

REVIEWS

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THE REDISCOVERY OF VISUAL AT THE BOLOGNA CHILDREN'S BOOK FAIR: THE SILENT BOOK CONTEST

The Bologna Children's Book Fair (BCBF) is one of the capital events for the professionals in the field of children's and young adults' books and media contents, where a variegated and international audience meets to exchange ideas, projects, and creations. Moreover, during the years, the BCBF has established fruitful collaborations with many countries, Russia among them, where the international programme "The visual world of children's books" was developed in collaboration with the Russian State Children's Library of Moscow. As the very name of the programme suggests, both countries, Italy and Russia, have fully recognized the slow but steady rise of the iconic language, which is crucial for the construction of meaning in the newest and most appreciated children's books. Another proof of the central role of images and visual storytelling was the founding of the Silent Book Contest (2014) for the best wordless visual narrative of the year, which was showing how images can be powerful cognitive attractors. This article will focus in particular on the last edition of the contest (2021), a virtual one due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the participants proposed works echoing the dramatic situation the world was (and is) living in. Now more than ever, 'to look at' seems to be synonymous with 'to know', as well as to 're-elaborate'.

Keywords: visual storytelling, silent books, Bologna Children's Book Fair, pandemic

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The Bologna Children's Book Fair: an international reference event

In 1964, Bologna, which is one of the most vibrant cities in the Italian cultural landscape and the one where the first University of the Western World was established in 1088, hosted its first fair dedicated entirely to the world of children's books. Since then, the Bologna Children's Book Fair has become an unmissable event for all the professionals involved in creation, promotion, sale, and distribution of children's and young adult' books and other media contents, reaching the astonishing numbers of 28946 visitors and 1442 exhibitors from over 80 countries around the world (during its last in-person edition in 2019, before COVID-19 forced the organizers to move the event online). In Bologna, the new frontiers of children's literature are explored, and many prizes are awarded to highlight the most extraordinary creations brought to the attention of both the industry and the public. Moreover, in 2021, with the creation of the BolognaBookPlus, a parallel event dedicated to a broader professional public in the publishing industry, Bologna made another important contribution to offer more opportunities and services to improve the quality and scope of the work of all the professionals in the publishing industry.

But it is not all limited to Italy. Rejecting a competitive approach and understanding that a collaboration with other cities and events could benefit all, Bologna Children's Book Fair established a strong network of international partnerships, not only with its ever-increasing presence of international participants and exhibitors, but also choosing a 'Guest Country of Honour' every year (in 2022 it will be Sharjah, United Arab Emirates), and, most importantly, supporting the creation and organization of similar book fairs and events around the world. Such is the case of the China Shanghai International Children's Book Fair, the only book fair in Asia-Pacific fully dedicated to children's literature and culture, co-organised by BolognaFiere and Bologna Children's Book Fair since 2012, and the New York Rights Fair, the only professional event in the USA where literary scouts, rights managers, publishers, licensees, film producers, and many others can meet to exchange the rights of publishing and distributions of cultural contents for adults, children, and adolescents. Given the extraordinary success of such collaborations, a more recent one was developed with the Moscow International Book Fair, resulting in creation of a new International Children's Book Fair in Russia. This new connection between the two cities and fairs will provide fresh energies and ideas to the publishing world, with new opportunities for knowl-

edge, entertainment, development, and wonder, for children and adults alike.

During the decades of its history, the Bologna Children's Book Fair, with all its organizers and participants from every corner of the world, has analysed, prepared and anticipated the future literary trends for the young generations. Transmediality, internationalization, and digitalization were just three of the main trajectories taken by the children's book industry, following the path of the wider cultural and social world. Moreover, the variety of themes dealt with in children's books, both fiction and non-fiction, exponentially increased, and the role and quality of the visual elements in them became paramount. As a matter of fact, illustrations ceased to be an embellishment for the page, a mere backdrop for the centrality of words, and turned into real co-protagonists of the story. Or even more.

Look and understand

Recent neuroscientific acquisitions and their application in the narratological field offer an explanation for the remarkable diffusion of images in recent decades: iconic representations activate mechanisms of embodied simulation of actions, emotions and sensations, which consequently ensure a truly direct and immersive experience [Calabrese, Conti, Broglia 2021, 92–93]. In other words, visual storytelling represents a biological and cognitive endowment that allows humans to convey concepts in a simplified and emotionally attractive way: moreover, when children encode reality, they grammaticalize it through the iconic language which is only later transformed into verbal language [Calabrese 2013, 27].

These findings have been well received by the world of children's publishing, which in visual narratives – from *picture books* to *graphic novels* – has gradually given way to a complementary relationship between words and images, in which it is the latter that leads to the real understanding of the story [Nikolajeva, Scott 2000, 230–231]. In this regard, particular attention was paid to strategies related to *visual literacy* that directly contribute to the construction of meaning. The authors, for example, recognize the role of colour choices – intended as real cognitive attractors – and of the choices relating to the shapes of the elements represented. If dark, broken lines convey an idea of negativity, rounded shapes and soft colours are linked to positive emotions [Bang 2010].

Therefore, in recent years, children's publishing has re-evaluated the role of *visual narratives* and of *silent books* (also known as 'word-

less books’): the reader becomes a real co-author as he/she activates a mechanism of re-interpretation of the iconic code that refers to the negotiation of meanings starting from the autobiographical experience and knowledge related to *visual literacy* [Arizpe 2013; Serafini 2014]. Silent book seems to be synonymous with cognitive and emotional complexity: when a child reads a text without words, he/she is led to develop sequential thinking (and, therefore, to recognize what happens before and what after) and counterfactual thinking, to integrate schemas and scripts, to consider visual clues and finally to recognize the links between actions and intentions, increasing his/her Mind Reading abilities. *Silent books*, therefore, can be considered not only a rising trend in the publishing industry, but also an innovative means of expression among artists and a source of wonder and contemplation for readers/viewers of any age.

The Silent Book Contest: trends and evolution

The Silent Book Contest, established in 2014, is the proof of this. Its finalists, selected by an international jury, are announced and exhibited at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair and the Salone Internazionale del Libro of Turin, the other major book fair in Italy. The contest is dedicated to the memory of Gianni De Conno (1957–2017), a Milanese award-winning illustrator. During its eight editions so far, the Silent Book Contest brought to public attention some of the best creations in the field of illustrations and visual storytelling, acknowledging the great talent and skills required to convey feelings and entertaining stories without words, just through colours, shapes, and atmospheres. The winners of the contest so far, along with the other finalists, explored themes as different as travel and curiosity (as in *Bounce Bounce* by Brian Fitzgerald, Ireland), dreams and life after the sunset (*Mentre tu dormi*, by Mariana Ruiz Johnson, Argentina), memories and growth (*Ciao ciao giocattoli*, by Marta Pantaleo, Italy), transformations, differences, and similarities (*R/Evolution*, by Arianna Papini, Italy), the power of imagination (*Immagina*, by Anastasiia Suvorova, Russia), fantastic tales (*Costruttori di stelle*, by Soojin Kwak, South Korea), illness (*Che febbre!*, by Rina Allek, Russia), and the special relationship between a girl and her grandfather (*Lo zainetto di Matilde*, by Sardo, Cognolato, del Francia, Italy). This extremely rich variety of themes shows how the world we live in is plural, fragmented, and ever-changing. On the other hand, it is also a globalized and hyper-connected one, both from a digital and physical point of view, as it has become dramatically clear with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Silent books and the 2021 edition: the reflection of COVID-19 pandemic

If visual storytelling may be considered a privileged tool in terms of understanding and re-elaborating reality, it is not surprising that most of the silent books involved in the last contest reflect the complexities associated with the period of pandemic we are living in¹. In visual narratives, negative emotions, such as loneliness and melancholy, are perfectly integrated with actions that enhance the time dedicated to beloved people and small things: for example, in the Lithuanian text *Grains Feather* (by Deimantė Rybakoviene, Lithuania, 2021), a grey bird visits different places in several seasons of the year and simultaneously experiences both loneliness and happiness. On the other hand, in the Spanish text *Waiting*, the ability of children to use their imagination and to make the most of waiting time is appreciated (by Violeta Gomez, Spain, 2021): at the bus stop, while all the adult characters look bored, a little girl creates counterfactual events that help her pass the time (for example, the scarf around a passer-by's neck becomes a huge red dragon and a little animal on a tree trunk grows so large that it looks almost scary). In these texts, the emotional expressions of the protagonists undoubtedly guide – through the well-known mechanism of embodied simulation – the authentic understanding of the narrative; at the same time, a fundamental role seems to be attributed to colour, which is closely linked to the emotional value of the event represented and to the salience of certain elements of the scene.

Moreover, two other silent books, published in Italy and Russia respectively, deserve special attention. *Matilde's backpack* (by Luca Cognolato, Silvia Del Francia, Fabio Sardo, Italy, 2021) presents the story of a grandfather and a little girl who experience some daily adventures, including leaving school, a stop at the village playground and a snack at home. The authors recount the rediscovery of activities usually considered “banal”, representing them through regular graphic strokes and specific chromatic games: the protagonist has curly red hair and a blue dress that lead the reader to focus on her, and, consequently, on her emotional expression.

Where is my home? (by Masha Shebeko, Russia, 2021) tells the story of a crab that is looking for its shell, or its home, but runs into a series of dangerous waste: the author's attention is undoubtedly directed at conveying a message related to environmental sustainability, but, at the same time, she express the feelings of disorientation and melancholy that the protagonist feels when is unable to place itself in specific space-



Figure 1. A double page that represents the daily life of the grandfather-granddaughter relationship (Cagnolato, Del Francia, Sardo, 2021)

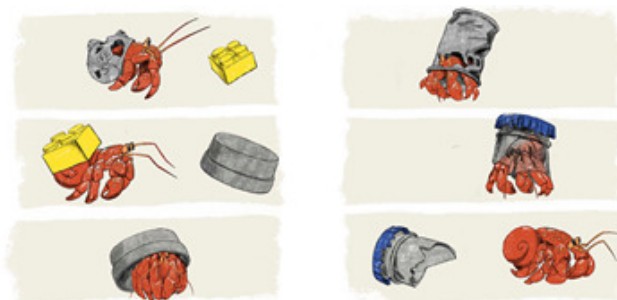


Figure 2. Sequential images that communicate the negativity of the scene (Shebeko, 2021)

time coordinates. Through sequential images at the base of a negative emotional climax and through the protagonist's emotional expressions – accentuated through the red colour that distinguishes the crab from the surrounding environment – the author communicates the tragic nature of the situation.

These are just a few examples that show how contemporary children's stories are increasingly moving towards formats that are open to multiple interpretations and free from boundaries, and thus capable of walking alongside their young readers/viewers, rather than leading them towards distinct ends. Visual language, moreover, seems to be the most suitable tool to represent and reflect the complexity of reality: visual narratives, which tell the stories of characters who face everyday problems, such as

loneliness and social isolation, helps the children – starting from the well-known identification mechanism – to build meaningful links between the characters and their own semantic memory related to the pandemic period. The iconic language supports the construction of a specific mental model, which is reworked by the reader’s knowledge about the world: moreover, recent neurocognitive studies confirm the substantial coincidence of the mnemonic process and the process of counterfactual imagination. In summary, visual language becomes synonymous with imagination and, at the same time, with autobiographical reworking.

As the publications of the latest edition of the Silent Book Contest clearly show, authors and illustrators are increasingly aware of this mutual relationship between images and cognitive and socio-emotional complexity. The publishing industry, therefore, is called to support and promote the artists’ work, and to better attend and feed the needs of the young generations. To do so, in an increasingly complex world, nothing is more helpful than a place and time to exchange ideas with highly qualified people, as the Bologna Children’s Book Fair and similar events are showing year by year.

Notes

- ¹ All illustrations from the books are available at <https://silentbookcontest.com/exhibition/>.

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**НОВОЕ ОТКРЫТИЕ ВИЗУАЛЬНОГО НА БОЛОНСКОЙ ЯРМАРКЕ
ДЕТСКОЙ КНИГИ: КОНКУРС «ТИХАЯ КНИГА» («SILENT
BOOK»)**

Обзор посвящен Болонской ярмарке детской книги (BCBF), прошедшей в 2021 г., главному событию для всех профессионалов в области детской книги и медиаконтента. Традиционно на этом мероприятии собирается представительная международная аудитория для обмена идеями, опытом и результатами своего творчества. За годы своего существования Болонская ярмарка детской книги установила плодотворное сотрудничество со многими странами, в том числе и с Россией, разработав совместно с Российской государственной детской библиотекой международную программу «Визуальный мир детской книги». Как показывает само название программы, издатели и авторы обеих стран признали медленный, но неуклонный рост иконического языка, который имеет решающее значение для современной детской литературы, стремящейся к выражению важных смыслов и ценностей. Визуальная литература, адресованная детям, становится заметным явлением и знаком нашего времени. Одним из доказательств центральной роли визуального повествования стало учреждение в 2014 г. конкурса «Silent Books» («Тихие книги») на лучшее графическое повествование года без слов, демонстрирующее, как изображения могут быть мощными когнитивными аттракторами. В данном обзоре описывается последний этап конкурса, проходивший в 2021 г., из-за пандемии COVID-19 ставший виртуальным, в рамках которого участники предлагали работы, перекликающиеся с той драматической ситуацией, в которой находился (и продолжает находиться) мир. Сегодня, как никогда ранее, «смотреть» кажется синонимом «знать», а также «проживать» и «осмыслять».

Keywords: визуальный сторителлинг, тихая книга, Болонская ярмарка детской книги, пандемия