

Images and Imagination for Social Communication to Childhood. Icons and Metaphors between Visual Realism and Symbolic Meanings [†]

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Abstract: Research is related to the complex field of the social communication to childhood, deepening some theoretical aspects related to the theme of verb-visual language. In particular, it is aimed to point out the importance of “narrative” expression, to be developed also through a rhetoric of text and image, and the need for an explicit finalization of the message thus its motivations. The essay synthesizes part of the results of a wider research that addresses the subject of childhood communication in terms of content, visual language, and textual language. The aim is to help outline a methodological disciplinary proposal for transferring accessible, unambiguous, non-deceptive, informative and educational messages to children around social, cultural, health issues, etc. With respect to these issues, the essay summarizes some reflections and exemplifications from projects led by me in collaboration with some health facilities of the Ligurian Territory and with National Institutions of Social Promotion on issues of health information.

Keywords: representation; illustration; visual communication; social communication; childhood

1. Representing to Childhood Its Rights

Communication campaigns on childhood and its rights—health, study, play, free expression, equality, etc.—as recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 [1], belong to the history and to the current social communication.

Mostly, they are campaigns aimed at the well-being of the “child”, to a large extent aimed at the family and parental, that is to the actors who, in different ways, exercise educative and relational roles.

By way of example, we mention in Italy some of the many campaigns promoted by Pubblicità Progresso: “Prevention of Home Accidents” (1980), “Parental Responsibility” (1981), “Children’s Health” (1982), “Violence on Children” (1988), and so on.

For the peculiarity of the content, these are communications where the recipient and the hypothetical beneficiary of the information can obviously not be the same.

This distinction of recipient, appears more complex, when communication is directly oriented to minors.

For example, in the “Hoping for No” campaign—realized by Telefono Azzurro (1989) with the sponsorship of Pubblicità Progresso, to report, to the Italian society of those years, the opportunity for the children to ask for help, to denounce abuses, violences, etc., to tell about their discomfort, by contacting by telephone and in an anonymous form, a listening center—despite the fact that the message had theoretically been referred to childhood, the language used was still not clearly oriented

to infant users, but rather to those who, in a variety of ways, interact with the potential victims of behaviors that violate the “child’s well-being”.

Even today, designing childhood communication is particularly complex because the difficulty inherent in designing and communicating the message that characterizes all social communication, is significantly increased by the specificity of the message user, particularly by his multiform linguistic identity. I think, for example, to the cultural and psycho-emotional differences, or to the various linguistic competences of the phases of childhood with respect to spoken, written and graphic language.

Moreover, in this respect, legislation provides content indications and limitations which, even in the light of the pervading “liquidity” of information, determined by the technological, cultural and social transformations of the last decades, still appear to be primarily aimed at avoiding harms resulting by bad informations.

So, it’s up to the authors of communication, in their different roles (public and private institutions, designers, educators, etc.) identify methods and processes for adequate and effective communication.

2. Designing Communication for Childhood, between Method and Imagination

With reference to the complex context of the communication for childhood, research has identified a wide range of theoretical-methodological themes that can be summarized as follows.

- What to communicate: what content for what childhood.
- The child’s learning at different stages of childhood.
- Communication language: metaphors, story-telling, emotional proximity between the issuer and the user of the communication.
- Codes of communication: cultural, linguistic, visual codes of the different phases of childhood and adolescence.
- Which image: illustration, scheme, photography, animation, iconicity, symbolism, etc.
- Where to communicate: how to access the product.
- How to communicate: how to use the product (in autonomous way/shared/assisted).
- Timing: start, duration and frequency of the communication.

For synthesis reasons, determined by the available space in this publication, among the topics listed above, it was chosen to propose, first and foremost, those relating to the forms of communication appropriate to the different stages of “child” development (to his learning modes) and to his skills in understanding textual and visual languages.

With reference to these general and preliminary issues, they were treated a number of critical topics on the integrated role of images and texts, on how to access and use communication.

The essay refers to the experience of projects that I coordinated [2] (within the Dipartimento Architettura e Design of the Università di Genova) in collaboration with the health facilities of the Ligurian Territory (Dipartimento di Scienze della Salute of the Università di Genova—Ospedale San Martino Hospital of Genova—Istituto Giannina Gaslini) and national institutions of social promotion (LILT, ANLAIDS) on health education issues.

In particular, in reference to the editorial space, among these projects we present “Safety for Children” (2013) [3]. Social communication project aimed at the prevention of childhood accidents, and concerning to three age groups: 3–5 years; 6–9 years; 10–13 years.

3. The Child’s Learning in the Different Phases of Childhood

Communication to the child involves a series of particularly complex issues related to multiple factors: what to communicate, that is what kind of content; what language is appropriate to use; what signs; how to spread the information, which product is better to use, in which context; etc. It is obvious, therefore, the opportunity to consider, although in general terms, some hypotheses developed in the context of major learning studies.

Compared to this methodological requirement, the projects presented here referred to the stages of cognitive development defined by Jean Piaget and, in general, to some of the themes highlighted by “socio-cultural constructivism”, including the centrality, attributed in the learning process, to the user himself of the communication, which is considered an active part in the elaboration of his knowledge.

Some issues related to the formalization of the message, as well as to its fruition and dissemination, have emerged, which have oriented the process of constructing the representation.

In particular, considering the age ranges to which the communications were referred, we have considered, among those defined by Piaget, the following stages:

- preoperational stage (2–6 years) where the child is able to use symbols but does not have inductive or deductive capabilities. This is a phase in which it is crucial to activate direct and unambiguous “cause-effect” relationships, in order to overcome the child’s logical and abstraction deficiencies;
- concrete operational stage (from 6/7 to 11) where logical thinking is activated, so there rise different points of view, effective intellectual operations are implemented which make possible to coordinate isolated mental actions. In other words, children are able to concentrate on many aspects of a situation at the same time.
- formal operating stage (over 11 years) corresponds to the development of hypothetical-deductive thought able to use abstract reasoning, deductions and inductions, and, imagine the outcome of actions.

In the awareness that knowledge processing is the result of an articulated integration of individual, socio-cultural, emotional factors, etc. which, even because of their intrinsic transformability, make it difficult to formalize stable and definitive communication models, in the light of the aforementioned theoretical references, it was, however, tried to define at least the general criteria for the processing of messages that may be suitable for the different phases of childhood. In relation to the specific modes of learning of the different ages, it was defined an extension of the range of communicative codes, with the progressive insertion of expressive typologies which integrate previous ones.

Therefore, symbolic and animistic representations have been developed for communications towards children in the age range between 2 and 6 years, while more complex representations have been developed, which also require logical capacities for children in the ages between 7 to 11 years, and signs of larger abstraction and generalization for children of age over 11 years.

In addition, in some projects, mediated communication formulas (by educators and/or experts in the topics of communication) have been developed so that the child can interface with operators who can support the process of information processing.

Furthermore, laboratory products (playful and/or didactic) have been designed to put in place that area of proximal development (from the current development to the potential development area) that allows the child to acquire new knowledge.

Obviously this practice provides that one of the privileged spaces for the realization of communication is the School. In this context, one can try to act on relatively large groups, favoring an initial comparison and exchange of information, then further amplifiable through external (eventually digital and online) information tools, which can generate a real social change.

But also the family context, meaning the space of parental relations and, more generally, the place of amicable interaction, is a place to accomplish that important support process by those who have an educational role, and also a significant peer sharing. In fact, it is a “permanent”, autonomous and/or assisted/participatory comparison space.

4. The Nature of Signs

The choice of signs to formalize communication to childhood leads to the general debate on the pedagogical role of word and images: on the one hand, the theories in favour of verbal language, on the other, those linked to the primacy of the visual signs.

In the awareness, determined by the ever evolutive scenario of contemporary media, of having to use in a more and more widespread way, multiple representation systems (written or pronounced words, static or dynamic images, off-line and on-line content, etc.), preferential use of the image appears to be fundamental. It is, in fact, a medium of greater semantic wealth irreducible to verbal descriptions that, conversely, can be expressed in representations. Indeed, “I can, with imagination, see what I say, even if I say things seen elsewhere, or even never seen”, but on the contrary “I can not say (not even to tell me) all that I see now, all that which I see in the image on which I drop my gaze” [4]. Moreover, in this perspective, the representative power, but also the evocative one, of the images is so prevalent with respect to that of spoken and written language, which can not to be decodifiable by it.

In other words, the image has its intrinsic perspicuity and, at the same time, something indefinable. “E che cosa e come del resto potrei dire, della rete di rimandi, esterni e interni, che essa suscita in me? Già verbalizzando quei rimandi, annullerei o comunque tradirei ciò che li genera, quell’apertura che è propria del rapporto tra immagine/cosa e concetto. Dovrei elencarli e dunque disporli secondo un ordine lineare e temporale con dei prima e dei dopo; non sarebbero, non farebbero più rete, non muoverebbero, non mi commuoverebbero. Insomma, se procedessi in questo modo sarei costretto ad annullare ciò che rende immagine l’immagine. La ridurrei a parola, cadrei negli schemi di un’astrazione verbale [...]” [5].

These considerations are even more apparent when we refer to the communication image. Among the many theories on this subject, we recall, by way of example, the well-known model described by Edgar Dale, which, in fact, indicates, from a functional point of view, an inverse relationship between information remembrance and their abstraction level.

Moreover, it is important not to overlook the possibility of expressing, in particular through figurative images, the bodily gesture—linked to pronounced words or phrases, or even only visual, closed in itself—whose expressive power depends essentially on being visual sign immediately understandable, as it is based on stratified behavioral codes of natural and cultural nature.

In this theoretical framework, here only mentioned, it develops the propensity to image-based communication forms.

In addition to the general advantages mentioned above, it is necessary to add those determined by the simplification in terms of access to information by children belonging to linguistically minority groups—as it is also encouraged by the paragraph d of art. 17 of “The Convention on the Rights of the Child” (cf. note 1)—and, to some extent, to users with reduced cognitive skills (with reference to the traditional linguistic scope).

5. Textual and Visual Language Codes

By attributing, therefore, in the communication process to children, a fundamental and indispensable role to the image—with its “codes” of representation (geometric, chromatic, narrative, gestural, etc.), with the variety of semantic contents that depend, partly by figurativity, that is by the similarity with the referent, in part by reference cultural codes—it is worth mentioning also the important function of the textual language, spoken and written.

This, ultimately, seems to be attributable to two main reasons.

The first concerns the strengthening of the information process. The word, written or pronounced, reveals the issuer and recipient of the message, realizing an attentional and emotional enhancement.

The second concerns the completion of the information, its full and definitive disclosure. This, albeit for different respects, appears useful in communicating to children regardless of the learning stage. In the preoperational stage, in which the inductive, deductive and abstraction capacities are absent or particularly limited, the text realize a semantic saturation that orients the reading of images, for their nature open to different interpretations, thus solving any meaning ambiguity.

In later stages, concerning the concrete operational stage and, above all, the formal operating one, the text extends and conceptualizes the sense of the image. In these cases, representation almost assumes a “context” value functional to connote the textual message, and adapt it with respect to

different psycho-emotional characteristics. In other words, depending on the cognitive level, it is possible to actuate that “relazione di ricambio” which views in the visual and textual language the “frammenti di un unico grande sintagma più generale” [6] (R. Barthes).

6. Communication Languages, between Storytelling, Finalization and Rhetoric

We now address some of the basic connotations on the communication languages to the childhood, which, by way of example, will be referred to the projects coordinated by me.

The use of narration, implemented in dynamic form (through the realization of short audiovisual products, about 30 s/2 min, designed to be available on multiple digital devices and at different places—private and/or public, off/on line) and in static form (through the realization of traditional communication products such as posters, brochures, postcards, editorial products, etc.), so ultimately in mode transmediale, was one of the choices made by most communication projects. At the base of this preference, sometimes instinctively determined, the idea that narration triggers highly empath psychological mechanisms and therefore has a particular effect on the child. In fact, it's activates a projection process that enhancements of voluntary attention, by ultimately facilitating the transmission of the message.

With reference to the different phases of age, the elements of the narrative structure (functional to the articulation of history and, consequently, to the understanding by the user and to his emotional involvement) have been appropriately developed, taking into account the learning abilities already listed. In this regard, context, characters, narrative pretext, crisis events, positive-oriented actions, final outcome and implicit or explicit teaching were points of attention around which macro typologies of projects have been developed.

For example, as far as the context and the characters are concerned, projects represent:

- spaces and domestic situations, essentially articulated events on the diade “mother son” – cf. “Dov'è Bubu?” (Figure 1), “Le avventure di Filippo e Ippo” (Figure 2);
- spaces and domestic situations which include the presence of other parental figures – cf. “Totò, attento alla presa!” (Figure 3);
- external contexts, sometimes also inclusive of people outside the family nucleus – cf. “Superbimbi al mare”, (Figure 4) and “Cintura Amica” (Figure 5);
- other contexts, such as places for sport, play, etc., characterized by social relationships.

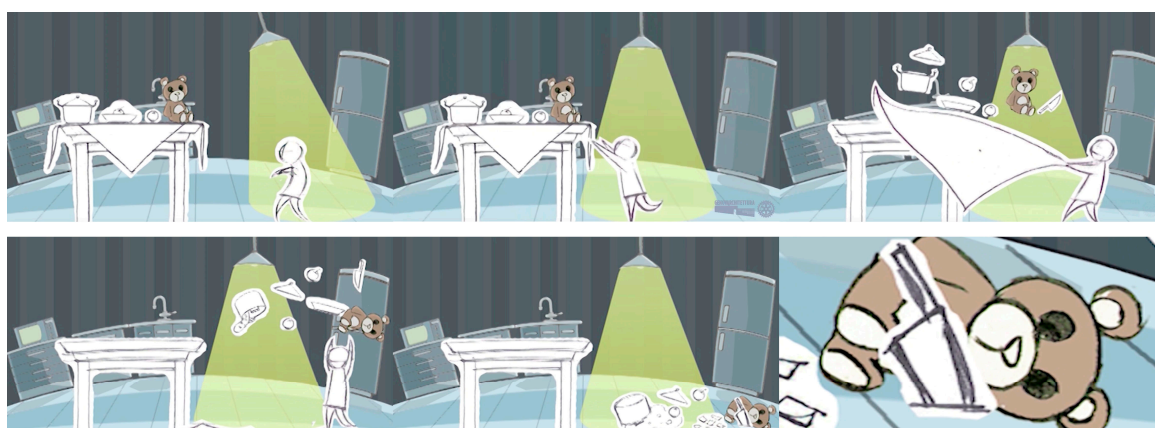


Figure 1. Frames from the project “Dov'è Bubu”. Problem: “home incident” (unassisted child activity, in areas at risk). Target: children 3–5 years and parents. Technique: animation; duration 30 s. Visual column: single fixed viewpoint, use of zoom for focalization. Soundtrack: Music base and, in relation to final frames, “voice over” to expose the message. Authors: Y. Bebei, A. Lolo, E. Spinelli, H. Tianmu, H. Xiaoyu. Credits in note 3.

The situation. It is about telling small episodes that belong to the world of the possible, so hypotheses of events and behaviors, a “realità al congiuntivo”, to use Jerome Bruner's expression [7]. This simulation of reality is mainly mediated by the use of the animation technique (especially for

age users up to 10 years), which establishes an adequate “distance” between the story and the child’s emotional dimension, and is further strengthened by the use of metaphoric figures that finalized to represent the problem situation in a clear but measured way, so as to mitigate the perceptual impact and activate a balanced emotional involvement. We think, for example, of the hippopotamus Ippo who has “la bua al pancino” for having ingesting the candy-shaped battery (cf. “Le avventure di Filippo e Ippo”, Figure 2), we think to the boat destroyed by the wave (cf. “Superbimbi al mare” Figure 4), to the puppet who goes in a thousand pieces because it is not protected by the seat belt (cf. “Cintura Amica”, Figure 5). Obviously, in relation to the growing age of the child, the extension and the narrative complexity are modified. Thus, it turns from the presentation of a precise problem, described in a diegetic, linear and limited time—cf. “Dov’è Bubu” (Figure 1) and “Le avventure di Filippo e Ippo” (Figure 2)—coinciding with real time, to more complex situations, also dislocated in different spatial and temporal contexts, such as in the “Superbimbi al mare” (Figure 4) and “Cintura Amica” projects (Figure 5).



Figure 2. Above. Frames from the project “Le avventure di Filippo e Ippo”. Problem: “home incident” (ingestion of objects). Target: children 3–5 years. Technique: animation; duration 30 s. Visual column: front view and high angle shot for extreme close-up, full length figure and medium shot to emphasize some events. Soundtrack: dialogues and ambience sounds. Authors: A. Covato, S. Pastorino, S. Repetto. Credits in note 3.

The solution to the problem highlighted in the narration, takes place on several expressive plans, creating an effect of clarifying and enhancing the information: on the one hand, in the visual representation of the tale are reported actions and behaviors that are adequate to prevent the problem being dealt with, on the other hand, pronounced and written texts (placed in closing of the representation), often reinforced by the choreography of the gesture, emphasize the “moral of the story”. The description of the “purposes” of communication, moreover, realizes a significant reinforcement in terms of message effectiveness. It is well-known, in strategies of communication advertising, that persuading someone to do some action (buying a product or service commercially, taking up a new behavior, consolidating new values, activating towards social actions) depends not only on the quantity and quality of the information provided, but above all by the argumentative dimension of the same information.

In other words, informations, without their sense description, are only a data set without value. Saying to child to tie up the seat belt while moving by car, means adding a behavioral norm, to many others that are constantly being required to him.

Abstract rules, of which the child does not perceive the deep meaning.

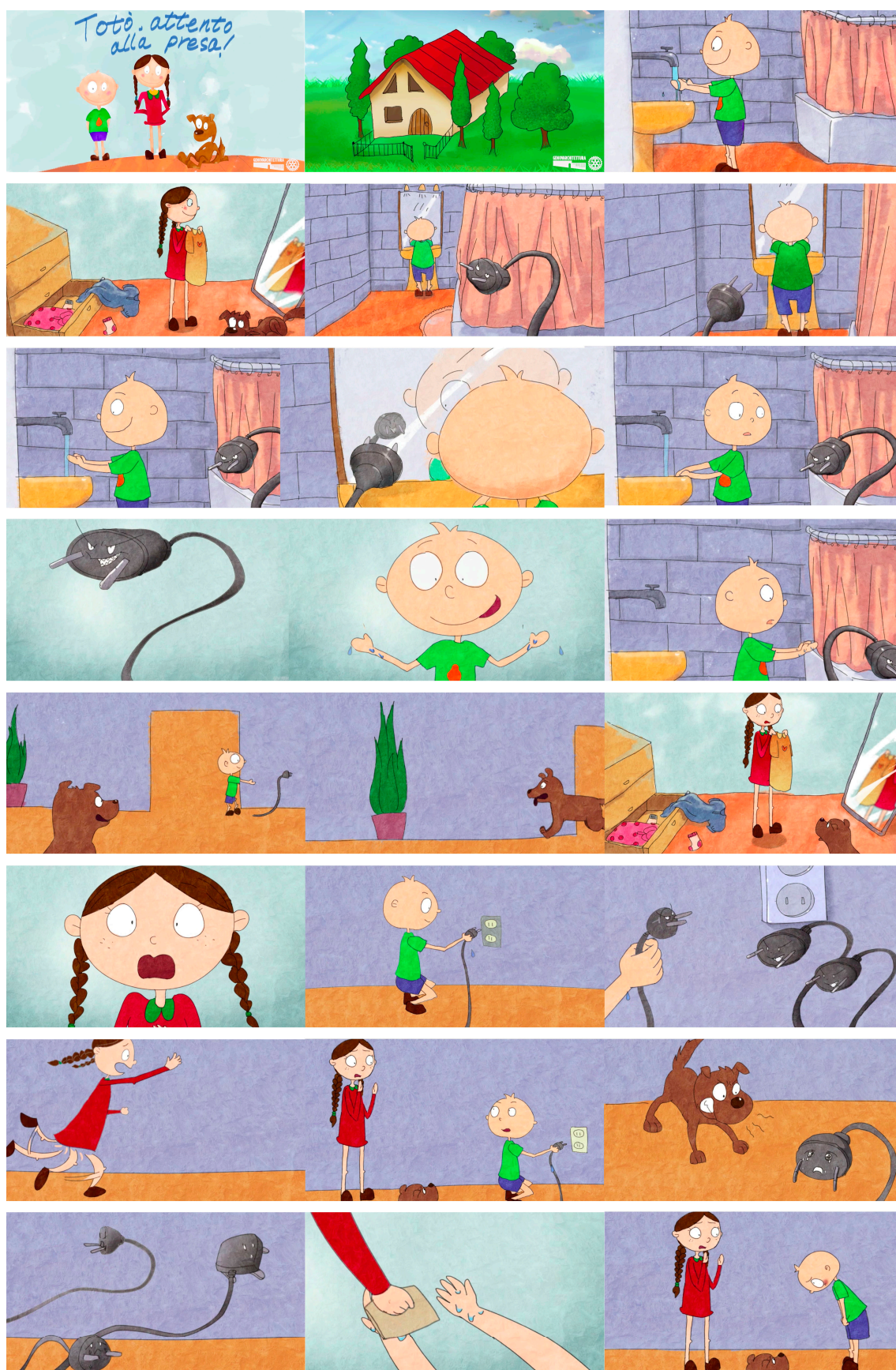


Figure 3. Frames from the project “Totò, attento alla presa”. Problem: “home incident” (improper use of electrical devices). Target: children 6–9 years. Technique: animation; cross cutting, duration 1 min and 30 s. Visual column: images and texts; Soundtrack: music. Authors: A. Blasco, Z. Qi, X. Qinyue. Credits in note 3.

But if the command is explained by words or rather by images describing what might happen during a belt-free accident, then the child not only gets the informations, but sees their reason.

In other words, the demand for a behavior has been finalized.

In social communication to children, equally important is the use of rhetoric.

The rhetoric of language is fundamental both in figurative and textual terms (written or spoken).

This choice answers different needs.

First, it helps speaking the language of the “lettore modello” to use a definition of Umberto Eco, since metaphor, in its elementary forms, responds to linguistic, imaginative, emotional, visual skills, etc. of the message user, which, accordingly, manages to access the contents, making communication possible.

In addition, as mentioned above, the use of metaphoric figures serves to create simulations of contexts, experiences and individuals, on which to transfer complex, even dramatic events, that would not be possible to describe in their actual consistency (the puppet that breaks during the accident because not properly attached to the car, the teddy bear pierced by the knife fallen from the table because of the tablecloth pull down by the child, etc.).

Finally, the formulas of “enunciazione enunciata” (Ugo Volli), that is, those modes of direct communication in which, through the use of the “second person”, communication is expressly referred to a recipient, they have significant functions (“fatica” and “conativa”) necessary to convey the information on which the recipient will finally have to model their values and behaviors.



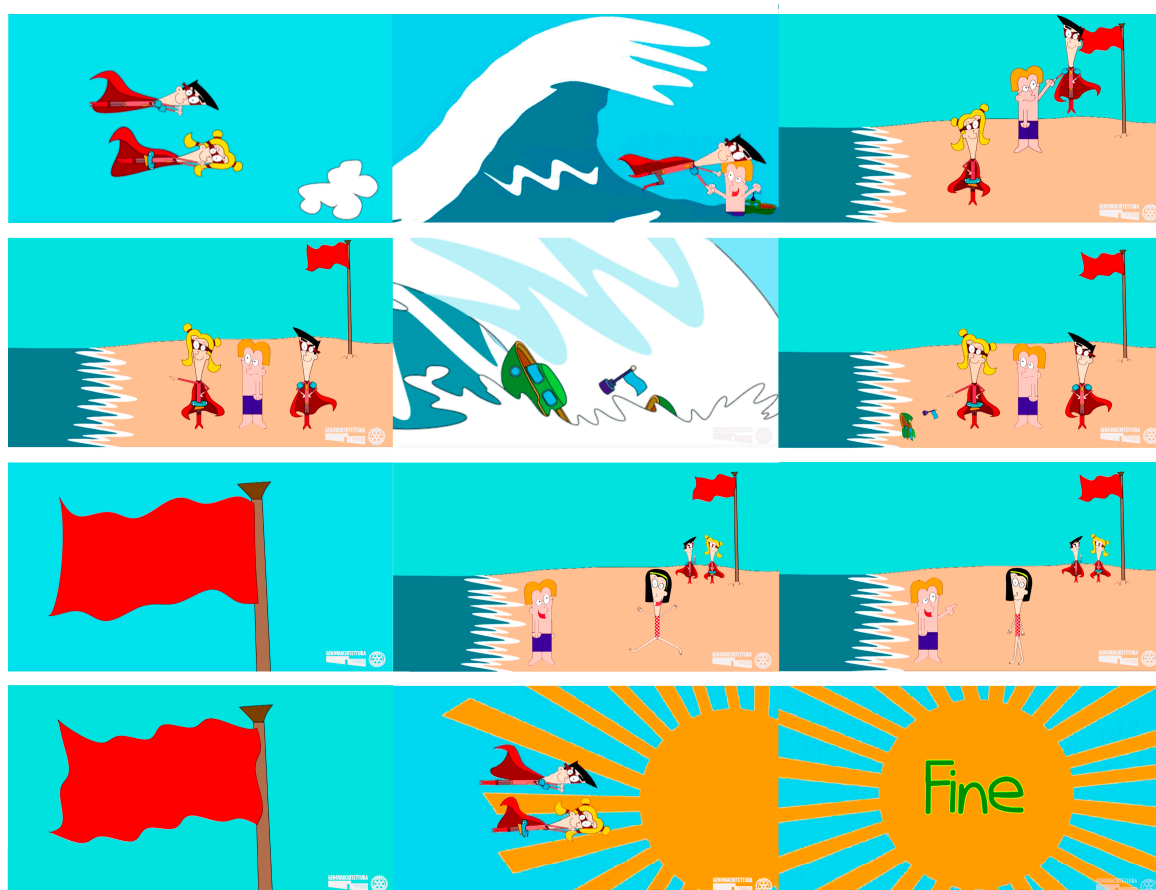


Figure 4. Frames from the project “Superbimbi al mare”. Problem: “sea incident” (inattention to the warning alerts for bathers). Target: children 6–9 years. Technique: animation, duration 1 minunte and 45 s. Visual column: images and texts; series of sequences: “il viaggio verso il mare”, “arrivo al mare e trasformazione dei bimbi in Superbimbi”, “il salvataggio e l’insegnamento”, “finale”. Soundtrack: music and ambience sounds. Authors: X. Ferrari, M. Ferri, M. Pagano, R. Posadino. Credits in note 3.



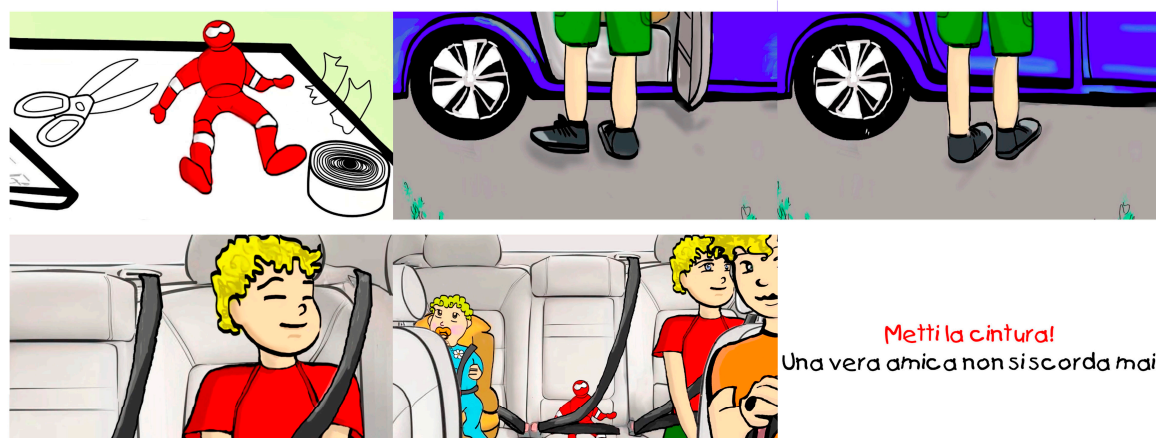


Figure 5. Frames from the project “Cintura amica”. Problem: incident on means of transport (without safety belt). Target: children 6–9 years. Technique: animation; duration 40 s. Visual column: images and texts; series of sequences: “l’incidente”, “la riparazione del pupazzo”, “il viaggio con la cintura amica”. Soundtrack: music and ambience sounds. Authors: O. Borgogno, Z. Danyang, C. Di, S. Peloso, M. Veruggio. Credits in note 3.

7. Research Developments

From these brief considerations, the complexity and amplitude of a topic of great interest for representation, especially in theoretical and methodological terms, is evident.

The themes that are dealt with, further orient the research towards a comparison with other disciplines, similar or contiguous to representation. It’s a comparison on theory, project practise and, mostly in terms of content, attesting the transversality of the matter.

Therefore, the concepts here presented, which are of an introductory nature, are propedeutic to further disciplinary extensions, which will in particular relate to the theme of visual language—explored in relation to different degrees of iconicity and Symbolism (illustration, scheme, photography, animation, iconicity, symbolism, etc.)—and the textual language—considered from the point of view of the claim and as a graphic sign.

In addition, considering the daily composite in which children move—family, school, sports, games, technology, etc.—it will be indispensable consider the tools, media and channels for training and dissemination of the message, as well as how to access to the product, how to use the communication (for example, in an autonomous/shared/assisted way), and the timing (start, duration and frequency of communication).

References and Notes

1. Childhood communication campaigns refer to the “Convention on the Rights of the Child and of Adolescence. Approved by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989, ratified by Italy by law no. 176 of 27 May 1991, published in the Official Journal of 11 June 1991, no. 35. In the title, the term “child” has been translated with “childhood and adolescence”, rather than with “fanciullo”, because the Convention applies to all younger people (from zero to eighteen) “(from [http:// www.garanteinfanzia.org/rights](http://www.garanteinfanzia.org/rights)).

In support of the research presented here, we report two articles from the Convention.

- *Article 17.* States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall: (a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29; (b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources; (c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children’s books; (d)

Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous; (e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18.

- Article 29. 1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations; (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own; (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin; (e) The development of respect for the natural environment. 2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.
2. For further information on the projects carried out, cf.:
- Bistagnino, E.; Castellano, A. (a cura di), *Being Positive. Strategie e Linguaggi per la Comunicazione dell'HIV*; GUP Genova University Press: Genova, Italy, 2016.
 - Bistagnino, E. *Graphic Design for Social "Disaster"*. In Gambardella C. (a cura di), *World Heritage and Disaster. Knowledge, Culture and Representation*, Ed. La Scuola di Pitagora: Napoli, Italy, 2017; pp. 774–781; (atti del XV Forum Internazionale di Studi "Le vie dei Mercanti", 15–17 giugno 2017, Napoli-Capri), ISBN 9788865425824.
 - Bistagnino, E. *Per il Mediterraneo: Segni Della Rappresentazione "Utile" Contemporanea*. In Gausa, M., Andriani, C., Fagnoni, R., (a cura di), *MED.NET 3. Resilience. Intelligence Cities/Resilient Landscape*; Eds. Papersdoc: Barcellona, Spain, 2017, pp. 82–88, ISBN 9788494126468; (atti dell'International Forum "MED.NET 3. Resilience. Intelligence Cities/Resilient Landscape", Genova, 25, 26, 27, 28 ottobre 2016; Relatore "invited" nella sezione "Scientific Meeting" sul tema "Global Med, Resili(G)encent", 27 ottobre 2016).
3. "Safety for Children" (2013) is a research carried out under the convention between the Department of Scienze per l'Architettura (scientific coordinators: Prof. E. Bistagnino, Prof. ML Falcidieno), Rotary Club "Golfo Paradiso" (referents: M. Ferrando, Prof. M. Musio Sale, Prof. P. di Pietro, Prof. S. Parmigiani), "Il Porto dei Piccoli" onlus (referent: G. Camurati). For medical and health aspects, it has been provided the scientific contribution by: prof. P. Di Pietro (coordinator of DEA at the Scientific Institute Giannina Gaslini of Genova); prof. S. Parmigiani (S.C. Pediatrics and Neonatology P.O.L.L. La Spezia). The research has been developed in the Videografica Course (2012–13) held by the proff. E. Bistagnino, M. L. Falcidieno, in collaboration with: d. C. Maccagno, dr. A. Castellano, arch. C. Ratto - information videos were realized to be broadcast in the waiting rooms of the Department of Emergenza e Accettazione of the Scientific Institute Giannina Gaslini (Ge). Among the results of the project, in the previous pages, the following videos were proposed: "Dov'è Bubu?" (cf. Figure 1), "Le avventure di Filippo e Ippo" (cf. Figure 2), "Totò, attento alla ptresa!" (cf. Figure 3), "Superbimbi al mare" (cf. Figure 4), "Cintura Amica" (cf. Figure 5).
4. Maragliano, R. *Parlare le Immagini*; Apogeo: Milano, Italy, 2008.
5. Maragliano, R., *ibidem*.
6. Barthes, R. *Retorica dell'immagine*. In *L'ovvio e L'ottuso*; Saggi Critici III; Einaudi: Torino, Italy, 1985; p. 27.
7. Bruner, J. *La Mente a Più Dimensioni*; Roma-Bari: Laterza, Italy, 1998; p. 34.

