Dismantle and rebuild the house in the Italian picture books of the 1940s. Mario Sturani, Elsa Morante, Bruno Munari

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Abstract
In the 1940s of the twentieth century in Italy important experiments for the creation of a new type of children’s book took place. The experience of Einaudi publisher regards two authors who, in the following decades, conquered great fame: Elsa Morante and Bruno Munari. Morante makes a large-format book, illustrated by herself, in which the house is still a material prison from which childhood save us through fantasy opposing the fairytale castle to the house, while Munari translates in children’s language the historical vanguard grammar, decomposing the domestic universe and attributing each object fantastic, surreal features that stimulate the imagination and creativity of the reader.

Keywords: Home, Lived spaces, Furniture, Picturebooks, Elsa Morante, Bruno Munari.

Resumen
Desmantelación y reconstrucción de la casa en los libros ilustrados italianos de la década de 1940. Mario Sturani, Elsa Morante, Bruno Munari

En la década de 1940 del siglo XX en Italia tuvieron lugar importantes experimentos para la creación de un nuevo tipo de libro para niños. La experiencia de la editorial Einaudi contempla a dos autores que, en las décadas siguientes, conquistaron una gran fama: Elsa Morante y Bruno Munari. Morante hace un libro de gran formato, ilustrado por ella misma, en el cual la casa sigue siendo una prisión material en la que la infancia nos salva mediante la fantasía
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mientras que Munari traduce al lenguaje infantil la gramática histórica de vanguardia, descomponiendo el universo doméstico y atribuyendo a cada objeto características fantásticas y surrealistas que estimulan la imaginación y la creatividad del lector.

*Palabras clave*: Hogar, Espacios vividos, Muebles, Libros ilustrados, Elsa Morante, Bruno Munari.

**Introduction**

During the twentieth century, in the field of pedagogy, the relationship between the child- his education, his physical, cognitive and emotional development- and the moral and physical environment in which he grows became more and more asserted. Maria Montessori (reaffirming with scientific and theoretical strength principles expressed by positivism on the basis of acquisitions which were already present in the rousseauian and romantic tradition) claimed the inseparability of the moral and physical dimension in an environment (familial, social, human, territorial, domestic, spiritual, even political) in which we take our first steps. For this reason, with an extraordinary pedagogical and symbolic ability to sum up, she called the institution she created *Casa dei Bambini*: House of Children. The Italian pedagogical twentieth century, even in its darkest moment during the fascist period, has never ceased to restate the importance of this connection, either in a democratic direction (starting with John Dewey’s activism) or in a propagandistic and authoritarian direction (neo-idealism and Giovanni Gentile): the environment that surrounds us, starting from the home and the school, shapes our body and our conscience.

In more recent years, cognitivism has maintained the direct derivation of our behaviour from the characteristics of the environment, also physical, as it has al-
so sustained the revival of the emotional spectrum and its overflowing out of the borders that centuries and centuries of the tyranny of reason have imposed on it. All this adds data of great interest to what we become on the basis of the emotions and feelings that living in a certain environment, surrounded by certain objects, provokes in us.

On this theoretical, hermeneutic and epistemological ground scholars from different fields of knowledge favourably converge: literature, art and music historians, architects, artists, neuroscientists, iconologists and theorist of perception and of reception, biologists etc. Sarah Robinson, recaps this perspective, today unavoidable, as follows: “we completely depend on meaningful places” (Robinson 2014, p. 167). This means that we build (and narrate) our own representation of the world (in an evolutionary and adaptive perspective) on the basis of the stimuli that we receive from our physical and moral environment. From the spaces (that in our narration become places) and from the objects, from their functional, cultural and symbolic quality.

The recent theoretical turn towards bioculture and biopoetic has transferred the notions of empathy, embodiment and self-perception also to literary criticism. Cognitive ecology and constructivism enable us to retrace in texts, and in our relationship with those, an essential element of our identity construction.

Children’s literature has always translated all this in stories that convey pedagogical perspectives largely based on the representation of places into which the characters act, being influenced by their features.

Also in Italy, since its nineteenth-century complete canonization, children’s and young adult literature has greatly insisted on the detailed representation of the domestic environment (Cantatore 2015) which
would steer the destiny of the young characters and condition the critical reception of the young readers: a first example, a classic, is the great *open space* where Pinocchio is shaped: all his adventure arises from the absolute correspondence between that place and the character’s destiny which originates from it.

I would like to focus our attention on a very delicate moment of Italian children’s literature history: the nineteen-forties. A decade in which, in my opinion, it is possible to retrace interesting publishing symptoms that allow us to speak about a proto-picturebook and, moreover, to retrace what use is made of the domestic imagery in specific experiences.

Italy, in the forties, is a ground full of trauma, both in a political and a cultural sense: the fascist regime collapses, the second world war is fought, democratic liberty is conquered back, the monarchy falls and the Republic is established, bombed houses are rebuilt, in art and literature two radically different trends are facing each other, realism and abstractionism. A vast and diverse landscape where trauma and controversies on the reconstruction have left a very significant mark in history. Neo-realist cinema renders much of this climate both in its dramatic quality and its abundance of enthusiasm. The theme of the house is often at the centre of these political and cultural debates, and it is in the background of many stories that are, at this point, part of our mass culture (in our collective and identity related imagination, the pain for the war and the heroic myth of the liberation and reconstruction), they are part of our common idea of that era. Let’s quickly go through some images:

1) American animation films reiterate old stereotypes based on the pair woman-hearth (kitchen) taken from the (widely revisited) tradition of

2) Advertising finds in the domestic realm its most effective argument for what concerns its commercial effect.

3) Neo-realist cinema uses domestic interiors, kitchens in particular, to express the soul of a poor population that lives thanks to its sacrifices and struggles to build a better future: *Obsession* by Luchino Visconti (the desperation of a love, poverty and murder story), *Shoeshine* by Vittorio De Sica (for poor kids the alternative to the home is the prison), *Bicycle Thieves* by Vittorio De Sica (domestic drama set indoors in a modest house in the outskirts of Rome: the myth of public housing, the house for everyone), *Bellissima*, by Visconti (the miserable wishes and unfortunate ambitions of a mother who wants her child to access show business), *Umberto D*, still by De Sica The child is almost always at the centre of the social and domestic dramas, the house (together with the city terribly and indifferently modern) is the favoured scenario of this sense of everyday tragedy.

4) Those are years in which the public debate on public housing is very animated. Working-class suburbs appear and there is a new idea of house and of the right to housing. De Sica’s film, *The Roof*, recounts the story of the construction of an unauthorised house.

5) In paintings the house, its interiors and exteriors, perfectly fits both the poetics of realism (Renato Guttuso) and of abstract art (Lucio Fontana, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Atanasio Soldati). It is an everyday subject, a kaleidoscope
of forms, colors and emotions even when it is broken down and it becomes almost unrecognisable.

Children’s books by Giulio Einaudi publisher

I would like to focus on this process of deconstruction that widely interests the art of the period after the second world war and that, in general, was also the propellant of the early 20th century avant-garde art movements. I believe that this procedure (which is both a theoretical and formal one and in its best cases aspires to be pedagogic, which means it desires to offer stimuli for the construction of an agile, flexible and full of personal resources way of thinking) fully interests also the picturebook, especially at its beginnings: the proto-picturebook.

In 1940s Italy’s case, the dismantling-reconstructing phenomenon of the domestic landscape concerns, not only the specifically artistic languages that work on the progressive abstraction of forms but also the sociopolitical process that reconstructs the house epic starting from the war’s dismantling- destruction.

Speaking of which I would like to point out to you the experience of two authors that in 1942 were working for the same publisher. In fact, the publishing of the first experimental collection of works for children, by publishing house Einaudi, dates back to the second wartime winter, in 1941-42. The pilot-work was *Le bellissime avventure di Caterì dalla trecciolina*, by thirty years old Elsa Morante and, subsequently, a unique album on insects written and illustrated by painter Mario Sturani, *Caccia grossa fra le erbe*, and two revolutionary books by Bruno Munari: *Abecedario* and *Le macchine di Munari*. These four books, all in
large format, hardcover, and all written and illustrated by their respective authors (the golden rule of the picture-book: writing and illustrations traced by the same hand), date 1942 and represent a first and only, accomplished experiment in the field of children’s literature by Einaudi, conceived precisely in the years when the publishing house is defining its action as a cultural opposition to the agonising fascism. Anyhow, after those four publications, the children series stops and seventeen years will go by (1959) before Einaudi will approach again this very specific audience/market.

Mario Sturani

Those are three experiences of extraordinary quality but very different both stylistically and culturally and, for what concerns us mostly, in their way of depicting the house universe. Mario Sturani (1906-1978), painter, illustrator, ceramist, designer, advertiser, years long collaborator of the ceramic doll factory Lenci. Versatile artist, formerly near to Futurism and later to the “six painters” group led by Lionello Venturi, anti-fascist. His album is an obsessive “at the microscope” journey of a childlike enthusiastic and anxious entomologist, illustrated with a calligraphic and scientific style, narrated with a literary tone, sense of tragic (scenes of life and death, of filthiness and cruelty) and poetic tenderness in front of the sight of nature depicted in micro-landscape. Generally speaking, it is a book of exteriors, at the centre of which an extraordinary description of a domestic interior stands out (unfortunately solely assigned to words and not to illustrations), in particular those two places that particularly fascinate children's imagination, places where vocations start to
come alive and the preferences of the adults we are going to be get excited: the cellar and the attic. Let’s read:

As a child, two places were wonderful for my games apart from the open countryside: the attic and the cellar. In autumn in the attic a sharp smell of apples stagnated, in the hot half-light, and the sun entered from above, through a tiny little window, to illuminate the golden quivering of the small dust particles the went up and down in the air like a swarm of really tiny shiny insects. In the attic I often found some little butterfly that came there who knows from where to sleep, and once, hanging like a pear from a ceiling beam, I even discovered a bat: I touched it with a finger, but I don’t know between us who was scared the most because we both let out a very high-pitched scream.

But even more than the attic, I was attracted by the cellar. A cold shadow of mystery and of slight fear clouded dark and uncertain all the damp useless stuff that was gathered there since years. The lit candle illuminated the dark marks on the walls and things produced long shadows that got lost in the shadow. Spiderwebs hung from the vault slightly agitated by my moving around and from every object a stale and musty smell was released; old rusty scrap metal, a rickety wardrobe without a door, a worn out armchair and also there, like in the attic, crates were piled up and erected as enormous stalagmites.

This great heap of crates occupied a great part of the cellar along with wooden curls and scrap paper. The clear masses raised some slowly from the obscure masses of the bottoms, others came off clear and sharp. The overlapping of the crates produced some rooms, some narrow and tortuous dark tunnels sometimes lit suddenly by brief patches of light between the gaps. And I went around in there, on all fours and I knew well every protruding nail, every board crack. Every piece of wood had its own particular pattern formed by the cut of the veining and had characteristic marks of rust in the holes left empty by the nails and dripping amber coloured drops of resin.

For me as a child those were the caves and I played cave-men: wonderful caves the attic and the cellar!
What a strange fascination, a mix of curiosity and fear, does dark inspire! It’s something prohibited, magic and concealed. (Sturani 1942, pp. 53-54)

In Sturani’s case it’s a realistic description (smells, sounds, powders, fears, joys, troubles, suspicions, curiosities) of a real place, or better of two real places of the house, retraced from head to toe, following the thread of memory: what the house can be for a child, how he explores it finding places which are exclusively his, completely for himself, that are embodied in him, they become one with his body and his mind, defining passions, emotions, feelings and knowledge acquisitions.

Elsa Morante

In Le bellissime avventure di Caterì dalla trecciolina, which should be considered de facto the first “novel” by Elsa Morante, the figure of the doll is taken again into consideration (it is in fact the story of its kidnapping and of the journey that the little owner will embark to get it back), already at the centre of a story written by Elsa as a child in an old school exercise book (Zagra 2012). With this book the long relationship between Elsa Morante and Giulio Einaudi, her lifelong publisher, begins. In this case Morante conquers an adequately wide and versatile typographic-publishing space to make Caterina, the main character, and her magic genie Dan travel on the wings of dreams looking for Bellissima, the stolen doll, between queens, fairies, dwarfs, talking animals, presumptuous ladies, castles, houses and little homes, all the houses that live in children's imagination.
Differently from Sturani, Morante leads us onto a path of imaginary homes that the protagonist encounters during her travel on the “train of wonders”. The domestic settings described and illustrated by Morante are clearly taken from the popular fairy tale tradition: the castle, the children’s modest house, the little home of the dwarfs, the enchanted garden etc. It’s a story developed in stations where the stations are defined by different houses. The opening scene is certainly striking, in this the main character of the whole novel appears to be the house itself: «even if Caterì’s home, looking at it, may seem a house like any other, I must tell you its story, because, among the many I know, it’s one of the most beautiful and it doesn’t seem real» (Morante 1959, p. 11). We can already foresee from these words that we are moving in the space of unreality and imagination. Caterì’s house is poor, a few pieces of furniture, no food, a wretched rag doll, Bellissima, is emptying the wooden box of the hen. It looks like one of those houses we have seen in the shots of those neo-realist films (Visconti will take his title Bellissima from the name of the doll created by his friend Elsa Morante): «the house is grey, quite ugly. To look out of the window you have to climb up on a chair, and be very careful, because the chair is a little shaky. To look outside you’ll also need to open the window, even if it’s cold, because instead of the glass there is a stripe of cardboard» (Morante 1959, p. 12). The author insists on this opening scenario, she emphasises its dramatic tones to prepare the surprise of the places that the main character will walk through, in her dreams, in the subsequent scenes. In this book the houses represent the moral evolution of the novel.

1) In the house of the Gran Guardaboschi (the Great Forester), «beautiful wooden little house
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painted in gold, with many windows and balconies» (Morante 1959, p. 30). It represents the entrance to the dreamlike adventure, full of positive energy and promises. Here Caterì sleeps in a «very beautiful room, all of straw. The beds were made of wood and they hung from the ceiling. On the floor there was a basket full of sweet crumbles» (Morante 1959, p. 32).

2) The next stop is at the Castello della Signora del Pineto (The Lady of the Pinewood’s Castle), an attractive place but full of perils. Is the location of the trial to overcome, of the danger and the courage in facing it, with her loyal helper Dan. Also the castle, as Guardaboschi’s house, contains food (poor people’s hunger! And children’s hunger!) and offers the possibility to play: food and play are the sign of the well-being and the tranquility for children and the actions are what allow the place to be embodied in the characters: «The castle was all lit and magnificent, and the long tables were full of delicious food, like grasshopper stew and snail omelette. Caterì and Dan ate a little more, and they explored the halls, the little rooms, the corridors […] they sat in the green living room, to play cards» (Morante 1959, p. 39).

3) In the most dramatic moment of the story, when Caterì risks losing her little wizard Dan, he is welcome, wounded, in the little wooden house of the dwarfs and, after a long convalescence, exactly when the signs of recovery become evident, also the small house changes: «the little red wooden house, in the sun, looked as if it was freshly repainted, for its satisfaction […] Caterì […] went into the woods and and picked
cyclamens, herbs and leaves, to decorate the little house. On the ground, she made a carpet, and up high, on the window, she put a big branch as a trophy [...] When Dan woke up again, was happy to see that the little house had became more beautiful than a theatre» (Morante 1959, pp. 50-51). The house, almost personified, reflects the improvements in the appearance of the character. Later, Dan looks out of the window, and sees another domestic landscape:

4) «domes as red as the sun with white and yellow flags waving on the top» (Morante 1959, p. 52), it is the reign of the Principessa delle Querce (The Princess of the Oaks), «The most beautiful of all princesses and her hair shone as those domes» (Morante 1959, p. 53). Identification between the character and the built up-anthropised landscape: somatization of architectural forms and vice-versa.

5) Another scene change, moving towards the conclusion: the little house of the dwarfs is magically transported into the Palace of Dreams that «is nothing other than the reunion of the houses that all the children dream during their lives. Its windows are always lit and every child has an apartment. You may find it strange, but often the kids that seem the poorest here were we are, are the ones who have the richest possessions in that building [...]. When she first arrived Caterinuccia left Dan for a moment to visit her own house. There was a kitchen with many very small clay pots and many dolls which talked and walked. She also found a chest of drawers full of compartments with the dolls’ supply. The kitchen was equipped with
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saucers, cups and cutlery, and with rags and also moulds to make cakes with flour; and with an almost newborn kitten with a bow» (Morante 1959, pp. 55-56). Caterì doesn’t content herself with her own house but she visits her sister’s Rosetta. So Morante identifies fantasy and dream as a great palace where everyone create their own house (synonymous of the desired life, a fantasy that is a consequence of the typical deprivations of real life) and represents the possibility to enter in the dreams of others. The dream dimension, and the fairy tale one, come together right in the moment in which the writer becomes a domestic scenery “architect” and chooses the house built in the dream as the central nucleus of the human desire for well-being, care, wealth, serenity: the myth of the doll house. It looks like a scene from an expressionist theatre piece: dream becomes reality through narration and representation, the places where the characters move and interpret there most intimate nature, their desires, their needs: play, food, brightness.

6) After a short excursus in the Castello della Regina delle Fate (The Fairy Queen’s Castle) (strangely represented while cooking, complying with a iconographic stereotype associated to women that surely doesn’t belong to this character's status) where the reunification with the lost object happens, the doll Bellissima (now renamed Grigia (grey) servant of the Queen): «The castle was of dark wood adorned with gold leaves; the staircase was covered with a red carpet, and the railing was made of hyacinth. The Fairy Queen was cooking a pie for
lunch and she cleaned her hands well with a rag» where the mix of high and low, of sumptuous materiality and modest materiality, is what is striking and takes the vision within the reach of Caterì’s humbleness.

7) There is a plot twist when poor Bellissima-Grigia refuses the wedding proposal of a wealthy merchant that would also give her a house “especially made for” her (Morante 1959, p.64). From this moment the story goes towards its conclusion where Catari and Bellissima get back home, to find Rosetta, Catari’s sister, who cannot dream (and so can’t have a house in the palace of dreams) because «she doesn’t eat, drink or sleep […] and so she doesn’t dream» (Morante 1959, p. 66). The final scene, the return to reality, the end of the dream, depicts Rosetta who «was sitting with her hands on her lap in front of the doorway of the house» (Morante 1959, p. 68), seems like the portrait of an Italian countrywoman. Caterì’s dream finishes where it started, inside the old house, «sitting on the wooden house of the hen that had died» (Morante 1959, p. 73) and Rosetta has finally found a job to sustain herself and her little sister. The two sisters with the doll salute us as if enclosed in the domestic shell that we have known in the first pages of this novel. The Palace of Dreams, however, is always there, at hand for anyone who would like to listen to this bedtime story which has the power to make us dream a different home.

The process to which Morante submits the child mind (both of her young characters and her young readers/listeners) during this narration. The domestic
space, the real one and the dreamed one, with all the objectual stock that comes with it (starting from Dan’s small trumpet and Caterina’s pierced cent), is the field of action of self and life ownership. I want to quote the words of Michele Cometa: «things, objects are what is left of those embodied “actions”. Things are, as in the classical example of the blind person’s stick, the prosthesis that constitute our mind through our body. Even though the studies on neural correlates of those prosthesis are at the beginning and not only on humans, its evident that tools, but also personal ornamentation and “artistic” artifacts with which we surround ourselves strongly modify our own self-perception (especially in terms of peripersonal space). And this demonstrates that our Self is made up of things at least as much as it is made up of intentions, thoughts, desires» (Cometa 2017, p. 108). And concludes: «Hence, things integrate the Self and collaborate to people's construction» (Cometa 2017, p. 144).

Bruno Munari

Moving from the character that, encountering things in the house, reaches the reader and embodies his own self quest, to the representation of things themselves, the household objects which become characters themselves, let’s focus and conclude our reflections on the experience of Le macchine di Munari (Munari’s The Machines).

This is an extraordinary innovative album (In and of itself for the 12x32, 32 pages format which is new in Italy in those years) that, well in advance, practices and realizes Leonardo’s and Marcel Duchamp’s fantastic and combinatorial logic theorised by Rodari many
years later (Rodari 1973). Yet anticipating also the ling-
guistic-combinatorial imagination of Toti Scialoja (la “cesta di Rimini”, il “giovane anatroccolo provinciale”).

And he does so starting from the house, the do-
mestic realm and from the objects that constitute it:
«Do you have a fish-tank in the house?». Munari’s ridd-
le-novel always begins with the objects that one has
at his or her disposal, a ready-made to arrive at a self-
made machine on the basis of free-associations which
pursue actions and effects comically justified by their
uselessness.

In this first children's book by Munari there isn’t yet
that mistrust in the logical-expressive capacities of the
word that, in later years, will blank out verbal language in
favour of a graphic and illustrative one. Here Munari puts
word and picture side by side in a coherent game that
simulates the dynamic that are established between the
scheme of the object to build and the instructions to do
so.

Also for Munari, at the time of Macchine Inutili,
it’s possible to follow a critical-cognitive approach on
the basis of the blending process (Cometa 2017, p.
312) explained by Mark Turner: a basic process
[where] the meaning doesn’t reside in a place but it is
typically a dynamic variable connection scheme be-
tween many elements. «Narration – goes on Cometa –
constantly uses fusions, associations, bold condensa-
tions of elements otherwise diverse and, in this per-
spective, it would not represent anymore the exception
to the natural brain functioning, but the rule of human
thinking tout court» (Cometa 2017, p. 312).

From this comes the encouragement of «our ten-
dency [especially as children] of attributing agency to
the non-animated» (Cometa 2017, p. 282). This behav-
iour brings us directly to the making special (Ellen
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Dissanayake) through playing and to «all those forms of “detachment from reality” that art and narration make possible for us» (Cometa 2017, p. 280) helping us in the exercise of compensatory and exonerative processes.

Munari’s machines are “useless” in everyday’s logic but they gain ground and meaning in the none-sense territory and in the free exercise of associative faculties. The neo-realist house that we have often seen represented in films and that still stands out in the frame of Morante’s novel, is here dismantled in its basic objects and re-semanticized it in the horizon of childhood games. The opening of this domestic crossing, that departs from the waking up of a boy, is entrusted to the coffee pot. Is not by chance that the first object to be annihilated with a useless machine is the ALARM CLOCK, the tool we use to come out of our sleep/dream and face the day, starting from our own bedroom. And after: the colander, the bathtub, the grappa bottle, the fireplace, the coffee cups, a very very fat aunt, a knight commander that sleeps in his bed, a pot, an egg, a wicker wine bottle, an iron, a nail file, a hat box, the cuckoo clock, cups and glasses, a big pudding, the umbrella and the muffler.

We are in the realm of house objects, still in use or by now fallen into disuse, silent inhabitants of the spaces of memory so well described in Mario Sturani’s album.

Anyhow we cannot help noticing that the deconstruction and reconstruction process of the domestic universe in the pages of the proto-picturebook is shared by Morante’s and Munari’s writing. In Elsa’s case the domestic landscape inspires dreams which in turn contain houses, one inside the other.
For Munari the domestic landscape supplies the ingredients to realise useless and paradoxical projects that, in their definite sense, have the same function/role of the dream: a break, a moment of carelessness, a mind travel, an escape where the symmetries of reality are questioned. In fact, about his useless machines (already renowned in Milan’s milieu at the time of the book publishing), Zavattini spoke of Munari as the “figure of a modern magician” (Einaudi’s letter to Munari, 9th March 1942)²

This is, in the end, the aim of the literary travel, in particular the one practiced with the picturebook: to conquer the Self and the Elsewhere starting with the magic that anyone of us can practice with the elements of the landscape that surrounds us, always thinking of the extraordinary adventure of Maurice Sendak’s Max (Sendak 1963).

The house is the first of these landscapes. For all of us.

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