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AESTHETICS
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DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2021
JUNE 08.09.10.11, SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

Abstract to figurative, and everything in between: visual design approaches and linguistic codes of a traditional form of animated product

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Abstract | Animated artefacts are demanding and successful tools to face articulated topics concisely by embracing different codes and style of representation. Among different animation techniques, stop-motion, the oldest one rooted in George Méliès trick-films in late '800AD, has recently been recognised as a valid and immediate pedagogic tool since the production process of a stop-motion film is easier to understand and handle, and animated objects are tactilely manipulated. This paper describes theoretical premises, teaching approaches and design outputs of a stop-motion workshop held in Alghero (Sardinia, Italy) in September 2019. At the end of the workshop students were expected to produce a short film about a famous tragic event related to Sardinian prisons, choosing appropriate visual styles and languages. Artefacts are very different and reveal the technique as a communication design tool highly effective through both figurative and abstract stylistic approaches, and both descriptive and metaphoric narrative languages.

KEYWORDS | STOP-MOTION ANIMATION, VISUAL DESIGN, PEDAGOGY, CODES OF REPRESENTATION, NARRATIVE LANGUAGES

1. Introduction: Theoretical assumptions

In the last few decades animated artefacts have been recognised as precious design products, very effective in answering communication and pedagogical challenges of contemporary society due to their being informative, pervasive, intrinsically capable of crossing cultural and generational boundaries, and versatile from both visual and linguistic standpoints.¹ As for any form of fictional product and communication tool, indeed, an “animated film is clearly a product of its time”, conceived, produced and released into a cultural scenario, with an existing technology, delivering certain messages for a specific target (Milligan, 2016, p.3). Animated artefacts have dealt with a broad spectrum of contents, ranging from social to psychological issues, with informative and pedagogical objectives. Not by chance animation and motion design artefacts have been successfully chosen as visual communication tools to deal with scientific contents, staging different codes of representation according to the targeted audience: from the fictional scientific anime “cells at work!” (2018), to the informative motion graphics produced by the Australian communication design agency “Animate Your Science”.

Animated films, furthermore, hold a pedagogical function as socializers, teach social values and moral lessons (Giroux, 1999; King, et al., 2010), and deeply influence “children’s culture and their everyday lives” (Giroux, p.2). In 1973 Bob Heyman acknowledged entertainment as an educational force and coined the term “edutainment”, today largely used to address media culture power to educate and regulate meanings and values. Even when animated narratives take place in fictional worlds and stage imaginary events, animation, better than any other fictional medium, inspires opinions, stretches the imagination, creates space for new experimentations and has a critical impact.

“The dynamic of Animation art lies in the narrative structure of non-existing world, while the events that take place are imaginary as well. The creator constructs his own world for taking aim at projecting his opinion, criticizing and developing his beliefs through the symbols and abstraction.” (Mouri, 2014, p. 26)

The strength of animation language, indeed, is its extraordinary ability to evoke meanings using symbols encoded in a collective imagery, and its dimension of abstraction. In this paper we will distinguish visual codes and narrative languages by applying concepts stemming from the theory of representation, media literacy, narratology and semiotics and we’ll briefly explain how we engage them for analytical purposes.

¹To deepen concepts of pervasiveness, versatility and communication qualities applied to the design of animated artefacts, we suggest consulting Laura Marks’ text *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), Nicolò Ceccarelli and Carlo Turri’s book *Progettazione in movimento* (2010), Suzanne Buchan’s book *Pervasive Animation* (2013).

Animated films stage different languages and visual codes and allow dealing with articulated and complex issues in both symbolic and abstract ways. Animated visual codes, therefore, do not just “merely reflect a world outside the bounds of the text, but [can] rewrite and reconstruct them” (Khun, 1985, p.48) as they play with shapes, forms, proportion, manipulate elements and provide an altered and modified representation of images that in first place aim at making an event or an action understandable and intelligible. The fluidity of animated visual codes makes the medium particularly suited as a model for analysing the production process of audio-visual artefacts engaging different codes of representation, narrative languages, design approaches, and eliciting unique synesthetic experiences. The ‘unit of measure’ that we will use to interpret visual aspects of kinetic products stems from the classification of motion graphic products’ visual categories theorised by two American scholars: Bruce Block (2008) and Matt Woolman (2004), who, after identifying those categories (shape, spatiality, volume, colour, surface, movement, complexity), evaluated them according to a dualistic approach and a logic of binary opposition. Abstraction is the visual parameter that we will investigate, and, by following mentioned logic of binary opposition between two extremes, an animated artefact will be defined as more abstract (or simply abstract) or less abstract (or figurative). In animation the concept of abstraction refers to a type of filmic style that experiment with shapes, colours, narration. Mohamed Fauzi Naeim defines abstract animation in this way:

“Abstract animation forgoes story plot and character development but focuses on gesture, imageries and techniques. The images exhibited do not necessarily have to be consistent with each other, though there is a rhythmic pattern (...) In abstract animation, what the author’s trying to say is more important than the actual execution of the animation itself.” (Fauzi Naeim, 2017, p.1)

Since animated artefacts move between abstract and figurative visual representations, the Italian researcher Carlo Turri (2010) recognised in the medium a natural flexibility and the ability of staging different levels of abstraction using signs and symbols already encoded in the collective imagery. The flexibility interests both visual codes and the narrative language at the diegetic level. The literary theory of *semiotics* says that language is a code that uses *signifiers* to produce meanings (the *signified*). Kinetic artefacts, and especially animation, plays with these symbolic elements at several levels starting from the structure of the storyline. Even by exploring and evaluating this further parameter we need a dualistic approach: if visual elements can be either abstract or figurative, narrative language can be either literal/descriptive or metaphoric, and these two extremes can successfully embrace either an abstract or figurative code of representation.

Stemming from these premises, we will, in the next section, describe the outputs of a stop-motion animation workshop held in Alghero (Sardinia, Italy) in September 2019, that engaged design students in experimenting with stop-motion animation as a communication design tool by using different visual styles and narrative languages.

2. The stop-motion workshop

The didactic experience outlined in this paper is an opportunity to verify the relationship between animation and communication by virtue of different languages and visual codes. The workshop was meant for architecture students with no previous knowledge of animation principles, software and techniques. The twelve participants came from either a bachelor's degree in Architecture or from a master's degree in Architecture-curriculum design, and most of them were local with the exception of an Erasmus student from the Czech Republic. The workshop aimed to combine three key aspects:

- The development of a critical thinking on how to use stop-motion animation language and visual codes in the more general framework of project communication;
- The transmission of practical knowledge through a set of exercises and an assigned project work;
- The acquisition of media literacy notions by using appropriate terminology and conventions, and by understanding and creating audio-visual texts.

2.1 Stop-motion animation technique

Stop motion is the oldest animation technique and rooted in George Méliès random discovery of camera-trick in late '800AD (Harryhausen & Dalton, 2008). Méliès realized that if the camera stopped shooting and then restarted after objects on stage were moved or replaced, an illusion of apparitions, disappearances and transformations was created. However, Méliès didn't see the potential of this discovery, and the first films using objects (toys) were made by James Stuart Balckton and Albert Edward Smith in 1897 (Maselli, 2018). This animation technique involves capturing images of:

“something (...) manipulated, moved incrementally by hand, whether it's a puppet, a pile of sand, some clay, or paper cut-out. Another increment and another image. When the images are strung together at an appropriate speed, the viewer is fooled into thinking something has moved in a continual manner.” (Purves, 2008, p.9)

But this movement is an illusion since it happens between the frames, and what the spectator really sees is what occurs when the camera takes the shot, i.e. when everything is still and nothing happens. Stop-Motion equally embraces photography, computer graphics, performing arts, sculpture, knowledge of anatomy of moving bodies and video editing. To make a stop-motion video we need a camera and an object to be photographed, following a logic of movement, direction and transformation. Stop-motion animated products are also powerful, expressive communication tools that open up possibilities of experimenting and experiencing languages and codes of representation while approaching material objects visually, for the audience, and tactilely, for the animator (Maselli, 2019). Stop motion is remarkably versatile in several ways as it can be used for many subjects, with every sort of materials and objects (plasticine, silicone, toys, legos, household objects), it can use

figurative or abstract codes of representations and, as any other form of animated artefact, it can narrate in either linear or non-linear ways. Stop-motion has been used for pedagogic purposes since the material qualities of the medium makes the production process easier to understand and to handle thanks to the direct manipulation of objects, puppets or flat figures. Stop-motion animation allows us to:

- Learn tactilely how animation principles work by applying them to real objects;
- Interact with materials and manipulate them by hand, also improving craft skills;
- Work in groups. Since stop-motion requires many skills and inclinations, from artistic and craftsmanship talent to organizational skills, collaboration and teamwork are essential.

During the workshop, students had to figure out how to practice working with others and to contribute to a team while improving their individual talents.

2.2 Workshop syllabus

During the five days workshop students had different activities, both practical and theoretical:

- They were provided with a theoretical overview about 120 years of technological and aesthetic evolution of stop-motion animation technique;
- They learned the twelve animation principles theorized by Disney's animators Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas (1981);
- They learned how to use *Dragonframe*, the most widely used software for stop-motion animation, utilised in large production studios such as Laika entertainment and Aardman studios;
- They worked on three exercises in cut-out (the bouncing ball, the swinging chain, the walking stickman) to practice with the technique, learn the software and understand the main animation principles;
- They produced a stop-motion short film using objects, paper, fabric, photographs and any other kind of flat element shot on a flat two-dimensional background. Students were presented with two possible narratives concerning famous events that occurred in the twentieth century and related to Sardinian prisons: the tragic story of the "bandit poet" Bachisio Falconi,² and the murder of Maria Goretti, killed at the age of twelve by Alessandro Serenelli.³

²Bachisio Falconi, knew as Bachis, lived in the first half of the twentieth century and is remembered as the "poet bandit". In 1936, after the accidental death of a young policeman from Thiesi, Giuseppe Ferrandu, Bachisio was unfairly accused of murder and sentenced to 30 years, which he served only in part because in 1943 he escaped from Tramariglio prison. He was killed six years later, on December 1949, with a gunshot. He became famous

Students worked in teams and had to follow the main phases of an audio-visual production process:

- Pre-production: subject development, visual style definition, storyboard, puppets, objects, and backgrounds creation;
- Production: camera setting, animation process;
- Post-production: video-editing, compositing, sound effects.

3. Animated outputs

Outputs approach the selected story by treating the diegetic language and the visual codes in completely different ways, either descriptive or metaphorical as the first, either abstract or figurative as the former. By documenting the process of each produced artefact, we will now describe the different materials, visual codes and narrative languages students worked with in order to complete the assignment.

3.1 Maria Goretti and Alessandro Serenelli #1

The video tells the story of Maria Goretti raped and killed by Alessandro Serenelli and focuses on the events experienced by the male character. It was produced in silhouette animation and students used flat paper monochromatic silhouettes, props and background. The style of representation is abstract as human figures and the props' shape and appearance are extremely simplified although staged characters, objects, events and actions are perfectly recognisable. The narrative structure is linear, the language descriptive and the representation and interpretation of the events literal. The plot is divided into ten scenes that follow the chronological order of narrated events:

1. Alessandro is welcomed by the Goretti family;
2. While working in the fields, Alessandro realizes that he is in love with Maria;
3. Maria refuses Alessandro;
4. Murder of Maria;

because, while in hiding, he wrote poetry and short stories and, after his death, his wife collected them in a book: "Sardinian song composed for the great misfortune".

³ In July 1902, eighteen-year-old Alessandro Serenelli stabbed twelve-year-old Maria Goretti with an awl, causing her injuries that led to her death. The day of the murder, Alessandro tried to rape Maria, but, rejected, he got mad and began to hit her violently. Sentenced to prison, already in 1910 he repented and said he had dreamed of Maria in Paradise forgiving him while collecting flowers. From 1919 he was transferred to Sardinia and in the following ten years he passed from the prison in Olbia, Nuoro and Alghero. He was released from prison in 1929 after 27 years. In 1934 he asked Assunta, Maria's mother, to be forgiven for his sin and she granted her forgiveness. In June 1950 pope Pius XII canonized Maria. Serenelli died in May 1970, at the age of 87 years old, in a convent in Macerata.

5. Alessandro exposed to public judgment and called “monster”;
6. Alessandro taken to prison;
7. Alessandro dreams of Maria forgiving him and collecting flowers;
8. Alessandro is released;
9. Alessandro obtains forgiveness from Assunta for killing her daughter;
10. Alessandro obtains beatification and ascends to paradise.

Actions performed by flat characters have an immediate and literal meaning, from the homicide to the moment of forgiveness. Nevertheless, students designed a few symbolic elements:

- A beating heart symbolically represents Alessandro’s love for Maria;
- Alessandro’s sanctification process after being forgiven by Maria’s mother is visually represented as the flat puppet ascending to paradise where Maria is waiting for him. Sarcastically students placed some kinky and provocative scenes at the end of the video after the credits and justified them as a sort of humoristic making of the story.

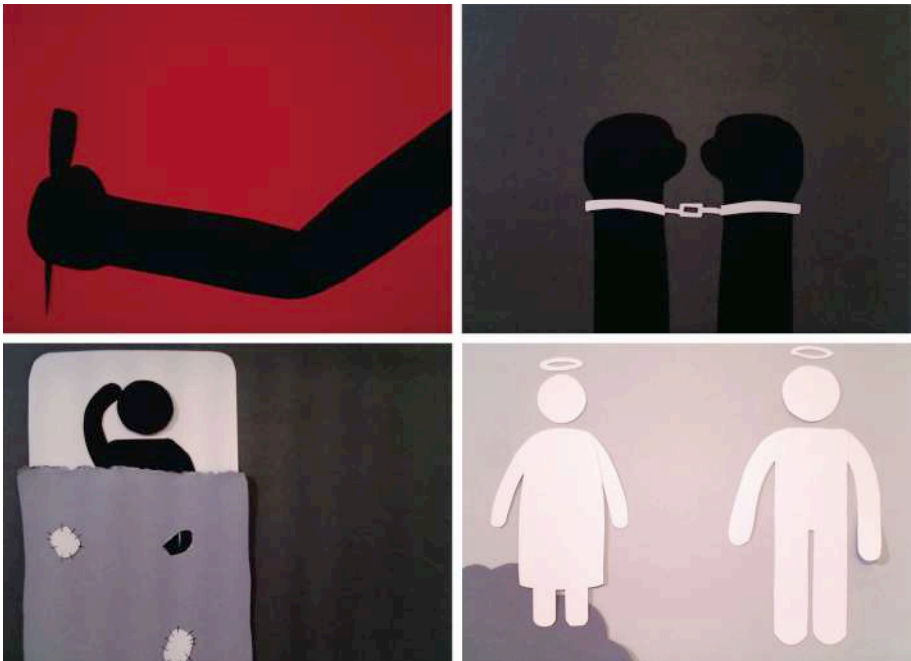


Figure 1. Still Frames | Andrea Tomasi, Sara Casu, Ilaria Prinzi | Alghero Summer School | September 2019.

3.2 Maria Goretti and Alessandro Serenelli #2

The video stages the story of Maria Goretti in a slightly different way compared to the previous. Flat elements in cut-out (pieces of paper, fabric, wool and photographs) and live actors captured frame by frame in pixilation were used. The visual code of representation is figurative, and the language is both descriptive and metaphorical since chronologically defined events are narrated either literally (e.g. the murder and raping attempting scenes) or by evoking symbolic elements. Metaphorical scenarios are shown in the first two scenes respectively staging Alessandro released from prison after dreaming that Maria forgives him, and flames arguably symbolizing Alessandro's atoned sin. The video has four main scenes all temporally placed, even though they don't follow a chronological order:

11. First scene (1927): Alessandro dreams of Maria who forgives him and gets released from prison. In this scene paper cuttings, cotton and fabric strings were used and the narrative language is predominantly metaphorical.
12. Second scene: Red and yellow fabric flames burn on a black background symbolically representing Alessandro's sin.
13. Third scene (1902): Alessandro attempts to rape Maria and kills her after rejecting him. This scene is made in pixilation with real performers (students themselves) literally simulating the action.
14. Fourth scene (1929): Beatification process of Maria begins. This last scene is made in cut-out with flat paper elements and makes use of metaphorical language.



Figure 2. Still Frames | Lara Marras, Carla Sau, Francesca Tomasi, Maurizio Zichi | Alghero Summer School | September 2019.

3.3 Maria Goretti and Alessandro Serenelli #3 (*black and white*)

The last video about Maria Goretti's murder and beatification approaches the narrative in a different way. The video "black and white" has a highly abstract visual style and a cryptic metaphoric narrative language. The video doesn't stage any event of the original storyline and focuses on the atavistic conflict between good and evil by representing these two abstracts and opposing concepts through two colours (black and white) and geometrical elements looping fighting. There are no scene changes, and passages from white to black - and vice versa - are harmonic and continuous sequences. A few symbols already encoded in the collective imagery clearly representing the addressed contraposition can be identified.

The video opening stages a collection of evocative and opposing words: innocent and guilty, angel and devil, heaven and hell. The conceptual contrast is emphasised by the colour: negative words (*guilty, devil, hell*) have a white fill on a black background, positive ones (*innocent, angel, heaven*) are in black on a white background. Right after the sequence of words, black squares appear and invade the white background by translating from right to left and from bottom to top of the scene - and vice versa - until they make the stage completely black. On the black background white squares beat and shape a cross. Squares' translation restarts but with inverted colours: white squares cross and invade the black background until it turns white. At this point on the white background an unshaped black figure appears and flatly moved onto the stage until eating a white filled square with black strokes and exploding. In the final sequence black and white backgrounds flash and a lonely square appears and shyly beats as a symbol that the fight is far from ending.

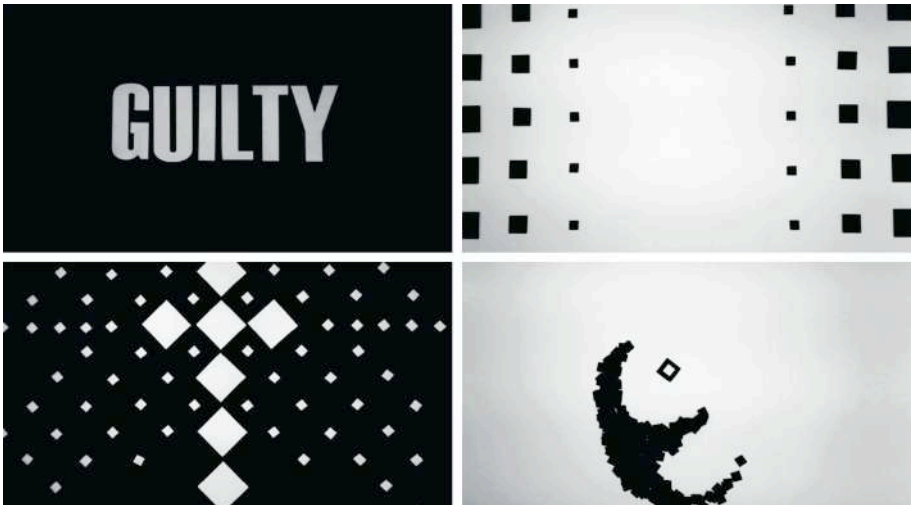


Figure 3. Still Frames | Francesco Secchi, Fulvio Serio, Ondrej Simon | Alghero Summer School | September 2019.

3.4 Bachisio Falconi “poet bandit” #4 (*su bagalliu*)

The last artefact focuses on the story of the poet Bachisio. The video is produced with both three-dimensional and flat objects, and in pixilation.⁴ The narrative is metaphorical as the action turns around a symbolic element, luggage. This symbolic representation of Bachisio’s story uses both figurative and abstract visual elements. The video is a one-scene shot in which luggage is the protagonist of diverse actions. In the first part, printed objects and words and pieces of paper enter the luggage. Typologies of objects and words progressively change, and viewers observe the passage from images of everyday objects and positive words in Sardinian dialect such as *paxi* (peace), *pesau* (childhood), *trabadhu* (job), to images of weapons, chains, handcuffs and negative words, such as *morri* (death), *monstru* (monster), *dialu* (devil), to crumpled paper arguably symbolizing confusion and corruption. When the luggage is full, it suddenly closes. Interestingly the more the elements filling the luggage get negative, the less saturated the scene becomes, until colours are completely missing, and the composition is in black and white. In the second part of the video, the luggage is closed and a human hand - shot in pixilation - re-opens and cleans it from the crumpled and confused pieces of paper on both the outside and the inside. The only left image represents the printed cover of Bachisio’s poetry book that he wrote while in hiding. The cleaning hand embraces a positive function and arguably pictures the hand of Bachisio’s wife, who collected his verses and stories after his death and made a book from them.



Figure 4. Still Frames | Glelia Cossu, Paola Dore | Alghero Summer School | September 2019.

⁴ Pixilation is a stop motion technique in which live actors are shot frame-by-frame. After the picture is taken actors slightly move until the movement is complete.

3.5 Narrative languages and visual codes of representation in comparison

By observing the above-described outputs, several themes and aspects related to narrative language and visual codes emerged. Students' efforts, focus and creativity extraordinarily leapt out in the preproduction phase. At this stage they were challenged to scan stories, to select main elements, events and actions, to think out a plot by summarizing those narratives, to use either a metaphoric linguistic register or a descriptive one, and to design a visual style of representation. In all outputs, even when students remained tied to a figurative style of representation and a descriptive language, a relevant number of symbols and levels of interpretation are detectable. Metaphoric language is traceable both in singular elements built and captured by the camera, and in the general tone of each video.

The theme of the atavistic conflict between good and evil seems to be frequently near the surface of each artefact. The conflict is symbolized by chromatic choices and geometric components in the video "black and white" or by flames and flat flowers frequently appearing in the second afore-described video.

Another theme engaged by those narratives concerns the fairness of the penal system. The last described artefact silently criticises it and emphasises Bachisio's talent as a poet and the love of his wife who fights for clearing Bachisio's name, socially rehabilitating his life, and spreading his poetry. The first two described videos, on the other hand, address the stiffness and justice of the penal system by staging Alessandro's release from prison as something that occurred immediately after he affirmed dreaming about Maria forgiving his guilt. Historically speaking Alessandro was released in 1929, after 27 years of jail, although he declared himself sorry and he had already regretted his sin in 1910.

A topic critically approached by students concerns the spiritual dimension of the victim and sinner in the catholic religion, too. In the first described artefact, students synthetically, ironically, and critically staged the act of forgiveness as something easy to accomplish since Alessandro, after regretting his crime, was forgiven and easily socially rehabilitated. In the narrative, indeed, the sinner is placed side by side to the victim in heaven. Animation technique and narrative language reveal their critical impact by building powerful "metaphors that can lead to an overall lightening of contents" (Turri, 2010, p.30). In the briefly mentioned last two scenes, indeed, students staged two sarcastic but meaningful actions: (1) the cross turns upside down; (2) the scene of forgiveness turns into a scene of revenge and Assunta, Maria's mother, comically blows Alessandro's head.

Visual elements, as well, were meticulously designed during the preproduction phase and as illustrated, they stick with different levels of abstraction, consistent with the tone and the language of representation: flat monochromatic geometric figures, simplified flat silhouettes, cuttings of printed paper, three-dimensional objects and real actors photographed in pixilation.

4. Conclusion and evaluation

David Kolb, in 1984, theorized the effectiveness of the experiential learning model, and today this approach is widely recognised and validated specially to teach practical disciplines and skills. As a practice and material filmmaking activity stop-motion has already been explored and used in different educational fields such as architecture and design thinking. Architecture students have approached stop-motion for sketching and communicating design experiences (Zarin, et al., 2012; Al-Saati, et al., 2011). Stop motion has been used also as a tool for “motion design thinking” processes.

The described workshop experience engages stop-motion at a more basic level. The technique was explored as a way to develop communication in an immediate way regardless of the outcome, a fictional short-animated artefact in this case. As a result of the students' experience, they thought that they could use the technique in their future work since it was revealed to be a very demanding but successful design tool quick to learn and practice and useful to understand and apply animation principles and to experiment with visual styles and codes or representation. The technical quality in terms of smoothness and visual details is quite rough, since students worked in a hurry with a new software and a new technique, but the workshop successfully demonstrated that different registers of narrative languages and visual codes can be understood, used and tested with this technique even in a short time. Furthermore, students' manual ability, imagination and creativity were engaged in several manners and produced noteworthy outputs.

In conclusion this pedagogical experiment confirmed stop-motion animated products as highly effective for the representation of storylines through different stylistic approaches and visual codes. The workshop, on the other hand, failed to provide feedback about a possible relationship between students' improving their knowledge of the technique and their taste in specific languages or stylistic conventions with cultural and demographic characteristics, as eleven out of twelve students had the same studies, cultural and geographic background, analogous degree levels and approximate age.

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Acknowledgements: We want to thank the students who participated in the workshop, who showed interest, creativity and effort in learning a new technique in a short amount of time. Thanks also to Prof. Nicolò Ceccarelli and Dr. Marco Sironi for organizing the Neo-Local Design Summer School 2019 and the described workshop.