

# Page Composing and Lettering Games: Experimentation in Italy in the 1930s

SARAH BONCIARELLI

**Abstract:** The objective of this article is to analyze how or in what ways the most advanced visual experiments centred on “the book” as an object in the period between 1900 and 1930 in Italy, in particular in relation to the development of middlebrow literature. The article’s hypothesis is that the revolution brought about by Futurism soon touched on literature intended for a middlebrow reading public, attracted and interested by the paratextual presentation of the book and its physical aspects. This article focuses in particular on changes in page layout and on lettering games in paratextuality, to give a precise idea of how strong the thrust of Futurism was and how book design affected the visual culture of the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy.

**Contributor:** Sarah Bonciarelli is a postdoctoral fellow at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. She is involved in the research programme MDRN ([www.mdrn.be](http://www.mdrn.be)) with the project *The Book in Italy between 1900 and 1950: Paratextual elements and typographic techniques in middlebrow literature*. She holds a PhD in Textual Criticism and is a member of the Permanent European Observatory on Reading at Siena University. Her main interests are Italian literature, semiotics and book history. She has lectured at the Universidad de Cantabria, Università di Viterbo, Università di Siena, Università di Perugia, Università per Stranieri di Perugia, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Université Catholique de Louvain.

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«Une page est une image.  
Elle donne une impression totale.»  
Paul Valery, 1927

Graphic and typographical experimentations, generally considered as being innovative if applied to rare books, special and prestige editions destined for an elite reading public and collectors, are of great interest if one observes how these types were used in the paratextuality of popular literature, given its widespread circulation and accessibility. The objective of this article is to analyse how the most advanced visual experiments centred on “the book” as an object in the period between 1900 and 1930 in Italy, in particular in relation to the development of middlebrow literature. The revolution brought about by Futurism soon touched on literature intended for a middlebrow reading public, attracted to and interested in the paratextual presentation of the book and its physical aspects.

“Middlebrow literature” is a genre or a group of literary genres that developed in the first half of the twentieth century. The concept of middlebrow first spread at the end of the 1920s and refers to visual art, but soon extended to literature as well. Nicola Humble offers a specific definition in *The Feminine middlebrow novel from 1920s to*

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1950s of the middlebrow as an hybrid literary form that includes several genres, from the country novel to the family saga and to women's fiction, and from children's literature to the western novel. This type of literature reaches a broad public, with a medium literacy level, composed of women, members of the middleclass, and young readers. Definitions of middlebrow usually insist on the following elements: (1) middlebrow literature is oriented towards the communication of clearly organized content rather than towards formal experiment, (2) middlebrow literature is more oriented towards emotional identification than towards critical-analytical thinking, and (3) middlebrow literature is positioned as a literature that is more accessible and less elitist than highbrow literature (Humble 2001).

There are two main reasons for this interest in the typographical and paratextual aspects of literature: first, the ability of the material aspects of the book to say something about the nature and characteristics of the reading public; and second, the layout of the page, whether an internal page or a book cover, corresponds to the ways in which textual material is organised. Books are multilateral and complex objects, comprising, as well as their contents, an important number of paratextual items such as their covers, typographical embellishments, illustrations, frontispiece, over sleeves, and book sizes. These features play an integral role in constructing the reading process and indicate how the reader approaches the book, the book series, and the publisher.

Genette has defined paratext as those things in a published work that accompany the text: "More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold." It is "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (Genette 1987: 1). In this sense, the efficacy of graphic and typographic techniques to modify paratextuality, and the way in which a book presents itself, becomes the ability not just to attract, but also to select and to create a public.

We could say that the graphic space delimits the physical and semantic boundaries of the page and that there is also a corresponding narrative configuration (Zaganelli 2008). Just as word and image organization can delimit not only technical spaces but also the reader's visual and interpretative ones, so lettering choices, page layout, book format, and type of paper should all be seen as pertinent semiotic features. The cover is an especially important semiotic element, because it can be considered as an anticipation, but also as a group of instructions that are given to the reader. These instructions can be useful to understand how the narrative text can be explored by the reader and the way in which he has to approach the text.

## **1. The graphic and typographical thrust of Futurism.**

Futurism brought a new approach to the material aspects of books. Marinetti showed his intention to arrive at a high level of recognisability of the serial publication of literary works through the use of standard formats (mainly pocket format), modern

book covers and a page layout that would allow for easy reading. The turning point in Marinetti's rejection of a traditional concept of the book is to be found in *Parole in libertà* (1913):

I am starting a typographic revolution, directed above all against the idiotic, sick-making conception of the old-fashioned poetry book, with its hand-made paper, its sixteenth-century style, decorated with galleons, Minervas, Apollos, great initials, flourishes, and mythological vegetables, with claps, mottoes, and Roman numerals. The book must be the Futuristic expression of our futurist thought. Better: my revolution is against among other things the so-called typographic harmony of the page, which is in complete opposition to the flow of style which the page allows. We will, if need be, use 3 or 4 different colors and 20 different typefaces on the same page. For example: italic for a series of similar and swift sensations, bold for the imitation of heavy tones, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 gives an example of a traditional and old-fashioned book that matches with the Marinetti description. Futurism wanted to depart from this kind of book typical of the end of the 1800s, where the covers were not colored, the font was uniform and the typographical mark was the only decorative element.



**Fig. 1:** G.G. Belli, *Sonetti Romaneschi* by Luigi Morandi. Città di Castello: Lapi editore, 1889.

With the *Parole in libertà* one witnesses a revolution that started off with a transformation of the page. The need to adapt the page layout to the style of literary communication gained ground. When the text was aimed at a broader audience, then it was necessary also to modify the way the book was presented to the public through its paratextual elements. Colourful, energetic and changing paratextual elements became

<sup>1</sup> My translation.

elements to conquer the attention of a reader who had become, according to the definition of Petrucci, a postmodern reader (Petrucci 1997).

The publishing format of books was one of the specific communicative strategy objectives of Marinetti's Futurism. Adopting a cheap book format that was concise and easily recognisable (and, as has already been noted, rejecting unusual formats or production techniques that risk hindering distribution and use) and choosing book covers with bright and essential features were all part of an overall strategy. This practice aimed for the efficient and widespread circulation of books as finished products (Van den Bossche 2011).

The idea inherited by middlebrow literature from the avant-garde was that books should be introduced to the reader in a simple accessible manner and should be communicative, by applying the most advanced advertising techniques and all the newest communication strategies. This is especially interesting if one bears in mind that culture up to that moment had been the preserve of an elite which had a monopoly on the circulation of "highbrow" contents. Futurism opened up culture for everyone, a mass culture that had to reach an ever-increasing number of people by means of the tools of simplicity and clarity. As Marjorie Perloff underlines in her book *The Futurist Moment*, Futurism and, more in general, all the Avant-garde understood the importance and the central role of material features in the presentation of a book (Perloff 2003).

According to Perloff, the starting point was the manifesto *Pittura e scultura futuriste* (1914) by Boccioni, who claimed that the picture is no longer an exterior scene, a stage for the depiction of a fact, and that is not an irradiating architectural structure in which the artist, rather than the object, form a central core. Viceversa, picture is the emotive, architectural environment which creates sensation and completely involves the observer (Perloff 2003). The innovative energy that the Futurism movement brought to the book's paratextual elements derived in large part from the admiration and imitation of advertising techniques, to which the whole movement looked with interest. There was a transition of styles and techniques from the mass advertising, to Futurist art, to the popular publishing sector. The observation of advertisements between the '20s and the '30s suggests that the world of advertising was probably the first to understand this need for a different approach to visual communication that could allow clarity, effective communication, phatic function, and the ability to capture attention. Later, these strategies affected the publishing sector in general as well. For example, the use of bold titles, limited edition capital letters, and aphorisms can be traced back to the various communist posters and flyers of Marx and Engels, although a more recent source for Futurist design is the language of late nineteenth-century advertising (Perloff 2003).

## 2. Page Layout.

Graphic innovations moved from the worlds of the avant-garde and advertising to the world of publishing, concentrating on the book. Middlebrow literature operated as a medium between artistic practices and mass production techniques, which had an influence on the relationship of people to the artistic experiments and to typographical

innovation thanks to the role played by paratextual elements such as book covers. The publishers chose covers to present middlebrow novels in particular according to the supposed profile of the readers. In this way they outlined a specific audience and created an image of the audience. Paratextuality became a crucial part of publishing strategies and also an index used to construct a specific image and profile of the author.

The strategy of the publishers towards the choice of the covers directed to a popular and middlebrow literature was dual: on the one hand the covers were used as a communication and expanded instrument to imitate the mass communication that was emergent in that historical period; on the other hand the paratextual instruments were a way to gain major prestige, using the visual codes that were coming from the world of the avant-garde, that in their turn were inspired by advertising styles, techniques, and atmospheres.

Besides the choice of format, which had to be concise, cheap and accessible to all, the innovations concerned page layout and lettering experiments. In the visual organisation of the page, titles and subtitles became of crucial importance, not just because of their linguistic construction, but also because of the way they were positioned within the page. This was seen as being a fundamental mechanism for implementing the phatic function of attracting audience attention.

The construction and positioning of a title is related to the way we perceive an image even when this image is made up of the characters of a word. Our reading habits bring us to perceive, first, abstract forms, and then concrete ones or qualifications. First of all we apprehend outlines, lines, and plastic characteristics, and then the shapes that these lines form as well as their details. We tend to give a certain reading bias to the visual process (Dehaene 2009). Obviously, this does not mean that our eyes move from one point to another: in fact they make very rapid movements, jumping from one part to the other of the image. Nevertheless, in the reconstruction that takes place in our mind, we tend to make sense of what we have seen. This is also due to the devices (plastic and figurative) that from within the visual text can orient us towards a certain reading rather than another. In western culture the prevalent type of reading goes from top to bottom and from left to right (Thürlemann 1982).

In *The new typography*, Jan Tschichold, referring to the new visual approach, wrote that:

Reading presupposes eye movement. The New Typography so designs text matter that the eye is led from one word and one groups of words to the next. So a logical organization of the text is needed, through the use of different type-sizes, weights, placing in relation to space, colour, etc. (Tschichold, 1925, p. 73)

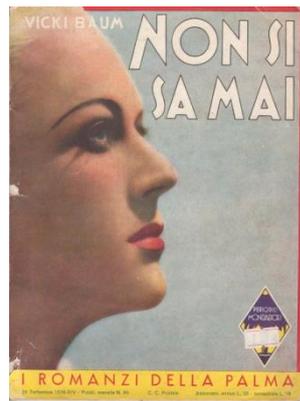
The images that adhere to our reading tendencies or even encourage them are perceived as being the least tiring for the reader, whereas the ones that break this rule make the reading process more uneven, but probably capture the attention of the beholder.

Futurist pages, in fact, do not always follow a narrative sequence and keep to eye movement, but choose a simultaneous poly-expressiveness in which graphic effects and figures intersect. Hence, the reader simultaneously perceives the morphological and expressive feature of the visual layout, and later begins to disassemble the contents and to more accurately decipher the single components.

The way in which the title is placed within the page, for example, can determine the linear or simultaneous reading path that the reader must follow. To use Greimasian terms, it can be said that the plastic<sup>2</sup> and topological organisation of the page gained importance, together with the capacity to give direction to spaces, to frame a particular aspect, in this case the title, so as to guide the reading process, and to focus attention on a particular aspect. Figures 2 and 3 show two examples of strategic positioning of the title on the cover page. These are two middlebrow novels straddling the 1930s. In the first case (Fig.2) the title obtains a central space, seeming almost to want to escape the page and reach out to the reader. In the case of Fig. 3, although the title is not exactly at the centre, it nonetheless manages to stand out, because of the woman's face being completely turned in its direction. Readers are thus guided in how to direct their reading by the woman's face, and this facilitates a top-down and right-to-left reading process.



**Fig.2:** Pitigrilli, *L'esperimento di Pott*.  
Milano: Sonzogno, 1936.



**Fig. 3:** Vicki Baum, *Non si sa mai*.  
Milano: Mondadori, 1929.

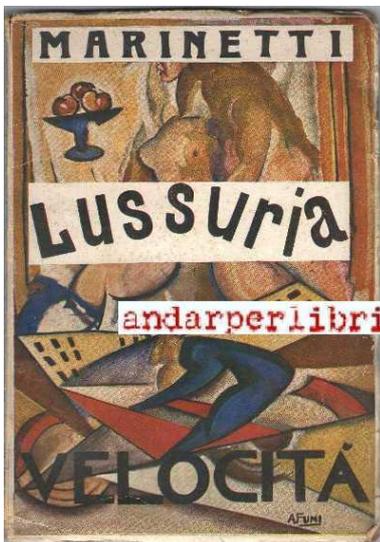
In both cases there is a break with the canon<sup>3</sup> and the tradition that characterised the visual layout of the printed page and, in particular, book covers up to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the title was usually positioned in a central position in the page, but still discretely and without a graphic setting that determined the predominance of this element on the others. In the first cover this occurs due to the

<sup>2</sup> Plastic and figurative levels are two elements of analysis traditionally taken into account by the semiotic of images [Greimas 1984]. The plastic one has to do with shapes and colors, the figurative with objects of the world. Each one of them has its own expression and content plane. Within the analysis of objects the plastic level is used to consider the plastic development of an object: shapes and colors, but also consistency, texture, weight, warmth—all perceptual features that depends on sensible syntaxes [Fontanille 2004].

<sup>3</sup> The expression “canon” refers to the traditional book at the end of the nineteenth century, characterized by the presence of very simple and sober colors and decorations, and uniformity of fonts.

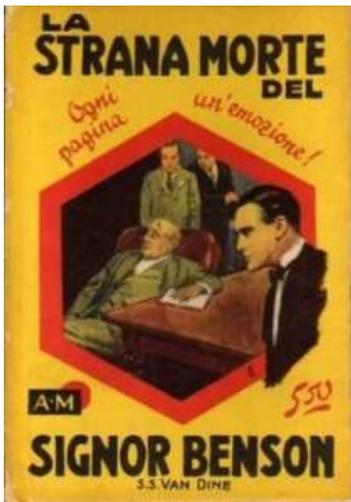
absolute centrality and predominance of the title over the rest of the items that compose the page, whereas in the second case this is due to the integrated position of the verbal and visual features created precisely by the direction of the (woman's) glance. As in a rebus or in a puzzle-solving game, it is the combination between images and words that builds the meaning of the page and it is up to the reader, through a process of visual collaboration and cooperation, to construct the meaning of what is being seen.

Another trend recognizable in the paratexts of middlebrow literature, and directly attributable to Futurist influence, was that the very titles on the covers were broken up and became fragmented. This separation corresponded to a distinction of contents which can be compared to textual listing and pigeonholing of different meanings. The objective was one of either greater clarity or of fragmenting the reader's attention, and it was pursued through this strategy. Marinetti's book covers were emblematic as regards this. In *Lussuria velocità* (Fig. 4) the cover was organised according to these criteria, almost as if the intention was to keep the different contents separate from each other.



**Fig.4:** Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Lussuria velocità*.  
Milano: Modernissima Casa Editrice Italiana, 1921.

Fragmentation can be obtained through, for example, the use of bold characters, inserting spaces, differentiating fonts, or visually separating portions of text. We even find this tendency in popular fiction. In *La strana morte del Sig. Benson* (Fig. 5), the title is split into two different parts within the same page where there are several different fonts, both italic and bold. In this case, the title is placed externally, acting almost as a frame for the image, the murder scene, which has the role of attracting the reader's attention, communicating the idea of mystery and crime. The tendency that developed, above all in the 1930s thriller, was to show the crime scene with a certain number of figurative details, thereby outlining the plot with a few brushstrokes and encouraging readers to buy the book.



**Fig. 5:** S.S. Van Dine, *La strana morte del Sig. Benson*  
Bemporad, 1935.

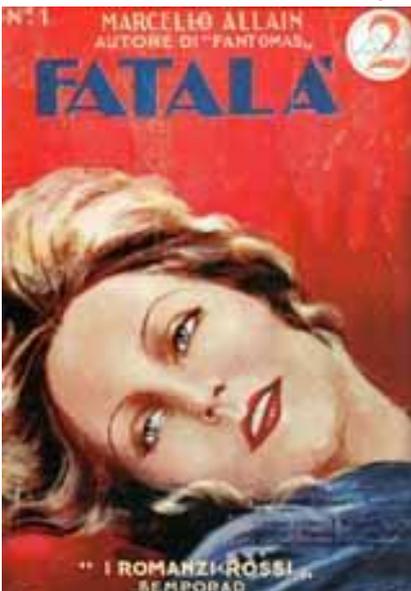
Besides the positioning of various features (including the titles) and text fragmentation, the chromatic component too played an important role in page layout architecture. According to Paul Valery, «Une page est une image. Elle donne un impression totale, présente un bloc ou un système de blocs et de strates, de noirs et de blancs, une tache de figure et d'intensité plus ou moins heureuse. Cette deuxième manière de voir, non plus successive et linéaire et progressive comme la lecture, mais immédiate et simultanée, permet de rapprocher la typographie de l'architecture, comme la lecture aurait pu tout à l'heure faire songer à la musique mélodique et à tous les arts qui épousent le temps »<sup>4</sup> (Valery 1927). The very effective idea that Valery transmits here is that of the page corresponding to an architectural creation, to which, of course, colours too belong. Building and setting out a page corresponds to building a house, where both structural solidity (which is necessary for proper operation and for the very survival of the whole) and aesthetic function coexist. Early twentieth-century book covers became more coloured than they had ever been before that time. They were luminous and bright, and often had images which recall the characteristics of photographs. If up until that moment books had been characterised by restrained, pale colours, then the page now changed aspect and started to become coloured. We already find in Giacomo Balla's *Colour Manifesto* some initial features that anticipated and probably inspired this tendency, which is more a graphic than a publishing one. Balla wrote in 1918 that "Given the existence of photography and the cinema, the pictorial reproduction of reality no longer interests anyone, nor is it capable of interesting anyone any longer; 1) In the hotchpotch of avant-garde trends, whether they be semi futurist or futurist, colour dominates. Colour has to dominate as it is typically privileged by the Italian genre; 2) the lack of powerful hues in colours and the cultural weight of all Nordic painting, eternally

<sup>4</sup> "A page is an image. It gives a general impression, presents a unity or a system of parts and layers, of black and white, a blur/stain of more or less appropriate design and intensity. This point of view, no longer subsequent and progressive like reading, but immediate and simultaneous, gives us the idea of the similarity between typography and architecture, just as reading could be compared to melodic music and to all the arts that involve time" (my translation).

bog down art, keeping it stuck as grey, funereal, static, monkish, wooden, pessimistic, neutral or effeminately graceful and indecisive; 3) Italian Futurist painting, being a colour explosion and having to be increasingly so, cannot help but be very merry, audacious, airy, electrically soap-washed, dynamic, violent, interventionist [...]”<sup>5</sup> Printing skills have always been connected with stylistic trends in graphic arts and in this case it is even possible to find that the graphic changes which we witness in the 1920s and 1930s fully comply with Balla’s declarations in the October 1918 *Manifesto*. Firstly, the choice of colours meets the criteria of both the new painting and printing styles. Red seems to dominate the scene, as can be noted even in the images present in the iconography and covers of popular literature. The choice of red is not casual. Tschichold commented that

In the New Typography color is used functionally, i.e. the physiological effect peculiar to each color is used to decrease or increase the importance of a block of type, a photograph, or whatever. White for example, has the effect of reflecting light, it shines. Red comes forward, it seems closer to the reader than any other color, including white. [...] The combination of black-red is of course not the only possibility [...] but is often chosen because of its greater intensity. (Tschichold, 1925: 73)

Hence, red or a combination of red and black were consciously and deliberately chosen (cf. Fig. 2, the Pitigrilli cover) as colours thought to catch the attention of a large public that was often distracted by many other visual and graphic stimuli arising for example from other media. And it is exactly this competition with other media that profoundly changed literature even in its paratextual and graphic features. See the cover in Fig.6, in which the illustration is very similar to a photograph.



**Fig.6:** Marcello Allain, *Fatalà*. Bemporad Edizioni.

<sup>5</sup> Giacomo Balla, *Manifesto del colore*, 1918. My translation.

This tendency to produce illustrations with noticeably photographic characteristics began in the 1920s and '30s, but increasingly characterises the nature of popular literature even in later years. Julian Murphet suggests that “literature's sudden self-recognition as a medium [...] had more to do with its metaphoric ability to absorb material qualities from the more substantial media around it; and this is really what we mean when we say that the modernist text its medially self-aware” (Murphet, 2009: 5). Murphet gives several effective examples of the remediation of literature, starting with photography. With the invention of photography, there was a rise of illustrated periodicals and consequently of illustrated books. The change also concerned the typology of the illustrations, referring more and more to pictures. This happened because the tastes of the audience changed every time they got in contact with new kinds of media. The publisher, with the application of new photomechanical processes to the printing industry, found a new way to illustrate the covers of the books in order to attract in a new way the attention of the public.

The covers selected here as illustrations clearly show this tendency towards choosing colours (amongst which intense red hardly ever seems to be missing) and illustrations which clearly evoke the world of photography (Fig.6). They thus attracted a reading public that used for pleasure, not just books, but also magazines and cinema films.

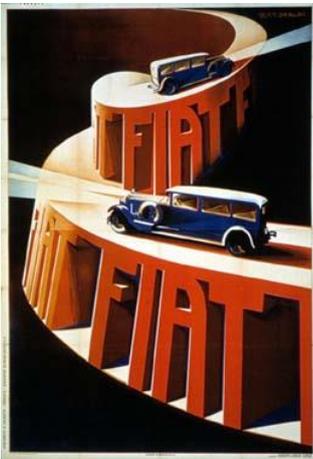
### 3. Lettering games.

Visual experimentation also involved lettering choices and centred on at least three different aspects: 1) dynamic effects created through modulation effects; 2) a multiplicity of letter sizes; and 3) the coexistence and combination of completely different fonts (italics, bold etc.). Futurism was the first instance in which innovative use was made of lettering. In Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb* letters are combined to form the cover image and create (apparently casually) arches and geometric shapes (Fig. 7).



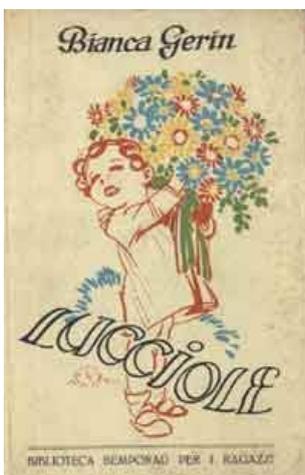
Fig.7: F.T.Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tumb*.

Single letters express a sound meaning that is reflected in the size and variety of the graphic choices. The artistic use of fonts, the particular shape that a sentence or word could assume, were stylistics that were reused on many occasions not just in graphic art, in particular for advertising, but also in literature and, as we shall see, in popular literature as well. The objective that was to be attained through these modulation effects was to generate dynamism and to capture the attention of the reading public. The letters were not only set out linearly, but were set out in movement as it were, thereby acquiring dynamism. It is possible to find different-sized letters, set out to form a word or a wavy title. This phenomenon, even before books, belonged to the world of advertising. See Fig.8, which shows a Fiat advertising poster produced by Giuseppe Riccobaldi del Bava.



**Fig. 8:** *Fiat Ad*, 1928.

In this printed announcement, letters form a shape, presumably a road along which one sees moving cars being driven. Dynamism is sometimes created on book covers only through varying dimensions and position of letters. As regards this, see the example of the cover of Bianca Gerin's, *Lucciole* (Fig. 9).



**Fig.9:** Bianca Gerin, *Lucciole*, 1921.

**Source:** [www.letteraturadimentica.it](http://www.letteraturadimentica.it)

Firstly, the author's name, the title and the publisher's details are all set out in fonts that are completely different from each other. Secondly, the title has its own dynamism, and is set out almost in descent, albeit always following the natural reading direction of the individual. Even if type legibility is normally of fundamental importance, it can sometimes be sacrificed in the name of greater visual and graphic expressiveness. If, on the one hand, in the body of the text of a novel or an essay, the choice has to be set out in such a way as to achieve maximum attention in terms of readability, on the other hand, in a book title or in a piece of advertising the expressive component can be predominant.

A trend that began with Futurism, and that we find again in middlebrow literature, is the coexistence on the same page of completely different fonts, thereby respecting the desire expressed by Marinetti. We even see italics brought together with non-italics, as well as the use of bold to express concepts and ideas that are different compared to the rest of the page, or to highlight features such as the title. See for example the cover of the children's novel by "Vamba" (Luigi Bertelli), *La Storia di un naso*, Bemporad, 1935 (Fig.10), in which there is an ensemble of different fonts, with different colours, on a page that is divided up into two parts, thereby creating two reading spaces that are completely different.



**Fig.10:** Vamba, *La storia di un naso*, Bemporad, 1935.

**Source:** [www.letteraturadimentica.it](http://www.letteraturadimentica.it)

It can be hypothesised, drawing on the studies of the American semiologist Steven Skaggs, that the communicative effectiveness of the book graphic and paratextual elements is inevitably linked to their expressiveness. This in turn is closely connected to the habits developed by the reader in relation to the visual culture of the period. According to this approach, in fact, the communicative and expressive capacity of the paratext is not to be found in its technical characteristics, but in the experience of whoever reads and observes it. The experience or database of knowledges that readers acquired in relation to visual elements they encountered between the '20s and the '30s, helped them to recognise and appreciate the presence of visual experiments from time to time. When, in the bookshops, they began to find books featuring graphical

innovations, they welcomed and accepted these positively, since they corresponded to what we could define as a “visual culture” that was typical of the time period in which those readers were living. At the same time, the paratextuality was an important way to contribute to the constitution of this specific culture of the period,

To conclude, if we frame these observations about paratextuality in a broader discussion about literature and literary criticism, we can observe how the trend of the covers to refer constantly to avant-garde and visual experiments was linked to a constant desire to reach highbrow cultural models. This desire was strongly evident also in the verbal text, where there was an intension to reach a high and cultured dimension, thanks to the imitation of tested techniques, like those found in advertising, art and cinematography. These devices and literary strategies were focused on the obtainment of a visual, figurative and intermedial language in the text. For example, the use of a figurative literary style was coming from a sophisticated literary tradition and, referring to the visual culture was engaging a competition with other media, trying to capture the attention of the public.

Middlebrow literature was reproducing techniques already used in highbrow literature, trying to reach a high level of culture and to escape from predefined borders and constrictions. In this context, the covers were just visible signs of this constant movement and exchange between different cultural and literary levels. In general is it possible to recognize in popular literature the ability to absorb styles and languages and to make them more accessible and familiar for the public. In this sense middlebrow literature, also if we consider the paratextual elements, was at the beginning of the XX century, one of the instruments to make the public more accustomed to experimental literary and cultural forms. For this reason we can say that the dialogue between literature and other discourses makes us aware of the need to look at literary objects, discourses and practices outside the canon and beyond “high” literature. So-called “middlebrow” literature is a case in point. Assigning itself different roles (aesthetic, didactic, entertaining), middlebrow writing ultimately grounds its legitimacy on the claim to make “high” cultural forms accessible to a wider readership (Baetens, 2013).

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