buia* is a tribute to Munari's childhood and an homage to the importance of nature and outdoor play for a young child's development, that Munari experienced when he was a boy.

The reader's exploration of the field comes to an end in front of a large black boulder, which effectively leads the story into this is third setting. It consists again of 16 pages, for which Munari chose an unusual type of paper. He used a beige-grey recycled paper similar to that used for wrapping parcels, which is deliberately imperfect and full of impurities, to represent the dark subterranean world of a cave (Fig. 4).

In this third visual chapter, a huge, unevenly shaped hole on the last page of the second setting leads the reader through a hidden entrance into an ancient grotto. The hole follows through from one page to the next, its shape constantly changing as

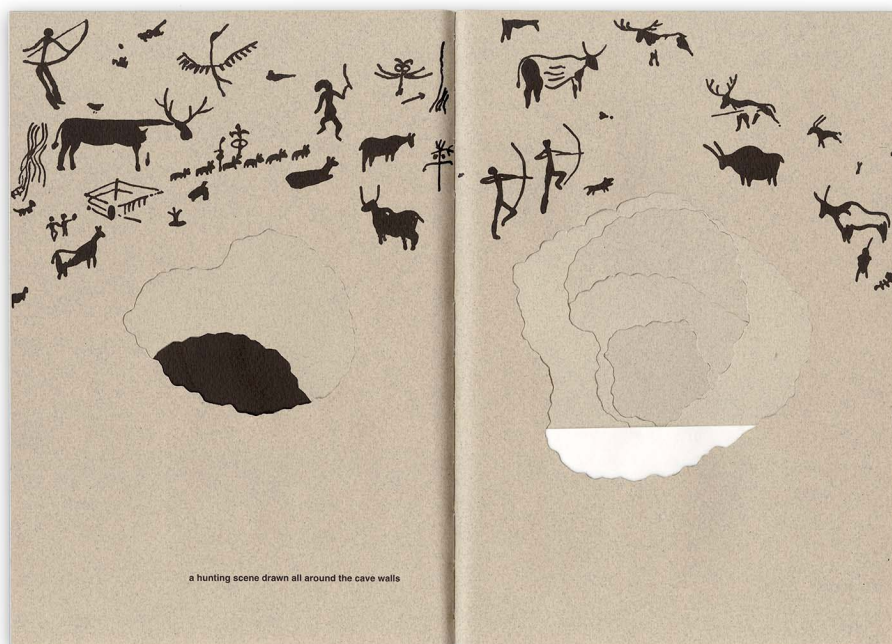


**Fig. 4.** Third section of the picturebook *Nella notte buia* illustrated by Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.  
**Sl. 4.** Treći dio slikovnice *Nella notte buia* [U mračnoj noći], ilustrirao Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

if the reader were moving through tunnels and underground passages. The illustrations in this third section are characterised by strong, rough black lines (as in cave paintings) representing primitive drawings of hunting scenes with men, bears, buffaloes, elks, and weapons made of stone and wood on the walls of this imaginary cave (Fig. 5).

As we turn the pages, we come across “touchable” underground rivers (Fig. 6) and fossils of animals now extinct. This third section catapults the reader along a mysterious path that speaks of the millenary journey of mankind through history. The journey comes to an end (or starts again?) with a last, black page dotted with tiny yellow lights (Fig. 7): the fireflies are back to light up the darkness of the night – a reminder that great discoveries can lie behind the little, curious adventures of every day.

In the picturebook *Nella notte buia*, Munari used the materiality of the paper – with its roughness, smoothness, softness, stiffness, flexibility, transparency – not as a support for the text or illustrations, but as something that communicates in its own right, capable of starting a curious and compelling exchange with a young reader. This picturebook paved the way to various editorial experiments that have contributed, since the mid-1960s, to revolutionising the shape and content of picturebooks in Italy and beyond. *Nella notte buia* was innovative as a picturebook not only for the choice of materials and their interaction with the story, but also for Munari’s original decision



**Fig. 5.** Holes and irregular black lines as in cave paintings in the third section of the picturebook *Nella notte buia* illustrated by Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

**Sl. 5.** Prorezi i nepravilne crne crte kao na pećinskim crtežima u trećem dijelu slikovnice *Nella notte buia* [U mračnoj noći], ilustrirao Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

to entrust the sensory setting of the book to the materials themselves. His ability to create three intriguing little worlds, enchanted microcosms, from everyday environments relies on the picturebook's materiality. Providing the backdrop for the narrative adventures of the book, what makes the settings whimsical is the 'fantastic' nature of the book's materiality that enhances the *mise en scène* so it transcends the boundaries of the ordinary. The depth of dimension *Nella notte buia* communicates is essentially conveyed by the different types of paper and other materials used to produce the book. It is the materials that prompt us to look at the real world from another point of view. These materials can surprise us and offer us the opportunity to pause and consider the infinitely tiny manifestations of our world. The three settings (a city at night, a field and a cave) become characters in the story. They capture children's attention and put their sensory receptiveness to the test. As young readers turn the pages of the three different "material chapters," they are launched on a journey of sensory and tactile discovery. The visual effects of the paper draw their eyes to seek new discoveries (the bright yellow light that shines mysteriously through the night leads the reader to the next section, or the turn of a page that unveils a new image of plants and animals).



**Fig. 6.** Touchable underground rivers in the third section of the picturebook *Nella notte buia* illustrated by Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

**Sl. 6.** Taktilne podzemne rijeke u trećem dijelu slikovnice *Nella notte buia* [U mračnoj noći], ilustrirao Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

The acoustic effects of the paper prick up their ears (such as the fluttering of the semi-transparent paper used for the second section, which recalls the buzzing of the insects in the illustrations). The tactile features of the materials lure the readers to explore their texture with their fingers (the fullness and density of the black construction paper, and the emptiness of the little hole lit up with yellow in the first section). These tactile-sensory experiences enable the reader to grasp the extraordinary nature of the landscape by means of the constantly changing materials in their hands. Munari continued to test and develop sensory and tactile learning strategies such as visual exposure and experiential material learning throughout the sixties, seventies and eighties. Among his many relevant activities (picturebooks and children's art laboratories), his approach to materiality and tactile-sensory experiences is perfected in *I Prelibri*, an exceptional example of his work in picturebooks.

### **The book objects *I Prelibri* [Prebooks]**

*I Prelibri*, published by Danese until 1980 (now in the catalogue of the Corraini publishing house), is one of Munari's greatest innovations in picturebooks.



**Fig. 7.** The fireflies are back to light up the darkness in the picturebook *Nella notte buia* illustrated by Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

**Sl. 7.** Krijesnice se vraćaju kako bi osvijetlile tamu u slikovnici *Nella notte buia* [U mračnoj noći], ilustrirao Bruno Munari (1956) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

It is an ingenious series of tactile-sensory micro-narratives intended for children up to 3 years old. Like the *Nella notte buia* picturebook, this original editorial project stems from experiments that Munari began in 1949 (and continued for 40 years thereafter) on the multiple visual, tactile and material possibilities experienced in his *Libri illeggibili*.

*I Prelibri* consist of twelve 10 x 10 cm square books (Fig. 5) that are small enough to be easily handled by even very young children. A large white box in the shape of a book houses the smaller books and states the title, *I Prelibri*, the author and the publisher on the front “cover”, surrounded by photographs of children engaged in reading these book objects.<sup>8</sup> The box opens just like a book and the ‘double-page inside cover’ has six pockets on each side, which contain the prebooks, numbered 1 to 6 on the left, and 7 to 12 on the right (Fig. 8).

<sup>8</sup> At the end of 2018 the publishing house Corraini reprinted *I Prelibri* by Bruno Munari with a new special cover designed by the Japanese graphic designer and book artist Katsumi Komagata. In this version, the photos of children reading *I Prelibri* have been removed.



**Fig. 8.** The double-page inside cover of *I Prelibri*, by Bruno Munari (1980) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova  
**Sl. 8.** Dvostraničje unutrašnjih korica izdanja *I Prelibri* [Predknjige] Brune Munarija (1980) – © 2016 Bruno Munari. Prava pridržava Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

Each booklet bears the title ‘LIBRO’ (BOOK) on both the front and the back covers, leaving children free to read it whichever way they wish. They can start from the front or from the back, from the top or bottom, going from right to left, or from left to right, or starting in the middle. These books do not have a beginning and an end as other books do, and they do not follow a strict linear sequence. Each reader can choose how best to explore this remarkable work (Fig. 9).

The materials Munari used to produce *I Prelibri* vary considerably, ranging from wood to string, from transparent plastic to stiff cardboard, from sponge to felt. They have very different consistencies and textures (smooth, rough, soft, hard, cold, warm, and so on). The twelve little books within *I Prelibri* also contain an abundance of cut-outs, buttons, holes, wires, creases and spirals, that serve the dual purpose of activating the narration and revealing/concealing details that initially go unnoticed, but are gradually, slowly unveiled to the observer.

As Munari clearly explained in his critical essays, children leafing through the individual books of *I Prelibri* “receive various types of information through all their sensory receptors, and get to know these objects called books, where every book contains different information. There is one about natural history, one about gymnastics, one about science fiction, one about dynamic geometry, one a possible fairy tale to invent, one on the perception of colours, a magician’s trick, and a soft and affectionate



**Fig. 9.** Encouraging reading habits in toddlers, using *I Prelibri*, by Bruno Munari (2016).<sup>9</sup> Photographs © Piera Lombardo for Marnie Campagnaro (FISPPA), University of Padova.  
**Sl. 9.** Poticanje čitateljskih navika u djece koja su tek prohodala, uz pomoć slikovnica iz *I Prelibri* [Predknjige] Brune Munarija (2016).<sup>10</sup> Fotografija © Piera Lombardo za Marnie Campagnaro (FISPPA), Sveučilište u Padovi.

book like Linus’s blanket” (Munari 1981: 235). With the exception of the title on both front and back covers (which actually has a great visual impact), the book objects are wordless, and yet extremely compelling and descriptive. These narrative objects all have the same square shape, the same structure, the same parts of ‘editorial body’ (a

<sup>9</sup> Stages of historical and educational research on Bruno Munari ran during the 2016–2017 academic year on children aged 27–39 months. NB: The parents of the child in the photograph, who was involved in this research project, entitled “Vieni a conoscere Bruno Munari! Un percorso educativo con i bambini del nido”, have permitted its publication in papers written by Marnie Campagnaro for scholarly or academic purposes, which includes the present paper in this issue of *Libri & Liberi*. All reproduction is prohibited.

<sup>10</sup> Pojedine faze povijesnoga i obrazovnoga istraživanja o Bruni Munariju provedene su tijekom akademske godine 2016./2017. s djecom u dobi od 27 do 39 mjeseci. NB: Roditelji djeteta na slici koje je sudjelovalo u tom istraživačkom projektu, pod imenom “Vieni a conoscere Bruno Munari! Un percorso educativo con i bambini del nido”, dali su suglasnost za objavljivanje ove fotografije u znanstvenim i drugim akademskim radovima Marnie Campagnaro, uključujući i rad u ovom broju časopisa. Svaka je reprodukcija zabranjena.

cover, pages, a binding), but they are very different in terms of their visual, tactile, material, chromatic, acoustic, thermal, and communicative consistency. As children manipulate the books in *I Prelibri*, they learn from this set of multisensory samples, for instance, to understand new concepts such as softness or hardness, lightness and heaviness. At the same time, the mini books also provide a precious opportunity to reflect on the heuristic value and the diversity of substances that constitute this world, and to learn to respect and appreciate it.

From Munari's educational perspective – he was strongly influenced by Piaget's theories on discovery learning and on children's intrinsic motivation to learn (A. Munari 2000) – creative experiences with children are not only about laboratory



**Fig. 10.** Material and sensorial reading of *I Prelibri*, by Bruno Munari (2016).<sup>11</sup>

Photographs © Piera Lombardo for Marnie Campagnaro (FISPPA), University of Padova.

**Sl. 10.** Materijalno i senzorno čitanje slikovnica iz *I Prelibri* [Predknjige] Brune Munarija (2016).<sup>12</sup> Fotografija © Piera Lombardo za Marnie Campagnaro (FISPPA), Sveučilište u Padovi.

<sup>11</sup> Stages of historical and educational research on Bruno Munari ran during the 2016–2017 academic year on children aged 27–39 months. NB: The parents of the children in the photograph, who were involved in this research project, entitled “Vieni a conoscere Bruno Munari! Un percorso educativo con i bambini del nido”, have permitted its publication in papers written by Marnie Campagnaro for scholarly or academic purposes, which includes the present paper in this issue of *Libri & Liberi*. All reproduction is prohibited.

<sup>12</sup> Faze povijesnoga i obrazovnoga istraživanja o Bruni Munariju provedene su tijekom akademske godine 2016./2017. s djecom u dobi od 27 do 39 mjeseci. NB: Roditelji djece na slici koja su sudjelovala u tom istraživačkom projektu, pod imenom “Vieni a conoscere Bruno Munari! Un percorso educativo con i bambini del nido”, dali su suglasnost za objavljivanje ove fotografije u znanstvenim i drugim akademskim radovima Marnie Campagnaro, uključujući i rad u ovom broju časopisa. Svaka je reprodukcija zabranjena.



activities. Through the use of different materials, he believed that books can stimulate mental elasticity, originality, problem-solving skills, socialisation, critical sense, open-mindedness, and understanding of different art forms (even the more abstract and conceptual). With *I Prelibri*, Munari successfully accomplished the three objectives that are at the core of this work. First of all, the materiality of the book objects is capable of stimulating children's narrative thinking in a format that they can readily leaf through, interacting with pages and details. Second, the materiality enables children to explore an object as fundamental as a book from very different angles, using an approach that can vary considerably and engage all their senses. Their ears will notice the sound of the wooden pages banging against each other in prebook No. 9. Their cheeks will test the softness of the sponge or felt in prebooks No. 7 and No. 8 (Fig. 10), possibly reminding them of their mother's caressing touch.

Third, the materiality promotes a reading experience that places importance on learning through doing at the heart of the process. This is a core concept in Munari's poetics. In the course of his long artistic career, he always attributed more importance to the process than to the product. He saw children not as passive recipients of facts and information, but as active subjects engaged in constructing their own reality and their own point of view by interacting constantly with their surrounding environment. Thanks to a playful and uninhibited use of materials in the books within *I Prelibri*, children can learn to freely combine thoughts and actions effectively and avoid the repetitive and monotonous educational methods that so often imposed a singular or "the right way" of thinking. These book objects are experiential spaces that give children, however small (even 18–24 months old), a chance to encounter a material complexity that is far more heterogeneous and/or differently articulated from what they experience at home or in kindergarten. The *Prelibri* are entertaining narrative spaces that children can use to nourish their curiosity and wonder, but these little books also help them to grasp more complex concepts, such as the cause-and-effect relationship. They offer an opportunity to gain experience of sensory situations and/or feelings that are not always cultivated in daily life.

On the back cover of *I Prelibri*, Bruno Munari wrote a sort of "manifesto" for children's literature that goes like this:

A – What's a book?

B – It's a thing made up of lots of pages, held together by a binding.

A – But what's inside?

B – Usually words that, if they were placed all in a row on a single line, the line would be miles long and you'd need to walk a long way to read it.

A – But what can you read in these words?

B – You can read lots of different stories: stories about people of today and ancient times, scientific experiences, legends, very complicated philosophical or political thoughts, poetry, economic balance sheets, technical data, science-fiction stories.

A – Even fairy tales?

B – Definitely! Even fairy tales, ancient stories, nonsense, limericks.

A – With lots of pictures?

B – Sometimes there are lots of pictures and not so many words.

A – But what's a book for?

B – For communicating knowledge, or for pleasure. In any case, for increasing our understanding of the world.

A – So, if I understand you right, it's for making life better.

B – Yes, it often is.

Munari's words remind us that the visual and material aesthetic qualities of a book are fundamentally important to making life better. The different types of materiality contemplated in the *Prelibri* empower and encourage their users "to take the lead, decide, create and configure, erupting into an enquiry into the constitution and mediation of narrative" (Veryeri Alaca 2018: 67). The format of the *Prelibri* has been intentionally designed to allow children to experience reading from a very early age (0 to 3 years old) and to help empower children and transform their reality. Taken as one, or all together, the little books nourish children's imagination and curiosity for the world around them.

## Conclusion

As studied in this paper, according to Munari's poetics, a book does not rely on words and figures alone, but also on material stimuli. In the two editorial projects we have analysed, *Nella notte buia* and *I Prelibri*, Munari experimented with ingenious graphic, visual and material solutions that profoundly changed our understanding of the purpose of picturebooks. There is a strong interpenetration of texts, images, and the book's overall design. More importantly, his works provide an opportunity for new thoughts and images to organically "materialise", actively engaging young readers through the freedom of choice and "impertinent" use of innovative materials. Munari designed his children's books with an attention to detail that, rather than being pedantic, created a sense of harmony, light-heartedness and playful impertinence. While playful, Munari repeated the use of the square, his favourite shape (Munari 1960); in *I Prelibri* he provided a stable regulatory principle that allowed the freedom to contemplate "the variation, the unexpected, the apparent error" (Piazza 2014: 40). *Nella notte buia* and *I Prelibri* are reading experiences that enable children to feel with their own skin how materials can stimulate senses and generate a story. They discover tactile-sensory gestures that remain under-exploited, even today, both at home and at school. All this plays an essential part in a child's development because, drawing on Munari's words again: "children get to know the environment around them through all their sensory receptors, not just their sight and hearing; they also perceive tactile, thermal, material, acoustic and olfactory sensations" (Munari 1981: 229). Although more than 60 years have passed since the first edition of his picturebook *Nella notte buia* and almost 40 years since the first edition of *I Prelibri*, the experiences these book objects offer still seem able to promote a sort of literary and aesthetic lessons. Young children can carry these lessons with them into the future and draw on what they have learned to envision new relationships and sharply cultivate connections to the world around them,

shunning learned biases and learning in greater freedom and with a stronger critical sense (Munari 1977).

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## **Materijalnost knjiga predmeta Brune Munarija: *Nella notte buia* i *I Prelibri***

Rad razmatra primat materijalnosti u djelima Brune Munarija na primjeru dviju njegovih slikovnica. Bruno Munari bio je jedan od najraznorodnijih talijanskih umjetnika 20. stoljeća. Tijekom duge karijere umjetnika i dizajnera, Munari je istraživao materijalnost dječjih knjiga s iznimno vrijednim rezultatima. Njegove su slikovnice postavile novu paradigmu u području dječje književnosti te su iznimno cijenjene sve do danas. Djeca oduševljeno prihvaćaju mogućnost slobodnoga strukturiranja procesa čitanja koje im nude inovativni grafički i tipografski mehanizmi, do kraja iskorištavajući urednički potencijal materijala kao što su obični papir, papir za modeliranje i karton, ali također i prozirne ili poluprozirne folije, drvo, plastika, spužva itd. U ovom se članku opisuje ekskluzivni Munarijev odnos s knjigom kao predmetom u svim njezinim različitim sastavnicama (uključujući tekst i paratekst), koji je razvio tijekom godina. U tu svrhu razmatraju se dva Munarijeva važna urednička projekta, tj. slikovnica *Nella notte buia* [U mračnoj noći] (1956) i *I Prelibri* [Predknjige] (1980). Analiziraju se načini na koje je milanski umjetnik uspio iskoristiti različite komunikativne, estetičke i obrazovne potencijale materijalne dimenzije navedenih publikacija.

**Ključne riječi:** Bruno Munari, slikovnica, knjiga predmet, materijalnost, taktilnost, višemodalna pismenost