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COMMUNICATION DESIGN FOR GENDER CULTURES: A RESEARCH
AND A DESIGN PROJECT FOR CONCRETE ACTIONS IN THE
PLACES OF EDUCATION.

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses, from the perspective of Communication Design, the issue of the representation of women through the media; in particular it concerns the value of Communication Design research in the promotion of a critical media education (Bellino, 2010) among younger generations.

By means of a structured "research through design", the discipline faces the design of new tools (analogical/digital) and new communicative models that can be easily transferable, sustainable and repeatable in educational contexts.

According to this perspective Communication Design plays the role of facilitator in the process of visual experience. It's common opinion that in our everyday life we encounter images that describe female figure starting from degrading and stereotypical models: women are depicted in a quite different way from men because the image of the woman is designed to flatter the ideal male spectator (Berger, 1972). We think that a new visual imagery of feminine, new communicative models (beyond aesthetic criteria or sexism) can be diffused and adopted in our society, starting from concrete actions in the places of education. For this purpose, communication design operates from a multidisciplinary perspective (closely related to humanities), for designing dedicated tools, new formats, new artefacts that are able to change the ways of seeing, consuming, distributing images. This could be a starting point to generate positive actions, lifelong learning and active encouragement in our society. This paper presents a structured research that includes experimental activities by the research group "dcxcg" (Communication Design for Gender Cultures) of Politecnico di Milano, Design Department. The group works with the goal to offer a critical view of the forms of representation of genders (female, male…), but also to support, through experimental teaching, the proposal of new models of communication and new opportunities to raise awareness in everyday life (private and public). The goal of experimental teaching consists in the design and in the sharing of a range of communication aids (re-media toolkit), for approaching images: critical tools for analysis, for the deconstruction of stereotypes, for the synthesis of the experience and active participation in the classroom. The aim is the integration of a gender perspective in everyday life and the shared construction of new hypotheses of intervention in the social context.

Keywords: women's stereotypes, media education, visual criticism, experimentation, re- media toolkit

1 INTRODUCTION

The paper addresses, from the perspective of Communication Design, the

question of media's representation of women; in particular, it explores the issues

around the educational contribution of Communication Design contrasting

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(specifically in learning spaces) degrading models of representation that demean and insult the female identity.

Communication Design can operate in the educational process from different perspectives, based on the skills that relate to it: the perceptual aspects of the world of images, languages and processes of production and configuration of artefacts, the mechanisms of reception of communicative messages. The discipline can play a key role opening to new paths of reflection, in the spread of new forms of social criticism and to new models of representation of genders both in their educational contexts (at University, in the Design Schools) and in relation to the outside world and to other degrees of training.

The media's portrayal of women is a phenomenon that can be analysed at multiple levels: the most obvious and discussed concerns the objectification of the female body, whose sex appeal is used for commercial purposes and the needs of persuasive communication. This repeatedly used model, expressed through a recurrence of subjects and poses, often ridiculous or vulgar, or through the emphasis of anatomical details not related to the topic, had a contribution to the spread of a distorted representation of the female, characteristic of an "oversexed culture", which is symbol of the dominance relationship between men and women.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey, published her theory of the "male gaze", which states that in the media (film, TV, advertising) the description of the female figure passes through the filter of the male look, which coincides with that of the camera and determines the perspective and both formal and video shooting aspects that characterize the female figure depicted. The male gaze is both the result and the premise of an androcentric view of the world, which takes the man as the unit of measurement for every other thing; a perspective that is constantly repeated and kept up by a community who has absorbed its rules and values, in a system where the dominated (the women) apply dominant-based categories inside relations of domination, making them look as natural (Bourdieau, 2010).

As also Goffman supports in his research (1976 and 1977) on relationships between man and women in print advertising, we are witnessing an imbalance in favour of men, to whom the women appear to be subordinated. In communication, this phenomenon is base of the roles the women play, usually secondary, accessory of the male role, in accordance with the binomial seduction-reproduction: the woman-object, young and good looking, charming but passive, and the housewife and mother, focused on housework and caregiving. Less obvious but, at the same time, more subtly persuasive are the

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representations where the subordination is evident just after an analysis of expressive forms and processes of signification: for example the choice and recurrent use of some aesthetic canons of representation in the composition of the image (the shots, the colours, the lights); or what Goffman defines as "ritualized" non-verbal behaviour, indicated by proxemics through the observation of posture, expressions, gestures and the spatial relationships between the male and female subjects, physically present or assumed.

In 1983, a research by Archer and colleagues showed how in the media is more frequent to see male faces and women's bodies, associating intellectual qualities to men and physical emotional qualities to women. People portrayed with a more frequent focus on their face are seen as more intelligent (a phenomenon of "face-ism"); women, instead, tend to be "dismembered" and represented with parts of the body, particularly with their primary and secondary sexual attributes (phenomenon of "body-ism"). The dismembering of the female body "leads to identify the person with their body, or part of it; the body-object is demeaned, seen as a mere instrument to be watched and evaluated as sex objects" (Bartky 1990) quoting Friedrikson and Roberts (1997) "as bodies that exist to be used and consumed by others".

The cult of the image, of the exaltation of the formal perfection of the bodies and the accession to the aesthetic canons of beauty shared and made sharable in society are added, therefore, to the theme of the objectification and eroticization of the female body. The manipulation of images, the post-production as virtual surgery, all the tools that correct, improve or cancel any defect of the body or any sign of aging, etc. produce an unreal and unreachable female image, that for many women is a source of dissatisfaction, sense of inadequacy and discomfort, and that is often found between the causes of health diseases such as depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia), affecting most commonly the vulnerable or the young. From another point of view, an excessive interest in beauty, body and look, may turn the individual (in particular, girls) away from other fundamental aspects of development, with consequential lacks of maths calculation or expressive and artistic skills, reducing their potential.

In a research conducted in Italy on the fears of children in early 2000's (Steve Binetti, P. Ferrazzoli F., Flora C.), what stands out is the fear of "not being beautiful"; a typical teenage attitude, an age in which the body changes rapidly to sexual maturity, shapes and sizes that can sometimes frighten if different from a shared ideal of beauty. The fact that this fear appears at such a young age is a consequence of a continuous exposure of children to advertising and

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entertainment programs for adults, what has produced a phenomenon of adult-child, even theorized by Postman (1984) as "disappearance of childhood", pushed toward themes of adolescence anticipating fears related to the body.

The formation of gender identity is the result of a social process, in which many factors play a role, the traditional agents of socialization such as family or school, but also the media assumes a function of reinforcement. Researchers states that the television teaches to youngers many characters sexually standardised because it represents and reaffirms behaviours that the child can easily find at home. As several social science researches support, the visual culture (Mirzoeff, 2002) plays a crucial role in the process of construction of meanings and in the organization of society. The theory of "cultivation" developed by Gerbner and Gross (1967-68) stand that television and other media "cultivate", according to a mainstreaming mechanism, the beliefs of the public and the formation of a dominant train, acting as agent of socialisation and providing an image of the social reality to emulate. McGhee (1976), applying this theory in the process of learning gender roles through the television and the media, argues that: "according to the hypothesis of "cultivation" an assiduous use should be associated with a tendency to define more stereotyped roles and occupations related to sexual gender. The results seem to confirm this hypothesis noting a significant correlation between the amount of time dedicated to the television and the amount of sexist statements relating to the nature of men and women, the social role they have and to the assumption of role characteristics based on the gender".

The problems related to the phenomena described and to the representation of women in the media are not limited and does not arise only through the observation of the obvious or the urgent, so not to those images that arouse refusal, offensive, that may be indicated and denounced, regulated or excluded (through the policies of the government, institutes of advertising self-regulation, etc.); but are contained also implicitly in many forms of female representation that quietly, almost invisible, become part of the everyday life and that "through their capacity to produce value, through the signification which are capable of generating, contribute massively to determine a deformed sensitivity and contribute significantly to the spread of sclerotic gender stereotypes".

2 THE CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN

The discipline can find space for action on several fronts, included those indicated as significant within the most recent European Resolution on the elimination of stereotypes (2013); in particular it can operate from an endo-disciplinary point of view, in the education of future designers, but also it can

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have a role, from eso-disciplinary point of view, in the process of raising awareness on respect of genders in the contexts of high schools, interacting with teachers and students. As Baule and Bucchetti (2012) support, the visual cultures can give their own critical contribution, arising public awareness, information and visual construction of the social sphere at a pragmatic level, they can provide, through a communication project, useful answers for a rethinking of the formats and the rules of communication.

In Italy nowadays we can found different academic realities that work on these themes, touched in the Studies of gender at interdisciplinary level. Among these, there is the newborn Centro Interuniversitario in Culture di Genere (March 2014), that includes six different universities of Milan (Bicocca, Statale, Politecnico, Iulm, San Raffaele, Bocconi), it's an academic pole centre actively involved in research and education on the themes of gender cultures. In particular, the group dcxcg (Communication Design for Gender Cultures) from the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano, is an important resource, establishing the common points and integrating the planning skills of Communication Design and what developed by the humanistic departments. The research group has promoted a series of activities on the issues of gender from a disciplinary and interdisciplinary point of view; it has worked on publications and academic theses, and has conducted educational activities (workshops) and funded research (Fondo giovani ricercatori 2006-2011: Piattaforma interdisciplinare per la comunicazione di genere: il Design della comunicazione nella formazione per il progetto, Prof. Elena Caratti; FARB 2013: La dimensione del Genere nel campo del Design, Prof. Valeria Bucchetti). The media's portrayal of women is the fulcrum of the research presented in this paper, it shows Communication Design tools used in education fields, focused on the design of suitable instruments for the deconstruction of the stereotyping phenomena of women's identity by the media.

3 THE PROJECT W.RE.MEDIA TOOLKIT

Our work fits into the big debate on the ethical dimension of design: is communication design able to guide and support our society toward new perceptive and behavioural models? What are the most diffused codes that affect the way we implement revise and internalize the messages of media? How can we strengthen, promote and suggest new behaviours that respect human dignity and integrity of the person?

The premises are based on different initial considerations: on a critical vision of

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communication design's role in our society; on the awareness of the need of a media education, of a visual alphabetization of the receivers; on the awareness that, in order to make real changes, communication design has to co-operate in a multidisciplinary dimension with the domain of humanities and social sciences. The design problem is linked to many issues: the influence of media on communicative processes; the complexity of tools and formats of communication; the visual rhetoric and codes of representation; the convergence or the integration of different media; and finally the problem of research methodologies.

The focalization on the theme of "feminine stereotypes" is strictly connected to the European Parliament Declaration in 2008: it expresses the Commission and the Member States' call to action on the problem of advertising that "often conveys discriminatory and/or demeaning messages based on all kind of gender stereotypes, which hinder gender equality strategies".
The promotion of portrayals of female, respectful of women's dignity and of a persistent fight against gender stereotypes, (in particular the prevalence of degrading images) is a challenge where communication design has a determinant role. As Bellino asserts, we need a new imaginary focused on reality instead of being a way to escape from the world, supported by new individual and collective actors, willing to activate a new process of signification, opening to freedom and truth for the future (Bellino, 2010).

The W. Re.Media Toolkit research project, which has students between 16 and 18 years as final target, has its structure based on two levels: a basic research as a foundation (collection of cases studies) and a research in which the model of the "research through design" have been applied.
The research is based on a set of project activities inside the educational context of Communication Design and other educational activities, experimental and of validation of previous researches data, with some secondary schools (in particular the fourth year of two Scientific Secondary Schools).
It have been designed a system of analogic and digital artefacts that include critical tools for the analysis, the deconstruction of stereotypes, the empiric synthesis and active participation in classrooms.

The experimental aspect of the activities in the classrooms is a constitutive part of the research with a double purpose: the intention of provoking change and iterative and imaginative steps forward (Sevaldson, 2010), and the will to create in the contexts of education an experiential dimension of learning, that integrates theory and practice, tacit and explicit knowledge (Niedderer and Imani, 2008), with an informative output.

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The term "Re.Media" have been chosen to define the project because of the assonance with the word "rimediare" or "remedy" - from the latin "remediare", (from "remedium") -; this first meaning implies the action of "remedy", to fix, to reorder, which may reflect the educational intent of correcting, help you understand, but also "review", "reread" or even "mediate". A second interpretation of the term is linked to the theories about media developed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in the text "Remediation: Understanding New Media" (2000), in which the concept of "remediation" expresses the mutual interaction/integration between digital and analogic media, in which a medium is seen as a hybrid of different elements that lead to other existing or pre-existing media. So, in conclusion, there are two fundamental values expressed in the name of the project. The first is linked to the willing to "act" in the most literal sense: to take the initiative, to start, to set up and start something in learning spaces: a sort of literacy teaching process and the rising of visual awareness (on the basis of the original meaning "to move" from the latin "agree").The second is linked to the close relationship between analogic media (the album and the call for action) and digital media (the diary online) inside the project and to the reconfiguration of devices (for the purposes of the project) that normally belong to teenagers' everyday life: the sticker album, designed according to the format and the internal structure of the original footballer albums, the visual diary as a catalogue of images portraying everyday life situations.

The added value of a digital diary is that the reading of the data is diachronic (temporal progression of the content) and at the same time synchronic (punctual map of the content).

As experiential training, the system designed leads progressively the students towards the theme of media's portrayal of women: from the first glance to a deep knowledge. Also the level of interaction between the people involved proceeds with a decreasing mediation by researchers and a growing proactiveness of the students.

The design output (album, digital diary online, call for action), was tested in the learning context of some secondary schools (in particular Scientific Secondary Schools), with a lively participation and strong involvement. The students have worked carefully on each phase of the project: on the selection and taxonomic classification of images, sharing and discovering languages and expressive codes, on the interaction with the digital tools, on the proposal of new ways of action in the social context.

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In summary, the system of communicative artefacts that have been designed, could constitute a model transferable and repeatable in different educational contexts; the goals are: to work for the integration of a gender perspective in daily life (against the indiscriminate use of stereotypes), to cooperate in the construction of new ways of intervention in the social context.
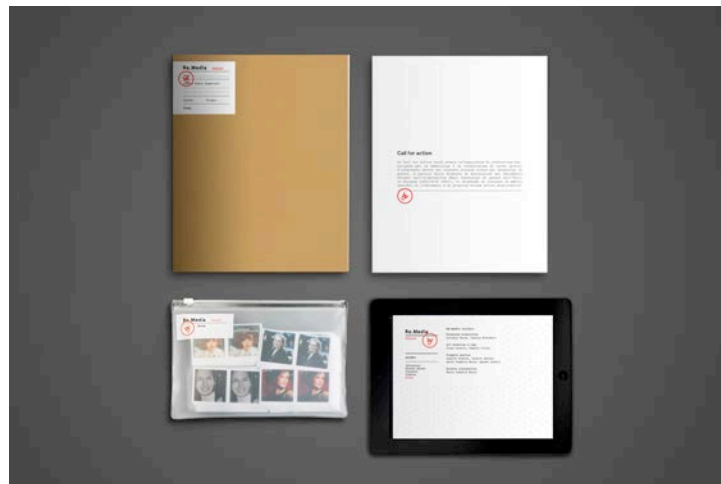

Figure 1 —The W Re-Media toolkit: the album with stickers, the blog, and the call for action.

4 THE DEVICES

There are three tools in the package "W Re-media toolkit" and their use follows the progression of the research goals (observation of the phenomenon, self discovery and interpretation of the phenomenon in daily life, and the construction of new possibilities for the future):

Sticker Albums (observation of the phenomenon): it is a metaphor of the cognitive process of cataloguing and categorization of 'identity factors' that govern the construction of female types and stereotypes. The work starts from some adjectives that should be a guide and help choosing, composing and organizing the different classes. All the recurrent and universally recognized traits contribute to the definition of female types and stereotypes. The criterion for the selection of the stickers is arbitrary and is functional for the contamination of meanings, values, traits, of relevant factors. The aim is to make visible, in a highly simplified way, the set of factors that have a role in the construction of stereotyped images of women, but especially to highlight the fact that stereotypes are derived from a process of generalization socially

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constructed and ideologically oriented, which can dangerously infect the collective imagination and the entire society.

The work on the album closes with the drafting of a double page of synthesis where for every stereotype identified is indicated a representative image.

Figure 2 –The album with stickers.

Digital Diary (self-reflection, detection and interpretation of the phenomenon in the daily context): the reference model is the analysis of the phenomenology and the research of visual ethnography: as a first step, there is an empirical observation of the students' reality through photographs of particularly significant images, scanning printed images, the realisation of small movies. The following step consists in the organization, cataloguing and, finally, the interpretation of their results and the upload of them on the digital platform. The goal is to increase the level of awareness of students on the visual imaginary proposed by the media in which they are involved daily.

The students have done field research in their own familiar context (city and/or family): they have observed reality and recorded their "visual experience" by identifying common characteristics and recurrent features in the images of women that have been analysed. The fact of being also the authors of the photographs they were analysing has put in place a twofold process: of subjectivation (becoming the owner) of the reality and its objectification (documentation and construction of a visual memory).

The next step consisted in the organization of the data, in the upload on the platform and adding textual indexes to the images. This is another useful data for our research because it allows us to analyse the criteria of collection/organization of images; the stereotype features in the language used and the mechanisms of translation from visual to text.

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Some "hashtags" (the adjectives associated with the images), also reflect the verbal language and the recurrent stereotyped definitions most of which demeaning the subject represented. This emphasizes the importance of the need to operate in education on the double register of visual and verbal language, students must be enriched with tools that make them able to think and express themselves over any prejudices or cliché.

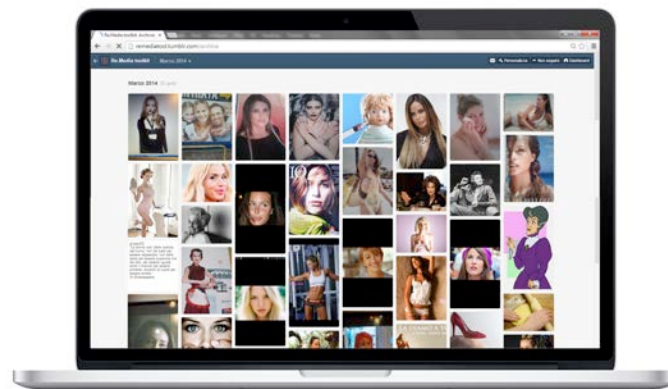*Figure 3 –The digital platform for the visual diary.*

Figure 4 –The visual archive of images on the digital diary.

Call for action (construction of new possibilities for the future) wants to be a construction experience, based on cooperation, for the definition and the sharing of new opportunities of active intervention in the widest social context. Starting from the contents of the European Parliament's motion for a Resolution on the elimination of gender stereotypes in the European Union (2012/2116 (INI)), students were invited to express an opinion on a specific relevant theme (education, advertising, tv. . .), and to propose new ways to improve.

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The goal of the Call for Action was a moment of shared reflection on issues relating to gender stereotypes expressed by the media, the sharing of what is related to "the media and culture" that are part of the European Parliament's motion for a Resolution of the European Union in 2012. Among the proposals of the students has been predominantly declared the need to enrich the education on these issues in learning contexts.

Figure 5 – Call for actions: the proposal of actions to contrast the problem.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The experience gained working at this project confirms the facilitating role of Communication Design in articulating and engaging the complexity of the issue of women's representation in the media.

Through the analogical and digital system designed, we have start a process of deconstruction of the female role models widely used by the media; we have highlighted the critical points and we have noted the urgent need to rethink the whole.

As designers of communicative artefacts, we highlighted how the female representation expressed in the media is influenced by a persuasive rhetoric and manipulative strategies that lead to the homogenisation of individuals and express the cultural backwardness of our society.

If the representation of the genders is socially constructed, as demonstrated by the theories expressed from the Social Sciences and Gender Studies, the construction of the social vision has to become a conscious process, the fruit of a critical look from promoters and designers of communication, but also of a

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greater awareness of the people receiving the cultural messages and models
transmitted.

Inside this framework, the education field has a role in which the communication
designer could give a significant contribution: the school must be able to
transmit a culture that appreciates the individual identities and differences, it
must be able to give to the new generations the necessary instruments to
observe and interpret reality - beyond the cultural models available, so it will be
possible to develop and build new opportunities of active intervention.

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