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# ICONS: NORMATIVITY AND GENDER INEQUALITIES

*abstract*

*This contribution is aimed at offering a disciplinary viewpoint on the "rules without words" for the purpose of investigating "non-linguistic" normativity from the Communication Design perspective. The intention is therefore to examine how Communication Design shapes social reality through the creation or strengthening of social, normative and tacit rules. The focus of the observation are the non-linguistic expressions, rules, that contribute to the development or maintenance of gender-based social inequalities. Specifically, the observation concerns the forms of schematic representation which permeate everyday life and have an informative and prescriptive function, characterized by a high degree of objectivity and addressed to the whole community - both men and women. The contribution inserts itself within an international framework in which the importance of gender equality is central and reaffirmed by the ONU Agenda 2030 and the Resolution of the European Parliament 2018 (2017/2210(INI)).*

**1. The Role of Visual Configurations**

The issue we wish to address concerns the role played by designed communication artifacts, which are employed in society to circulate information, data, goods, services, etc. It is these artifacts that we are going to observe in order to offer a disciplinary viewpoint on "rules without words" for the purpose of investigating so-called "non-linguistic" regulation.

The approach adopted is that of Communication Design, a discipline that "deals with giving form to content by working on the content itself and its representation methods as well as on the communication context in which it is conveyed" (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012, author's translation) and which forms the basis for the ideation and development of artifacts (Anceschi, 1992), visual systems and communication systems. This discipline, through design synthesis, "allows the transmission of content by 'embodying it' and thus making it available" (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012). This contribution is intended as a reflection on the way in which Communication Design, through its artifacts, models social reality by creating or reinforcing social, normative and tacit constraints.

To this end, we must start from an assumption, that "Communication Design has a permeating effect and is capable, though designed artifacts and systems, of guiding recipients' choices and behaviours, altering their perception of the reality in which they operate and contributing to the formation of viewpoints and opinions, to the point of taking on a role and function in sensitisation processes targeted at problems and issues." (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012, author's translation). It therefore exerts an action closely connected to the social role of individuals (Nissen, 2002).

Following these assumptions, the notion of *visual configuration* - a term referring to the organised visual forms and compositional structures at the basis of each visual communication artifact - is central to the discussion. These are configurations that constitute a system; a coherent and significant whole, capable of distinguishing itself through its qualities as a perceptual object within a densely populated flow of images. The idea, therefore, is to observe each communication artifact as a system, or a textual structure, in its semiotic sense. A structure, indeed, of varying complexity, composed of one or more visual configurations (Fontanille, 2008) that constitute the artifact's breakdown into forms and determine its expressive value, according to the rules and coordinates provided by the system itself and the relative context (Bucchetti, 2018).

Each "visual configuration" is therefore a text: the place where its signification materialises and manifests itself; that place, in other words, where two levels may be recognised and distinguished, belonging to each language, to each sign system: the level of the signifier and the level of the signified; the level of expression and the level of content.

Having delineated an initial perimeter for our discussion, we would like, then, to specify

our intended focus, namely the non-linguistic expressions (rules) that contribute to the development and maintenance of *social gender inequalities.*

In the "process of setting within the social landscape, discourse and language - in all their semantic dimensions - are load bearing (Federici & Leonardi, 2013). In particular if we consider the role played by these as amplifiers of social conventions on gender differences as well as behaviour and practice acquisition [relating to roles]" (Baule & Caratti, 2017).

The gender perspective, being a classifying concept, is therefore a key analytical category and, using this key, it is possible to make an observation of the relationships between women and men, taking gender, therefore, as a *descriptive axis* that allows the comprehension, in both diachronic and synchronic terms, of the conformation of male and female in a given society (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014; Priulla, 2013).

The overall issue, of course, involves the media system in its globality and its various forms and, for this reason, it should be underlined that each configuration, each, "visual assertion", constitutes a building block in this "construction" of social representation.

Images portraying women, using representation methods, purposes or contexts distort their purpose and debase their dignity. We know the extent to which this universe of images places a crucial, delicate and, at the same time, urgent issue at the centre of the debate on the design disciplines, its pivotal point being the expressive synthesis of images.

While attention tends to be focused primarily on certain communicative events, such as advertising, for instance, which is considered a key topic being the arena for the solutions most markedly and explicitly detrimental to the development of an egalitarian society (*Resolution of the European Parliament,* April 2018 (2017/2210(INI)); Baule & Bucchetti, 2012), in this paper we have chosen to focus our attention on certain visual configurations somewhat removed from this. Indeed, we have chosen to observe *iconic forms* that correspond to *forms of schematic representation* (Anceschi, 1992; Frutiger, 1983); forms of pictographic representation which have a prescriptive and directing function, guiding people to "do the right thing", "in the right way", and which, themselves, are developed based on normative design principles.

If language proceeds by concepts and perception by objects then there is a border area "where these two ways of proceeding meet: the area of ideograms and cryptography or, in relation to our immediate concerns, of signage and graphic styling. [...] we realise at once that we are looking at that series of signals whose task is to transmit essential information to a large number of people who speak different languages but have common sociocultural traits and have received no training to aid them in deciphering these messages» (Massironi, 1982, author's translation).

We therefore wish to focus on iconic signs (Eco, 1973) which operate within contexts of information and signage (Burke & Eve, 2010; Massironi, 1982) or within systems of artifacts intended to convey instructions for use (Mijksenaar, 1999) and to assist us in our daily activities.

Forms of iconic communication - the pictographic signs at the centre of our discussion, constructed in accordance with the rules of the theory of representation - function as "semantic chains that succeed in conveying particular and specific content and, within an economical communication, are not something other than or different to language but an aid to it; an amplification and a completion" (Massironi, 1982).

The reasons why we believe this specific category of artifacts to be of interest for the purposes of our discussion are determined by multiple factors as illustrated below.

## 2. Pictographic Signs and Communication Systems for Everyday Use

- They are signs perceived in their immediacy and for which it is important to consider the intellectual operation that generates the link between the signifier and the signified.

- They are signs that are more useful the less they involve the need to learn decoding rules, and for which a code is established in order to construct a scaffolding of iconic meanings whose interpretative rules require no learning since they are found as in "diluted" form in the users' socioculture.
- We are dealing with a category of communication artifacts that, by nature, have a normative dimension since, at content level, they must transfer rules, instructions or orders.
- They are designed in a systemic perspective, that is, as a system of coherent signs that refers to a normalised system.
- They are aimed at an extremely broad target audience or, in many cases, at the entire community, embracing a concept of message universality since "[...] seeing is a specific instance of our collective theory of mind, vision is a commons, meaning a shared resource that we can nonetheless make use of in ways that also suit our individual needs" (Mirzoeff, 2015).
- They belong to a category of messages that are recognised as objective, do not revolve around persuasive rhetorical forms (persuasive and seductive rhetoric as seen, for example, in advertising) and are, in most cases, promoted by institutional agents or, in any case, with the intention of preventing and protecting. These are messages, therefore, aimed at citizens or users of a service and not at consumers to be persuaded. For this reason, too, they require a solid foundation of trust between sender and receiver, placing recipients in a position to listen through methods that do not give rise to defensiveness against the message on their part but, rather, a lowering of barriers. They are messages that have to do with tacit knowledge; with the apparently most obvious aspects of life: those that we think of and question least (Ghisleni, 2004) and that convey information which, to some degree, falls under the domain of common sense and all implicit knowledge of a given social and cultural setting.

This set of considerations, on one hand, reinforces the idea that we are reflecting on a category of signs whose main communicative function is of an informative nature, featuring a high level of "objectivity". At the same time, our phenomenological collection highlights the way in which this set of signs translates models that include behaviours, duties, responsibilities and expectations linked to female and male identity, the subject of social expectations, thus centring the discussion around those gender roles to which women and men are encouraged to conform.

In the design world, as Vitta (Vitta, 2016, author's translation) reminds us:

> [the] concept of norms enters into the very heart of objects, establishes their measure and value based not only on their technical effectiveness but also on the entire web that bonds them, to varying extents, to the existence of the subject, whoever this may be. The norms that govern them are the same ones that organise society: customs and rituals that revolve around objects' forms, distribution and, therefore, hidden meaning are often based on concealed and secret foundations on which only anthropological thought can shed a faint light. [...] The primitive roots of our being, its secret recesses in the conscious or subconscious mind and the hierarchies of behaviours imposed by society or the group constitute a tight web of rules that develop ceaselessly with the same imperious regulatory authority exerted by technical considerations.

It is precisely by starting from our repertoire of collected cases that we intend to observe this "web" and investigate how these organised visual forms, which have acquired a normative

quality, convey messages that affirm and reiterate an iniquitous and discriminating vision of society and the roles that women play in it, based on the principle of categorisation, thus revealing the distorsions inherent in a "neutral" system which is, in reality, heavily weighted and rife with inequalities.

To categorise, as we know, "is to render discriminably different things equivalent, to group the objects and events and people around us into classes, and to respond to them in terms of their class membership rather than their uniqueness" (Bruner & Brown, 1956).
This categorisation forms the basis for the production of pictographic artifacts: "each image that contributes to forming a pictogram tends to take on the characteristics and transmit the sense of the entire category of objects to which the one in question belongs".
Normally, the image of an object has the quality of presenting that object in all its uniqueness, loaded, therefore, with those attributes that define it in its individuality. In pictograms, as Massironi (1982) reminds us, the opposite must occur: "the figure 'man' must represent all possible humans". However, if "each figure must represent 'the entire set of possible objects belonging to that class', the figure in question must no longer depict one object but the entire class of those objects. In other words, it is a concept".
We see, then, how pictographic representations of male and female figures give rise to denotative signs that refer, depending on the circumstances, to distinct classes not necessarily coherent with the denoted elements, within a vision closely connected to *male dominance* (Bourdieu, 1998), in which:

> the power of the male order stems from the fact that it is not required to justify itself: the anthropocentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to engage in discussions aimed at legitimising it. The social order functions as a vast symbolic machine designed to ratify the male dominance on which it is founded (Bourdieu, 1998, author's translation).

Indeed, prescriptive communication artifacts, through their pictographic signs, reflect a norm - the choice of denotative signs - in which the universal masculine prevails, in contrast to signs that restrict representation of women to all those cases in which their femininity must be specified in order to meet specific conditions, presumed tasks and stereotypical inclinations.
Our reflection on the nature of pictographic artifacts originates, in part, from observation of the Italian public signage system and how this reflects the condition of inequality that characterises our society today.
Hence our decision to investigate the iconic representations that characterise our everyday environment; that setting "rich in signification" (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012) in which we live and whose images influence the construction of individual and collective biographies, indirectly affecting the construction of social identity. As Yazdani and Barker underline in *Iconic Communication*, "[...] pictographic icons, notionally transcend the barriers created by language differences. Pictorial icons do not necessarily transcend the barriers between cultures".
Assuming the critical viewpoint of designers, we therefore set ourselves the task of identifying and collecting those pictographic signs found in public and private environments that we habitually attend and that typify our routines: from public signage to other wayfinding systems, pictograms featured on product packing or instruction leaflets, focusing on icons depicting people.
This initial reconnaissance operation in the field enabled us to isolate and identify topics that led to specific in-depth studies intended, on one hand, to extend our base of iconographic

**3. Normativity and Dominance: A Field Observation**

material and, on the other, to determine whether particular aspects observed in individual cases are recurrent or not.

Resuming our above-mentioned reference to "visual configuration" as text, it is interesting to note that Robustelli's reflection on verbal language appears equally applicable to visual language:

"Language makes it possible to codify thought and communicate judgements, opinions and expectations. The content and the very way in which the message is codified offer information on the conception of gender held by the person speaking - or, in our case, the designer - and can result in discrimination. Language respectful of gender differences constructs the message in such a way as to avoid its reading in terms of subordination or discrimination, through adoption of precise semantic or grammatical strategies, the former relating to the content and the latter to the use of the methods provided by the language system for recognising and specifying the existence of different genders" (Robustelli, 2015, author's translation).

**4. The Universal Masculine and Pictographic Systems**

In "*Pictograms, Icons & Signs - A guide to information graphics*" (Abdullah & Hübner, 2006), the authors stress the role of pictograms and the consequent need to be as independent of culture as possible: "Pictograms are used to warn, guide or protect and need to be immediately decipherable. They must get right to the heart of the matter by visually conveying a vital piece of information in such a way that it cannot be misunderstood, and they should therefore be internationally recognizable and independent of culture."

The observation work conducted (January-May 2019, Milan) was intended to uncover evidence of the link between pictographic representation and gender cultures. The results highlight an almost unavoidable tendency to reflect the culture and thinking of the designer - who grows up and is formed within a certain social group and with a particular culture - just as the verbal language and visual configurations studied reflect an historically placeable social situation, inevitably inducing judgements that "diminish, downsize and, ultimately, penalise the positions that women have, today, come to occupy" (Sabatini, 1987, author's translation).

The public environment was, as previously mentioned, the starting point for our observation. Signage is found in all public spaces, and generally consists of codes assimilated - or presumed to be so - by the collective. Starting with the pictographic language applied to the Italian road signage, a "neutral" system by definition since it is aimed at all citizens, both male and female, and an idealistically universal language, the first discrepancies emerge, highlighting the way in which the system is, actually, heavily weighted and loaded with implicit elements that contribute to reflecting and feeding an evident condition of gender inequality, as yet unresolved.

The prevalence of the male is clear and appears to coincide with the concept of neutral, used, in other words, when the message is addressed to the entire collective (*image 1*). The issue is accentuated by a minimal presence of figures with female characteristics who, as we will see below, appear to be linked predominantly to the sphere of mother/family or, more generally, to caring roles. The definition of "neutral masculine", drawing, once again, from the field of linguistics, indicates "uses of language that do not correspond to those of grammar but which attempt to justify themselves based on a misunderstood interpretation of sexual 'plurality'. Everyday language and the press reinforce the use of the masculine plural grammatical gender in its extensive and inclusive interpretation, in other words, to indicate male and female referents" (Robustelli, 2015).

[1] Examples from the Italian public signage system

The same occurs when a plurality of citizens is addressed through icons: figures with male characteristics are used if the message is addressed to both men and women, while, for specific cases (that is, when addressing limited groups), the figures may assume female characteristics, for example where in relation to a child and therefore in the role of mother, as seen, for example, in signage. The "unmarked masculine" is therefore identified with the bivalent function of the masculine gender, which refers both to males and to both sexes. There is also discussion of the "false neutrality" of the masculine when "what is only of man is passed off as universal" (Sabatini, 1987).

In the previous section, we introduced the concept of the *neutral masculine*. If, however, we consider the numerically inferior cases in which female and male figures are co-represented, our attention is immediately drawn to hierarchical relationships and to those parameters that lead the beneficiary of the message to perceive, in varying degrees of consciousness, a subordinate relationship of women to men.

**4.1 Hierarchies**

a) A Dimensional Relationship
The female figure is represented as dimensionally smaller than the male. One example is the "children crossing" danger sign (*image 2*), in which the little girl is depicted clearly smaller than the little boy, a difference which is emphasised by details that connote distinct age groups (such as the satchel carried by the boy and the lunch bag held by the girl). Similarly, in the sign specifically representing "elderly people crossing" (*image 3*), designed to be inclusive, we nonetheless find the same paradigm (the woman is portrayed as smaller than the man).



[2] *Children crossing* sign,
Italian public signage system



[3] *Elderly people crossing* sign,
United Kingdom

b) Topological Space
The female figure is perceived as "behind" the male. In the above-mentioned cases of the "children crossing" and "elderly people crossing" danger signs, for instance, the two figures are depicted respectively running and walking, and their positioning defines who is in front

and leading, thus assuming a role of power and responsibility (the little boy and the elderly man), and who is being led (the little girl and the elderly lady).

Another example is provided by the "lift" pictogram (*image 4*), part of the Italian public signage system. In this case, the *woman* icon is positioned in the centre, between two male figures, emphasising her need for protection, while the pictograms indicating "groups" and "groups with luggage" (designed for Zurich Airport's wayfinding system, *image 5*) use an icon representing the woman in the background, behind the male figure, due to a composition by *superimposition* in which the male pictogram is read perceptually as above the female one.



[4] *Lift* sign, Italian public signage system

[5] *Groups* and *Groups with luggage* signs, Zurich airport, Swiss

c) A Quantitative Relationship (in representation of groups)

The above examples (the Zurich Airport "groups with luggage" sign and the "lift" sign) raise another issue: that of quantification. In representation of groups, it is not unusual to find cases in which, despite both female and male citizens are being addressed, male figures have an unjustified prevalence.

d) Type of Action Performed

The question of the action represented and attributed to male and female figures brings us immediately back to the subject of the roles attributed respectively to these. This is a key issue since, as demonstrated by some of the cases cited ("children crossing" and "elderly people crossing"), the male figure assumes the role of leader - he who leads and, in some way, ensures the safety of the woman - and these are roles that deserve further exploration.

**4.2 Roles** The final aspect investigated, and one closely interrelated to the observations made, is that of the roles that are attributed to women where the communication is not universal but intentionally targeted at a female audience. The premise that we undertook to verify concerns the fixed and limited nature of the roles attributed to women in the media, in which representation of the feminine world appears simplified, devoid of depth, ineffective or even damaging. With specific reference to the field of advertising,

"women have long since been the gregarious symbol of the desire and fantasy of men, essentially bodies with no story other than the one defined by male interest; by criteria of value and disvalue in force in the patriarchal symbolic order which absorbed the female into the male and offered subordination or parity as the only possibilities for existence" (Pallotta, 2012, author's translation).

This question brings into play fundamental and far-reaching problems, such as work-life balance, the so-called glass ceiling, professional inequalities, etc.

a) Female Roles

One of the cases that led us define and closely examine this category is a pictogram that

we consider emblematic. This pictogram is positioned on the shopping trolley of a major supermarket chain and represents a female figure in the act of pushing a trolley with a child seated inside it (*image 6*). The supermarket in question is Esselunga, whose wayfinding system uses a visual language very similar to that of public signage in which the neutral masculine is prevalent. The "need" of the issuer or designer to make the icon female therefore emerges precisely from the relationship between a *child* and the act of *shopping*. A relationship that "necessarily" includes a female figure: the task of caring for house and children falls to women. The mother/carer icon recurs in other cases of co-presence in pictograms representing children. One example is found in the signage used in stations, airports and shopping centres in the proximity of escalators (*image 8*). These signs normally send a series of "warning" or "danger" messages and, in all communications, the subjects are male, even if in groups or pairs, with the exception of the sign indicating that children must be accompanied by an adult, once again consigning women to the sphere of maternity and care, tasks attributed explicitly to them. The same occurs in some road signs positioned in proximity to pedestrian areas. These signs, part of the public signage system, show, in particular, pictograms of a man walking, the "children crossing" icon (with all the considerations indicated above) and a third icon that represents a female figure pushing a baby carriage.



[6] *Accompanying children on escalators*, Esselunga supermarket, Italy



[7] *Pedestrian area* sign, Italian public signage system



[8] Safety signs on escalators, Italian public signage system

Cases of signage featuring females also include those that use the colour pink to mark parking spaces reserved - as reported in a daily newspaper article about the creation of the first pink parking spaces in the municipality of Sesto San Giovanni - for "new mothers", with babies up to 18 months, taking for granted that the role of carer falls exclusively to the mother. These parking spaces are also signed, in other localities, through application of pictographic signs representing a female figure pushing a baby carriage (*image 9*).

This issue recurs in other settings; indeed, one need only think of the presence, still prevalent in Italy, of baby changing tables in women's public toilets but not in men's. The signage on the door is clear: in the majority of cases, it depicts a woman in the act of changing the baby. This does not occur in countries more sensitive to gender issues (such as the northern European countries, which top the ranking drawn up by the *Global Gender Gap Report*), where changing tables are present, together with the relative icon, in both toilets.

Returning to the shopping centre setting, when browsing the shelves of household products, it is immediately evident that laundry detergent and washing powder packaging, in particular, features female figures, alone or with children helping with the laundry or guilty of dirtying the clean clothes. Where usage or danger warnings are given, the figures depicted are once again female.

Another emblematic case is the icon that most laundry detergent packaging displays to encourage correct conduct, namely the message "keep out of reach of children" (*image 11*).

To convey this message, a little girl is pictured reaching up to take the product in question, which is positioned on a shelf above her. The child's action reaffirms that the product is aimed at female consumers (the symbol recurs, in a similar if not identical form, on other products of different brands) and implies the role that she will assume when she grows up. The little girl is depicted wearing a short dress, with pigtails and holding a doll, a key reference that symbolises learning of the care roles that we have seen to be the female domain.



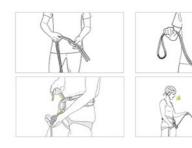[9] *Pink parking*, Avezzano, Italy   [10] *Changing baby room* sign, Italian public signage system   [11] *Keep out of reach of children*, laundry detergent package

b) Male Roles
Returning, for a moment, to the domestic cleaning product shelf, a single product stands out from the others due to the presence of male figures: a stain remover (a Nuncas product) which features some male silhouettes on the packaging (*image 12*). The point of interest, in this case, is the role attributed to the men. While women are depicted busy doing the laundry or, in some cases, as mere silhouettes, to emphasize the implicit target market in question, these men are portrayed as sporty. The product is called "Sportswear - penetrating, hygienic anti-odour action, especially for technical clothing", and the three outlines, with a relatively high level of detail, represent a skier, a cyclist and a runner engaged in their respective sports. The role attribution is accentuated by the very name of the product, which describes itself as "especially for technical clothing", and the male figures, as opposed to female figures, are not placed directly in relation to the domestic task of doing the laundry but rather to sporting activities.



[12] *Sportswear* package detail   [13] From *Petzl* instructions, climbing devices

More generally, if we observe *forms of schematic representation* and forms of pictographic representation that have a prescriptive function, aimed at guiding people to "do the right thing", and which are developed in sectors such as clothing and technical sports equipment, we can see that they are targeted at a male audience even when the product itself is not differentiated based on sex. One example of this is provided by unisex products such as climbing equipment (harnesses, safety devices, etc.) in which the images relating to usage

instructions (displayed on labels, tags, websites, etc.) predominantly feature male figures. The female figure is represented only when, on the subject of safety devices, the practice of performing a "partner check" is described, and her role is the passive one of "making safe" the man who, in contrast, plays the "active" role (*image 13*).

In the same way, if we were to perform a more detailed analysis of the forms of representation relating to "emergency instructions", displayed, for instance, in passenger aircraft, we would see that these reflect the phenomenon equally well. The cases presented here are structured according to a narrative sequence based on a visual language that is more illustrative than pictographic, and therefore more detailed and closer to the referent. In the three cases, the actions that must be carried out in the event of an emergency, during which passengers must play an active and collaborative role, are explained through a sequence of images.

In the first, used by the company Ryanair, the man has an active role (he is wearing an oxygen mask and life jacket and is operating the emergency exit) while the female figure is depicted in the passive act of sliding down the emergency slide. Another case that merits our attention is that of Lufthansa, in which the subject is a female flight attendant portrayed in the active role of assisting a boy in putting on his oxygen mask and life jacket but, again, the operation "requiring strength" - turning the handle to open the door - is carried out by a man. The female image reappears in the narration in order to show that children must be carried on the emergency slide, and therefore her task once again relates to caring for others. In the final case presented (SAS), the man is once again opening the door, assuming the role of hero and guardian, while the woman is depicted exclusively to draw attention to the requirement to remove high-heeled shoes before using the slide, thus also endowing her with a frivolous quality.

The cases we have presented demonstrate the way in which visual configurations that correspond to forms of *pictographic representation* - whose task is to convey messages aimed in equal measure at female and male citizens - reflect, and implicitly feed, gender inequalities, with regard to both expression and content. The repertoire of signs collected highlights the extent to which each artifact form is permeated by what Melandri defines as "protection of masculinity's universal neutrality, capable of avoiding the unveiling of male partiality. The white, heterosexual, able man becomes the absolute signifier of the full and free social subject. He thinks of himself and is thought of as the 'only prototype of the human species'; he is the citizen *par excellence* while the others are 'minorities' " (Melandri, 2011, author's translation). Linguistic structures, too (Violi, 1986), underline the extent to which man is used as a measure of things: in the Italian language, the masculine form is used as a universal neutral, disguising the divide between men and women and thus reproducing a social order (Toffanin, 2013; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017), and the same occurs in semi-symbolic and figurative systems.

This is even more significant if we consider that an icon is "always a presentification of the represented, past and the future: temporal dynamics do not affect it, meaning that what is represented is always here and now, and inferences as to temporal attributes concern the cognitive interaction of the perceived data, not the immediate experience" (Massironi, 1982, author's translation).

We are, therefore, dealing with a designed repertoire in close relation to the 'aspects of the culture' of a society; aspects that, as Johan Galtung maintains, feed the elements that contribute to 'cultural violence'. It is a repertoire that directs our reflection to the close interweaving of artifactual devices and "tools that nourish gender violence" (Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017).

If it is true that the *schematic* visual language on which we are reflecting is not "something different to language" but rather an amplification of or a complement to it (Massironi, 1982), then the very content of the message provides information on the thinking of the designer,

**5. Non-Linguistic Rules and Design Challenges**

who implements an interpretation process and, through *embodiment*, translates a "'certain idea' of *gender*". Hence the social responsibility role of designers, who must be aware of their design choices relating to form, content and communication structure; choices that "necessarily imply manipulative rules that guide sensitivities and orientations" (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012).

We may, then, assert that non-linguistic rules contribute to the maintenance and development of social inequalities and that, also on the basis of this field of study, a challenge has emerged for the design disciplines: thanks to the approach introduced by gender research (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014), these disciplines may now reorient their own areas of research and design experimentation, thus contributing to the promotion of non-linguistic rules in order to further the 'social good'.

This observation of ours must, therefore, be placed at the centre of a design challenge and a disciplinary reflection whose focus is on the "construction" of sign systems that organise society. To design communication artifacts that are fair and respectful of gender differences is to adopt a critical gaze permitting formulation of the message "in such a way as to avoid its reading in terms of subordination or discrimination" (Robustelli, 2015, author's translation). A message capable of expressing a condition of equality and, in the long term, promoting the social good through representation methods that reflect the plurality of the recipients to whom they are addressed.

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