



**Revista do Programa de Estudos Pós-Graduados em Literatura e  
Crítica Literária da PUC-SP**

**nº 24 - julho de 2020**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.23925/1983-4373.2020i24p4-23>

**The materiality of silence The curious cases of Munari, Charlip and  
their picturebooks with no pictures**

**A materialidade do silêncio Os casos curiosos de Munari, Charlip e os  
seus livros-ilustrados sem ilustrações**

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**ABSTRACT**

Picturebooks are by no means a homogeneous body of texts and they require different approaches to interpret their meaning-making mechanisms. A wide variety of challenges can be offered by contemporary picturebook research. One of these challenges refers to the investigation of a singular typology of picturebooks: picturebooks with no pictures. How do these picturebooks work? What kind of reading experience do they activate in young readers? The goal of my essay is to analyse the role of white space, the morphosyntactic characteristics and the narrative mechanisms of these picturebooks. I will focus on two pictureless stories dealing with a white silent snowy landscape: *Little White Riding Hood* by Bruno Munari (1981) and *It looks Like Snow* by Remy Charlip (1957). These two authors succeeded in transforming a white and apparently empty space into innovative visual narratives capable of effectively engaging children and promoting their imagination and creative thinking.

**KEYWORDS:** Picturebooks without pictures; Blanks and white space; Silence; Bruno Munari; Remi Charlip

**RESUMO**

Os livros ilustrados não são, de forma alguma, um corpo homogêneo de textos e requerem abordagens diferentes para interpretar os seus mecanismos de criação de significado. Uma grande variedade de desafios é oferecida pela pesquisa contemporânea sobre o livro ilustrado. Um desses desafios refere-se à investigação de uma tipologia singular de livros ilustrados: os livros ilustrados sem ilustrações. Como é que esses livros ilustrados funcionam? Que tipo de experiência de leitura eles ativam junto aos jovens leitores? O objetivo deste estudo é analisar o papel do espaço em branco, as características morfosintáticas e os mecanismos narrativos desses livros ilustrados. O estudo centra-se em duas histórias sem imagens que tratam de uma paisagem branca e silenciosa coberta de neve: *Little White Riding Hood* [Chapeuzinho Branco], de Bruno

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Munari (1981) e *It looks Like Snow* [Parece Neve], de Remy Charlip (1957). Estes dois criadores foram capazes de transformar o espaço branco, aparentemente vazio, em narrativas visuais inovadoras, suscetíveis de envolver efetivamente as crianças e de promover a sua imaginação e pensamento criativo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Livros-álbum sem ilustração; Espaços vazios e espaços em branco; Silêncio; Bruno Munari; Remi Charlip

Some people say  
blank space is nothing.  
But if you think about it,  
blank space isn't blank.  
It's like the air.  
Invisible most of the time.  
But when the wind blows,  
it feels nice.  
(BACON, 2018, n/p)

## Introduction

Silence is commonly understood as the possibility, necessity or choice, of producing no sound or making no noise. It has different forms. Silence sometimes originates from some punishment or from some condition of anger or revenge, inflicted or endured. Silence may be the consequence of pain. At times derives from concentration, intellectual production, reflection. In the happiest cases, silence is a sought-after condition, accompanied by a pleasant sense of quiet, peace, joy or intimate satisfaction.

Silence configures itself as a necessary and essential practice to contemplate and internalize the world (TORRALBA ROSELLÒ, 2012), to observe and understand oneself and the others. In this sense, silence is deeply connected with human relationships (DEMETRIO, 2014). This is the reason why, despite what one might think, silence frequently becomes a narrative “object” in children’s books, especially in picturebooks. In fact, numerous writers and illustrators, in their descriptions of everyday episodes in the lives of boys and girls, direct their introspective views towards different forms of silence. Silence may thus arise from joyful events such as feasts and celebrations, or from intense emotions connected with love, encounters and expectations like *La gigantesque petite chose* [The Big Little Thing] (2011), or *Un grand jour de rien* [On a Magical Do-Nothing Day] (2016), by Beatrice Alemagna. Silence sometimes represents a form of mourning, grievance, loss or final departure like *Ente, Tod and Tulpe* [Duck, Death and the Tulip] (2007), by Wolf Erlbruch. It may occasionally accompany embarrassing situations, for example, when one says something out of place. Unspeakable happiness may also be accompanied by silence, and, at the same time, be clearly visible on people’s faces like *Lost and Found* (2005), by Oliver Jeffers. Silence may be the consequence of one’s sense of shame or sense of guilt like *The Empty Pot* (1990), by Demi. It becomes ice-cold when it means disapproval, or gloomy

when it comes with a bad mood. Silence may imply concentration in a game, but it may also express repentance, puzzlement and lack of answers, triumphant joy, bafflement or bewilderment like *Dans Moi* [Inside Me] (2007), by Alex Cousseau and Kitty Crowther.

Silence is, in other words, a very complicated dimension of human existence. As such, it is not always easy to narrate or represent it. Its complexity is deeply rooted in its multifaceted nature, which may only be interpreted through a careful hermeneutic investigation (BALDINI, 1988).

Silence curbs the pervasiveness of acoustic and visual pollution, and the heavy impacts of these kinds of pollution on the lives of many children. This is no irrelevant aspect, especially considering that, from this point of view, children's literature may help young readers defend themselves from polluting repertoires often associated with banal or stereotypical stories. As far as the construction of visual imagery is concerned, some picturebooks create spaces of silent visual contemplation and encourage not only functional reading but also “the aesthetic and pleasurable experience of reading and the status of the picturebook as an aesthetic object” (ARIZPE, 2015, p. xix). These settings and sensory landscapes are particularly effective, for example, when they aim at placing young readers in close connection with nature, with its forms, colours and sounds, when they are animated with the rustle of the wind, the whispering of leaves, the sound of footsteps, of raindrops, of insects buzzing, of fire crackling:

Every rural or woodland place evokes strong emotions through its intrinsic beauty, its mysterious charm. The convergence of favourable factors make that place unique and special, as if it were inhabited by invisible, benevolent and generative strengths. Every place with these characteristics is a place inhabited by silence, which contributes to emphasize its magic. (DEMETRIO, 2014, p. 72-73, my translation)<sup>1</sup>.

These situations are often materialized on the page through white space and its graphic interactions with words. The visual representation of this space is the topic of the present essay, dedicated to the narrative strategies adopted by two children's authors, Bruno Munari and Remi Charlip, as a precious dimension for novel visual narratives capable of effectively engaging children with silent visual landscapes and promoting their imagination and creative thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> «Ogni luogo campestre, silvestre che suscita in noi forti emozioni per la bellezza intrinseca a quello spazio possiede un fascino arcano. Esprime la convergenza di fattori favorevoli a renderlo unico e speciale, come se fosse abitato da forze invisibili benevoli e generatrici. Ogni ambiente con queste caratteristiche è sempre uno spazio abitato dal silenzio, il quale concorre a renderlo ancora più magico».

The essay is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the theoretical framework, based on the use of white pages and blank spaces as reflective dimensions in literature. The second part briefly introduces Munari, Charlip and some features of their works, highlighting some intriguing comparisons between their picturebook productions. The third part analyzes the particular case of two picturebooks, *Little White Riding Hood*, by Bruno Munari (1981a) and *It looks Like Snow*, by Remy Charlip (1957), both of which revolve around the pictureless story of a white snowy landscape and an intriguing process for developing children's imagination.

This essay is part of a broader research project which I have been carrying out for four years on the Italian children's author Bruno Munari and his legacy to children's literature in Italy and worldwide.

## **1 About blank spaces, white pages and picturebooks... with no pictures**

New directions in picturebook research (NIKOLAJEVA; SCOTT, 2001; SIPE; PANTALEO, 2008; EVANS, 2015; KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER, 2014, 2018; BOULAIRE, 2018) highlight how picturebooks offer an extremely complex reading experience, and the readers' understanding of the complex word/image interaction is "part of the literary competence that can and should be trained" (NIKOLAJEVA, 2003, p. 5). The word/image interaction is one of the most significant meaning-making aspects; it is extremely versatile and provides different and fruitful reading challenges for the child.

Seen from this point of view, picturebooks are relevant resources. Expertise in the sphere of literacy is also closely connected not only to the capacity to read, understand, interpret and use words, but also to images (even artistic ones) to create knowledge, and to conceive harmonious forms and innovative modes of representation. If these skills are adequately cultivated, they make it easier to get children reading, to train their critical observation, and to subsequently engage them in a dialogue about characters, objects, landscapes, and the numerous symbolic and interpicture references contained in a picturebook. Graphics, shapes, sizes and materials join forces with the aesthetic dimension in general, to turn a book into a narrative object (VERYERI ALACA, 2019). A specific typographical project can encourage processes of positive interaction between the child and the narrative plot, both in physical and/or material terms, thus altering the traditional act of turning the page as well as the reading process

itself (RAMOS, 2016). In early childhood, for instance, visual and aesthetic literacy often transits through the materiality of the book-object and its characteristic features, such as the thickness and texture of the paper (paper, cardboard, tissue paper, etc.), binding materials (glue, staples, string, wire spirals, etc.), the graphic design, which may be obtained in various ways (silkscreen printing, engraving, collage, etc.), and any additional elements (flaps, holes, cuts, etc.) (CAMPAGNARO, 2019a).

These short remarks show that picturebooks are by no means a homogeneous body of texts (early-concept books, wimmelbooks, ABC books, pop-up and movable books, wordless picturebooks, nonfiction picturebooks, digital picturebooks), and they require different approaches to interpret their meaning-making mechanisms. Hence, a wide variety of challenges can be offered by contemporary picturebook research. One of these challenges refers to the investigation of a singular typology of picturebooks; that is to say pictureless picturebooks or picturebooks with no pictures. This typology includes picturebooks that contain no images and develop a strong graphic relationship between words and the empty white space on the page.

Scholarly investigation has largely concentrated both on the meaning and function of blank spaces in picturebooks and on the concept of “framing” as a dialogic combination of words and pictures within the general graphic layout of a book (NODELMAN, 1988; SIPE, 1998; DOWD LAMBERT, 2018). A white space around a picture can act as a frame, create a sense of constraint, suggest a character’s sense of being imprisoned or a sense of freedom. It can be used to display detachment or to demand the young reader’s involvement.

The renowned children’s author Maurice Sendak, in particular, was a master in the use of white space. His imaginative use of blank spaces is beautifully displayed in his book *Where the Wild Things Are*, where the word/image/white space interaction reveals “the relationship possible between visual and emotional constriction—between framing and meaning” (NODELMAN, 1988, p. 52). This process is particularly evident in the final totally white spread,

The very final page-opening of the book contains no image, but only words on a blank page, welcoming Max back into the world of maternal discipline and solicitude by telling us that the supper that she has put out for him “is still hot”. It is not that the words have “won” their battle with the pictures, but Sendak evidently understood that a withdrawal of his images, which had been so anarchically drawn and always so subversive of the order that the words were attempting to

impose, would nicely symbolise a return to calm and compliance. That final, unillustrated page signals Max's reintegration into the home and family, where sustenance and care are provided in return for obedience. (GRENBY, 2014, p. 221).

This renewed interest in blank spaces has not only been the subject of recent scholarly investigation, but it is also the intriguing protagonist of the recent picturebook *Blank Space*, by Beth Bacon (2018), which visually explains the importance and impact of blank spaces on the reading experience of a young person.

The studies mentioned so far confirm that blank spaces are fundamental elements in a picturebook and that they are inextricably connected with the storytelling process itself. What has been ignored by academic studies, however, is the necessity for in-depth studies of picturebooks without pictures, and the relevance of the visual narrative potential of empty white pages. In these books, visual storytelling is based only on the succession of white double-spreads, with no illustrations. The written text is extremely condensed. Rather than invading the white space, it remains in the background and, in general, it is placed near the bottom margin of the page. In this way, white space impacts the reader's perception whose eyes are opened to the act of envisioning scenes and characters.

What kind of reading experience does a picturebook with no pictures activate in a young reader? The interaction between words and white space enables readers to transform white space into mental images which fill their imagination. Pictures take shape in the readers' minds, thus bringing the story to life. For instance, blanks and white pages allow the silence of a lively mind (e.g. thoughts, reflections, emotions)<sup>2</sup> or

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<sup>2</sup> White, silent narrative pages are no new literary phenomenon. Quite on the contrary. One of the most significant and pioneering examples is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-1767), by Laurence Sterne, an unusual and bizarre novel, written in a literary-historical context in which modern novels were starting to develop and new narrative structures were the result of passionate and fruitful experimental activities. Sterne's novel is characterized by numerous typographical peculiarities. White pages, black pages, pages decorated with marble patterns, together with one-sentence chapters and other creative graphic solutions are some examples of the solutions adopted by Sterne in order to give his readers original food for thought. In the novel, reality unfolds through digressions and free associations of ideas towards a landing point beyond the readers' visual horizon. This novel will inspire important writers in the 20th century, like for instance Elbert Green Hubbard, the author of an original work called *Essay on Silence* (1095) and Virginia Woolf, who observed that «Sterne allows the blanks and lapses, the silence of the life of the mind, to appear on the page. [...] In this interest in silence rather than in speech, Sterne's black page calls attention to the materiality of the text. Silences are marked. [...] with his modern interest in silence – the blank spaces, the white and black pages, the typography (asterisks, ellipses, dashes, parentheses) – illuminates the unsaid in his time and place» (ONDEK LAURENCE, 1991, p. 30). These narrative mechanisms also appear in some contemporary children's novels. A notable example is *My name is Mina* by David Almond (2010), with its numerous graphic references to Sterne's work. Almond's novel contains a chapter called «A story without words», where the protagonist writes the following words: «On the next page is the story I created at Corinthian Avenue. It's an empty page, no

of nature (e.g. a silent snowy landscape like the one I will analyze in the next pages) to appear on the page.

Yet not all picturebooks without images activate these mechanisms, and not all of them are meant to do so. For instance, *The Book with no pictures*, by B.J. Novak (2014), offers young readers a hilarious reading experience in that it plays with written words to amuse children and introduce them to the idea that language can be an inexhaustible source of delight. The book has no images, but the page actually contains a visual pattern that is mainly created by the words of the text and not by the blank space. The graphic layout of the written text represents the pictorial element on the page. In this case, what is missing is the role of the silent, powerless, undemanding white space, which engages the reader in the co-operative meaning-making experience of a literary work.

## 2 Bruno Munari, Remi Charlip and the art of picturebook innovation

My analysis of the two case studies, *Little White Riding Hood*, by Bruno Munari and *It looks Like Snow*, by Remy Charlip, starts with a short introduction dedicated to the two authors and to some aspects of their pioneering picturebook creations<sup>3</sup>. The importance of this part consists of the fact that it explains the experimental approach that gave rise to the two picturebooks described in the analytical part of this essay.

Bruno Munari and Remy Charlip are two remarkable, eclectic artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bruno Munari was an Italian architect, graphic artist, illustrator and writer (MENEGUZZO, 1993). He is credited with having contributed to industrial design, sculpture, painting, literature, education, film, concrete art, the visual arts, futurism and modernism. He was born in Milan on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1907. He spent most of his childhood and adolescence in Badia Polesine, a small village near Padua, not far from Venice, in north-eastern Italy. When he turned eighteen, he returned to Milan and,

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words at all. It's like Steepy's back, waiting for tattoos. It's like an empty sky waiting for a bird to cross it. It's as silent as an egg waiting for the chick to hatch. It's like the universe before time began. It is like the future waiting to become the present. Look at it closely, and it can be filled with memories, with dramas, with dreams, with visions. It's filled with possibilities, so it isn't really blank» (ALMOND, 2010/2011, p. 247).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noticing that the much-referenced "drama of the turning of the page" used, for instance, by Bader (1976), Moebius (1991), Sipe and Brightman (2009), to explain picturebook storytelling, is a quotation of a short unpublished essay by Rémy Charlip, *A Page is a Door*: «A thrilling picture book not only makes beautiful single images or sequential images, but also allows us to become aware of a book's unique physical structure, by bringing our attention, once again, to that momentous moment: the turning of the page.» (Charlip, n/d, n/p, <https://www.remycharlipestate.org/book>)



two years later, he joined the Futurist movement led by Filippo Marinetti. This close connection with the world of art meant that he was very well-informed about new artistic developments and figures in Europe, such as Kandinsky, Man Ray, Duchamp, De Stijl, Hans Richter, Paul Klee and Mondrian. Munari absorbed many features of the Futurist movement, but he moved away from it after World War II because of the proto-Fascist values it exhibited. Then he embarked on his lifelong exploration of the connection between art, crafts, science, technology, and childhood. He did a lot of work in the sphere of industrial design, his products including all sorts of things – from espresso machines to ash trays, clocks, toys, lamps and beds. He experimented with several visual art forms too, coming up with ingenious ideas. He changed the stereotypical features of graphic designing and typography, and developed book-objects, transforming children’s books into appealing learning tools (CAMPAGNARO, 2019b). Munari’s books feature textured, tactile surfaces and cut-outs that make it easier for children to improve their sense of texture and color via a kinesthetic learning process. He was the creator of unforgettable unreadable books – his “libri illeggibili”, and experimented with photography, lectured at Harvard, wrote and/or illustrated over 80 books of fiction and non-fiction. He died in Milan on 30th September 1998.

Remy Charlip was an American artist, writer, choreographer, designer and teacher. He was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1929 and raised by his Lithuanian Jewish parents in Brooklyn, New York. From a very early age, he showed a natural talent for the visual arts. He began his artistic career as a painter but soon became interested in narrative art forms. The two forms he settled on, dance and children’s books<sup>4</sup>, have some essential elements in common: both communicate largely through visual language and both develop through a series of scenes. Charlip graduated from Cooper Union in 1949 with a degree in Fine Arts. He then studied dance at Juilliard, and in 1950 he joined the corps of dancers that became the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953. His periodic visits to Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, from 1951-1953 brought about a great change in his life. Currently regarded as the nation’s most successful and influential art school, a sort of “American Bauhaus,” in Charlip’s time the BMC attracted many vanguard artists who were to influence the course of American post-war art, including Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Albers,

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<sup>4</sup> Remi Charlip’s artistic and literary production is described in the website: <https://www.remycharlipestate.org/>. I am grateful to Philip Nel for his kind generosity in sharing archival material on Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss dedicated to Remi Charlip. Our discussions on Charlip’s picturebooks “with no pictures” were the fertile ground for useful reflections.

Franz Kline, and Wilhelm de Kooning. Charlip's diverse career included performing with John Cage, dancing and designing costumes for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, co-founding the Paper Bag Players, serving as head of the Children's Theater and Literature Department at Sarah Lawrence College, besides winning two Village Voice Obie awards, and three *New York Times* Best Illustrated Book of the Year citations. He wrote and/or illustrated more than 30 books. He died on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2012.

These two children's authors, who lived in two different continents and were born 20 years apart, have several common features in their approach to the art of designing children's picturebooks. I will limit my analysis to three elements which I consider significant for the purpose of this essay: playing with children's engagement; the surprising aspects of the ordinary; verbal and visual narrative experimentation.

## **2.1 Playing with children's engagement**

Both authors explored the fundamental concepts of the functionality and uselessness of play. They believed that, as well as offering children the opportunity to enjoy themselves (the uselessness of play), engaging playfully with picturebooks could improve children's knowledge of the world. From this perspective, picturebooks like *Jimmy Has Lost His Cap*, by Bruno Munari (1945) or *Where is Everybody?*, by Remy Charlip (1957) are seen as engaging books for activities that help children to develop a flexible mind, and learn how to use verbal and visual communication in original and ingenious ways.

## **2.2 The surprising aspects of the ordinary**

With a flair for intelligent and unexpected outcomes, Munari and Charlip knew how to draw the unusual out of the ordinary. Their choices of either domestic or urban settings are often based on the surprising effect of the unforeseen and fabulous aspects of everyday reality. Household objects are used to build "fantastical" machines that are certainly unusual, like *Munari's machines* (1942): machines for taming dogs, automatic timers for cooking eggs, tail-moving machines for lazy dogs, and so on. Charlip turned household objects, discarded paper and boxes into costumes and stage settings. A

common object like a fork could become a hand, or even many hands<sup>5</sup>. Pots and pans could become hats, and an old lampshade could be turned into a tutu, like in *Dress up and let's have a party* (1956).

### 2.3 Verbal and visual narrative experimentation

Munari and Charlip were both aware of the devastating damage caused by conformity to rigid and stereotypical visual narratives, which can stunt children's development and dampen their creative spirit. Both authors started designing picturebooks that could nurture children's creativity, and a sense of freedom gained from experimentation and unusual visual narratives. That is why they were endless experimenters when it came to picturebooks. When Munari designed children's books, he saw the page of the book as a challenge. He wanted to test its limits. This approach involved investigating the possible ways in which a narrative could be presented to a young reader, and even toddlers like *I Prelibri* [Prebooks] (1981). He asked himself: "Can a book communicate something beyond the printed word? And if so, what does it communicate?" (MUNARI, 1981b, p. 217, my translation). Charlip claimed that all his books deliberately looked different from one another. For each one, Charlip chose different collaborators or took pains to explore different ingenuous writing and illustrative styles like *Thirteen* (1975), an unusually singular picturebook made of eleven disparate images, rendered via warm watercolors on thirteen spreads. Young readers turn the page to discover how the story has progressed for each image. In this picturebook, "[...] stories are circular, interconnected. They don't have a beginning or end. You can read it backwards and forwards. [...]". (LEVINE, 2020, n/p).

The analysis conducted thus far clarifies some significant features that these two authors have in common: the profound understanding of how children's imagination works, and their capacity of using books "as departures for all the various ways in which children experience creativity" (LEVINE, 2020, n/p). These literary and visual convergences generated relations of filiation between Munari and Charlip and between their two innovative pictureless picturebooks.

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<sup>5</sup> In the 1950s Munari designed some original sculptures out of metal forks, «The folding of the "prongs" created exhilarating animation effects, turning a bland everyday object into a puppet; the book, which was published by La Giostra (and then later, with plenty of variations, by Muggiani and Corraini), shows drawings of these objects.» (MAFFEI, 2008, p. 35).

### 3 How pictureless picturebooks work? The case of two white snowy landscapes

In 1957, at the age of 28, Charlip published an original picturebook entitled *It Looks Like Snow*. He dedicated this book to John Cage, whom he knew quite well. There seems to be quite an obvious intertextual relationship between Cage's work *4'33*, published in 1952, and Charlip's *It Looks Like Snow*. Cage's "4'33" composition is his most famous experimental musical piece, in which the musician plays no single note on the piano. Charlip did exactly the same thing with images, transposing Cage's music in his illustrations. In other words, Charlip did not illustrate a single page of his picturebook.

The picturebook is a witty little story about an Eskimo boy, his Husky dog, Blanche, and his family engaging in ordinary indoor and outdoor domestic activities in a completely white landscape covered in snow. What is rather unusual is that there are no pictures in this picturebook. The pictures on the page are completely silent. Only the few words at the bottom of the page interrupt the whiteness of the doublespreads. The picturebook was set by hand and printed in a first edition of 750 copies, with a wraparound cover, and was intended to be mailed. In 1957, Munari – who was 50 at the time – received a copy of the book, mailed to him by Charlip for Christmas, inside a red envelope. It was a nice present, but nothing came of it for 23 years. It was only in 1980, when Munari designed the last picturebook of his trilogy (three colorful rewritings of "Little Riding Hood"), that an interesting intertextual link between the two authors came to light. Munari wrote and illustrated his *Little White Riding Hood* in 1980 and, on its front page he paid tribute to Remy Charlip and John Cage in a witty inter pictorial game.

Munari appreciated Cage's and Charlip's approaches and conveyed them to his *Little White Riding Hood*. He echoed the silence of John Cage's composition and, like Charlip, produced a highly unusual picturebook: a blank visual narrative. Although there are no images but only black words on the pages, *It Looks Like Snow* and *Little White Riding Hood* are still considered picturebooks: the pure, silent and powerfully-vibrant whiteness of the pages is a protagonist in both stories.

How do these picturebooks with no pictures work? A detailed analysis of *Little White Riding Hood* might be helpful in clarifying the narrative mechanism. Unlike

Charlip, Munari created a new original version<sup>6</sup> of one of the most popular European folk tales: *Little Red Riding Hood*. The protagonist is a determined and independent girl who walks through the woods to visit her grandma called Blanche<sup>7</sup>. In the woods she meets a white wolf, who devoured her grandma and got indigestion, so that now he needs to eat nothing but plain white rice. Other «white» characters like, for instance, Snow White and Mr Whitely, the painter, appear during the girl's walk through the woods. Throughout the narrative, both words and pictures insist on verbal and visual whiteness.

The book cover is completely white, and so is the title, which is hardly visible on the white cardboard page. The title page contains the dedication to Remy Charlip and John Cage, in an unsurprising tribute to their work. The original introduction (the back cover in more recent editions) contains the following text:

Completely unknown [...] was the story of Little White Riding Hood. Now, she's here in these pages but you can't see her. You know there's this little girl all dressed in white, lost in the snow. You know there's a grandmother, a mommy and a wolf. You know there's a stone bench in the little, snow-covered garden, but you can't see anything, you can't see the dog kennel, you can't see the flower beds, you can't see anything, anything at all, everything is covered with snow. Never seen so much snow. (MUNARI, 1981a, n.p.)<sup>8</sup>.

The story of *Little White Riding Hood* begins with a white doublespread, containing one sentence only:

Never seen so much snow.

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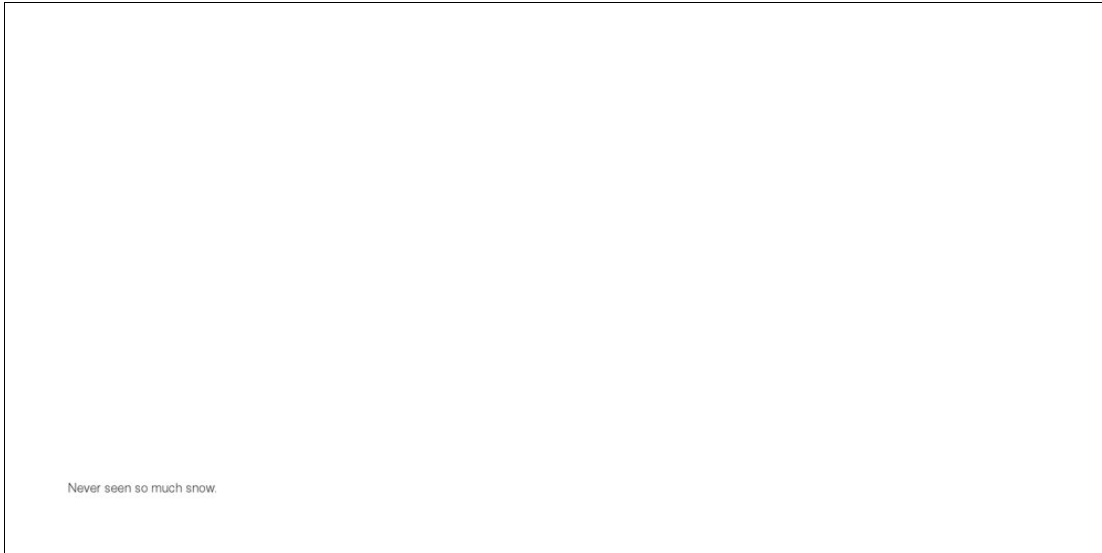
<sup>6</sup> The story originally appeared in a collective volume published by Giulio Einaudi in the collection “Libri per ragazzi” [“Children's Books”] (n. 68, format 9 ½ x 6 ¾, 114 pages). Beside *Cappuccetto Bianco* [Little White Riding Hood] published for the first time in this edition, the volume contained two rewritings by Munari himself, *Cappuccetto Verde* [Little Green Riding Hood] and *Cappuccetto Giallo* [Little Yellow Riding Hood], which were first published by Einaudi in the collection “Tantibambini” in 1972, the story of *Cappuccetto Blu* [Little Blue Riding Hood], by Maria Enrica Agostinelli, published by Einaudi in 1975, and the translation of the original version of *Rotkäppchen* [Little Red Riding Hood] written by the Brothers Grimm. The picturebooks *Little White Riding Hood*, *Little Green Riding Hood* and *Little Yellow Riding Hood* are now available in separate volumes published by Corraini.

<sup>7</sup> The quotations refer to the English edition of the book published in Italy by Corraini.

<sup>8</sup> «Assolutamente sconosciuta [...] era la storia di Cappuccetto Bianco. Ora è qui in queste pagine ma non si vede. Si sa che c'è questa bambina tutta vestita di bianca, sperduta nella neve. Si sa che c'è una nonna, una mamma, un lupo. Si sa che c'è una panchina di pietra nel piccolo giardino coperto dalla neve, ma non si vede niente, non si vede la cuccia del cane, non si vedono le aiuole, non si vede niente, proprio niente, tutto è coperto dalla neve. Mai vista tanta neve».

The text occupies a marginal position on the bottom left-hand side corner. Wide empty white space dominates the entire doublespread (Fig. 1).

**Figure 1 – Never seen so much snow**



**Source: Bruno Munari, *Cappuccetto Bianco* [Little White Riding Hood] (Mantova: Corraini, 2017) - © 2016 Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.**

Thanks to this visual layout, the readers’ gaze is free to hover gently over the monochromatic landscape and explore the immaculate whiteness of the page. The readers thus find themselves immersed in an extra-ordinary environment, consisting of one single colour, and they then start grasping the mechanism of Munari’s narrative game as soon as they open the second doublespread, which, once again, is apparently empty, with the exception of the black words in marginal position at the bottom: “This morning we woke up and opening the window we were blinded by so much white. The snow had been falling all night and had covered everything. Never seen so much snow!”

In our daily experience, like in many traditional picturebooks, snow is generally supposed to appear as a white surface that covers things or as a multitude of soft flakes falling from a white-grayish-pinkish sky. However, rather than appearing as a stand-alone element, it tends to be accompanied by the presence of characters, landscapes and coloured objects that populate the pages (and our view), like in the popular picturebook *The Snowy Day* (1962), by Ezra Jack Keats. The protagonist of this story is Peter, an African-American Little Red Riding Hood, who, after the very first snowfall, sets out in an exploration along different tracks and paths in his urban adventure in the snow. The

beginning of the story is very similar to *Little White Riding Hood*: «One winter morning Peter woke up and looked out the window. Snow had fallen during the night. It covered everything as far as he could see» (KEATS, 1962, n/p), but the visual narration is completely different, not only because of the suggestive illustrations, but also because of the sharp contrast between the white snow and the rest of the landscape, which is portrayed in bright polarizing colours. Both the protagonist and the objects curiously seem to play with the traditional fairytale colour triad of white, red and black.

So distant from Munari's *Little White!* The white pages and the readers' imagination in Munari's picturebook are the protagonists: on the one hand, the child reader admires the pristine white snow (the dazzling white of the page); on the other hand, coloured images emerge from the reader's personal experience: many objects are hidden under the white «cover» of the page, which can only be imagined and not seen (unlike in Keats' picturebook). Munari thus plays with three different levels of a child's perceptive experience: imagination, personal experience and recollection of absent images, thanks to previous narrative memories. The ingenious narrative mechanism of *Little White Riding Hood* would be impossible without the interaction of these three levels. In this way, Munari managed to offer his readers an innovative and touching experience: the absolute and fulfilling visual contemplation of a silent snowy landscape. The sensory receptiveness of this landscape is convincing and lifelike. The reader can see snow everywhere and the visual and emotional impact is surprisingly strong. The silent blank space becomes the dominant feature of the story.

This story is visually effective and impactful because of another particularly powerful narrative mechanism employed by Munari, i.e., his “simultaneous contrasts”. In Munari's view, “an ancient rule of visual communication is simultaneous contrast. Thanks to this rule, two components of a dichotomic couple enhance and intensify each other's communicative potential. The contrast is not limited to formal or material elements, but it also includes semantic oppositions” (MUNARI, 1968, p. 355). Munari defined the technique of “simultaneous contrasts” as the first law of communication, applicable to all creative disciplines. The simultaneous contrast generates «a kind of responsive energy, which produces some kind of memory once the contrast itself has been experienced – that is, seen, touched, or perceived» (CAMPAGNARO, 2017, p. 160). The white snowy landscape enveloping and hiding everything can be visually perceived and emphasized, in verbal opposition with the colourful objects mentioned in the text. To highlight the contrast with the silent whiteness of the page, Munari includes

in the text a multicoloured series of familiar, everyday objects: the dog kennel, the box hedges, the stone bench, the outline of the flowerbeds, etc. This is, obviously, an engaging narrative device for young readers, who can not only imagine to catch a glimpse of the various objects on the white pages (hidden under «so much snow») but also visualize them through their imagination, starting from their personal experience: the dog kennel, the hedges or the bench take shape in connection with the experience of the real objects, maybe one's own dog kennel, a neighbour's dog kennel, a hedge or a bench in a garden, maybe in a familiar place that the readers see every day on their way to school, to the supermarket or to their grandparents.

The chromatic richness emerging from the list of objects hidden under the snow appears to be «in contrast» with another list of objects, absolutely monochromatic ones this time, described by Munari in the third doublespread: Little White, grandma Blanche, the basket with (notoriously white) milk and sugar, wrapped in a white tablecloth bundle. This constant game of repeated visual cross-references between the absolutely white page and the chromatic variations introduced by the words is repeated throughout the story, in an exhilarating crescendo, until the final climax when Little White discovers that her grandma has set out on an exploration of «Black Africa». In his story, Munari ingeniously employs a series of typical Italian idiomatic expressions based on different colours (ANTONELLO, 2019). Little White Riding Hood, for example, turns «red with surprise», «a bit green» with fear because her grandma is missing, «slightly purple» with cold, and she finally starts wondering whether her adventure might actually seem «a yellow spy story». Little White's story ends with a playful final remark explicitly addressed to the readers, based on another «coloured» expression: «With this strange tale you'll pass a white night». This expression sounds as a serious warning: be careful, dear reader: this book you are holding in your hands will give you a sleepless night!

## Conclusions

Picturebook research has adopted numerous innovative approaches and reached out in new directions over the last two decades: from the text/image interplay, to paratext and graphic layout analysis, from materiality to metafiction, from interpictureoriality and hybridization to gender studies and age studies. The landscape is, therefore, extremely rich and variegated. However, picturebooks with no pictures based



on the narrative potential of pictureless white pages still remain a relatively underexplored research area.

This essay aims at shedding new light on these peculiar research objects, defining their role, functions and morphosyntactic characteristics through the analysis of two particularly significant examples: *Little White Riding Hood*, by Bruno Munari, and *It Looks Like Snow*, by Remi Charlip. The discussion concentrates on the literary, aesthetic and educational potential of this peculiar picturebook typology that offers readers the possibility to experience a complex multisensory exploration through the ingenious visual narrative mechanisms activated by white (apparently) pictureless pages, exactly like in the exploration of the magic and boundless possibilities of the very first snowfall.

The visual-narrative solutions adopted by the two authors stimulate the young readers' imagination: their gaze is free to wander not only through the white pages but also through their own personal memories connected with snow. The unique visual landscape of the white pictureless pages arouses the readers' curiosity and offers them the opportunity to become the protagonists of an original aesthetic and pleasurable reading experience.

With their use of play, children's engagement and visual experimentation, Munari's and Charlip's picturebooks are rare and beautiful examples of an engaging semiotic playground that transforms the reader into an active participant of the meaning-making process and puts into practice the words that Hans Christian Andersen wrote 180 years ago in his tale *A Picture-book without Pictures*:

"Sketch what I relate to you,"  
said the Moon at her first visit,  
"and you will have a pretty picture-book"  
(ANDERSEN, 1947, n.p.)

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*Data de submissão: 19/05/2020*

*Data de aprovação: 19/05/2020*