

Preschool Children’s Audio–Visual Contents: Comparing Value, Educational and Narrative Approaches*

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Abstract

With this contribution, we would like to examine some audio–visual narratives dedicated to the preschool age group (0–6 years). Our analysis is based on an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that draws on Film and Media Studies, dwelling on particular choices of audio–visual language, their educational impact, and their repercussion in an experiential key, also with some references to the most recent cognitive and neuro–filmological proposals. The article is divided into two parts, consequential and dependent. First, in addition to proposing a stylistic and content comparison of the cases examined and highlighting the messages conveyed, we focus on identifying two modes of genre production and their consequent functionality in proposing the educational and narrative approaches. On the one hand, we consider the television series, with its episodic development and its design for daily passage in the television schedule (we deal, in particular, with *Bing* and *Tumble Leaf*). This type of animation is functional in fostering the identification of the target audience in behavioural patterns linked to everyday life cases. On the other hand, we analyse two animated films, which are true ‘cinematographic’ texts (*Room on the Broom*; *The Snail and the Whale*), designed, however, for television and which respond more to the need to convey educational values of a general and human–identity nature. Secondly, we propose to analyse the same products in the light of Torben Grodal’s filmological theory, which provides interesting readings of a cognitive nature and which seems to us to help explain on which dynamics the objects examined can ‘act’ on young viewers.

Keywords: Animation; Children; Tv Series; Functional Bundle; Simulation.

* The authors conceived and developed the entire article framework together. However, Valentina Domenici is the author of paragraphs 1, 2, and 4, and Lorenzo Denicolai is the author of paragraphs 3, 5, 6, and 7.

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1 Introduction

This article analyses and compares two different models of audio-visual productions dedicated to children¹: that of television seriality, with the analysis of two successful products such as *Bing* (2014–2021) and *Tumble Leaf* (2013–2019), and that of the filmic text starting from two case studies, the animated medium-length films *Room on the Broom* (2012) and *The Snail and the Whale* (2019), to highlight the main differences in terms of both the form and use of audio-visual language, as well as the themes and values conveyed, emphasising the educational impact of these narratives and their possible fallout in terms of experience and the acquisition of new skills.

The analysis mainly draws on the methodological contribution offered by Media Studies and Film Studies, with some references to cognitive and Neuro-filmology proposals that the international literature has advanced in recent years. In particular, on the one hand, we intend to propose an aesthetic-formal analysis of how language and audio-visual discourse can generate effectual productions for the target audience concerned; on the other hand, we want to offer a quick reading of the same products, starting, in particular, from Torben Grodal's (1999, 2006, 2009) reflections in the field of Film Studies, and from the cognitive contribution that his theories have made to the same category of studies. The wide production of audio-visual narratives for children offers an equally wide choice of examining objects. In this article, we have chosen to dwell on four products — as mentioned, two TV series and two medium-length films — which we consider to be exemplary of both a declination of the language and dynamics of cinematographic and audio-visual production and the field of application (from theory to practice, therefore) of the Grodal's considerations. The aim is to provide an introductory overview of contemporary audio-visual productions for children and to hypothesise their relative effectiveness on the target audience. This hypothesis will eventually have to be corroborated in the field and will be the subject of future in-depth studies.

2 Media Offerings for Children: Some Trends in Today's Children's Television

The pervasive presence and increasing use of digital media have significantly changed children's everyday experiences in ways that are not yet fully understood and very different from context to context (Rideout et al. 2003, Livingstone et al. 2020), to the extent that they influence, albeit indirectly, the approach and outlook of young children on the outside world and others. Children, even of preschool age, are nowadays exposed to a wide variety of television shows and narrative products of different genres specifically written and designed for children, but also to devices such as smartphones and tablets that kids use with an ongoing frequency (Di Bari 2019). Among the various media devices available, the 'old' home television screen, in particular, has gradually been joined by many other devices (first and foremost smartphones) with which programmes and media content can be followed from early childhood onwards, through habits and modes of use that are increasingly disengaged from precise locations, times or routines of the day, according to a non-linear and therefore unpredictable logic (Lotz 2014). As with adult audiences, with the target of children there has been a qualitative widening of the offer and genres, with platforms and educational contents specifically designed for an audience of minors and divided by age group (Cordero and Tirocchi, 2020) and, in many cases, by learning objectives. These programmes generally aim to promote a positive development of children, both at the cognitive-intellectual level (also by teaching specific knowledge such as the alphabet or vocabulary) and about the sphere of emotional and social needs (Fisch 2014). From this point of view, many of today's children's programmes represent compelling examples of informal education (Antoniazzi 2016), being media products that offer models and patterns of behaviour designed to teach children new skills, or to enrich and improve existing ones (Fisch 2014), taking into account the fact that even the youngest children are never entirely passive users, but subjects that negotiate and share values with adults and the peer group (Cordero and Tirocchi 2020). The drive for active audience involvement and interactivity is, not surprisingly, a central feature of many television programmes and content designed for children; this is a relevant indicator of the quality of a product (Metastasio 2002), along with the ability to teach while entertaining. The strong trend towards generally more excellent targeting and, consequently, differentiation of audiences (Lotz 2014) has also led, in parallel, to a focus on the specific needs and interests of even the youngest users. For the target audience of minors, this has also

1. We mainly consider the 0–6 system, although the media films examined are also suitable for the primary school age group.

implied, in a particular way, growing attention and sensitivity concerning the contents, styles, and languages of the programmes offered, to build an outstanding balance between the more explicitly educational component and entertainment component. Within the so-called Children's Television, which has seen an enormous development of thematic channels in recent years, programmes tend to be generally divided into two macro-typologies, which correspond to two different formats: programmes whose structure relies predominantly on narrative and those with more descriptive/explanatory content (Linebarger et al. 2017). While the latter format explicitly aims to convey specific knowledge through an often didactic approach (using, for example, in the case of programmes designed for pre-schoolers, actions such as showing the differences between objects and elements or explaining cause/effect links), narrative products, on the other hand, despite having similar aims, make use of a set of conventions (such as the presence of a specific setting, the presentation of characters, objectives, and resolutions), in order to convey content in line with the specific age group. Narrative programmes similarly use strategies to create and enhance audience involvement and attention (Linebarger et al. 2017), among which there can be, for example, the presence of the characters' glance into the camera or asking questions directly to the viewers, even inviting them to the repetition of gestures and actions.

There are also many children's programmes that are, in fact, hybrid products, in which the narrative component, albeit weak, is fundamental for the construction of roles and characters with a key function; this is the case, for example, of animated series aimed at preschool children, which effectively interweave the episodic structure of serial narration with the pedagogical approach typical of children's television programmes. The Children's Television offer also includes, of course, filmic narratives, which are now increasingly designed to be enjoyed on streaming platforms and aimed at promoting the development of pro-social behaviour and thus often focus on the themes of friendship and emotions, the value of sociability and cooperation.

3 Watching with Knowledge: Children's TV Production and the *Functional Bundle*

With the advancement of neuroscientific research, studies on cinema and audio-visual media have also begun to question the cognitive involvement during viewing a film. This experience is regarded as an act involving the entire organism and not just a part of it or a particular sensory apparatus (D'Aloia and Eugeni 2014). The many studies conducted in the neuro-cognitive field concerning the cinema experience have contributed to highlighting certain cognitive functions related to the fruition of the moving image, offering different overviews and interpretations but all aimed at demonstrating how watching a film makes us live embodied experiences, with a solid emotional and affective involvement and with a pregnant dynamic of identification with the story enjoyed and with its protagonists (among the many, and with different disciplinary and interpretative inclinations, we refer to Carocci 2018, D'Aloia and Eugeni 2014, Gallese and Guerra 2012, 2014, 2015, Hasson et al. 2008, Tikka 2008). In this direction and in light of our hypothesis, it seems interesting to approach the analysis of the audio-visual materials examined also from the perspective of Torben Grodal (2009), whose studies offer valuable models for reasoning and investigating both the products considered and their use by infants.

Concerning Grodal's filmological theory, which is part of his broader discourse that traces the film back to a manifestation of nature capable of providing stimuli and *affordances* (Eugeni 2014), here we will focus mainly on the concept of *functional bundles* (Grodal 2009) and the related dynamics of identification with the narrated story. This action can have implications in terms of cognition and acquisition of skills. The scholar's reasoning is based on the hypothesis that children's minds are not a 'blank slate' but that they "have an innate mental architecture and partly innate patterns of development" and that "their biology to provide a framework for, and impose certain constraints on, the kinds of films that fascinate them" (Grodal 2009: 27). Similarly, in the field of cognitive anthropology, Ellen Dissanayake (2007) hypothesises that *Homo Sapiens* is born with a baggage of "predispositions and aptitudes" that helps him to enter the social and cultural context; this inheritance seems to be fundamental to having an interest in certain stimuli, also of an aesthetic nature, which the author already glimpses in the mother-infant interaction: at this moment, the adult uses specific mimic, rhythmic, gestural, vocal and movement acts to respond to the infant's physiological needs. For Dissanayake, such actions involve a series of 'abstract components' (*repetition, dynamic variation, exaggeration, manipulation*) that are

nevertheless basic to any artistic manifestation; these components are typically used by every medium — both human and technological and communicative — to attract attention and to keep the emotion high. It seems that Grodal's *functional bundles* work on the same level: they give security to the viewer, allowing the young viewer to enjoy the narrative and audio-visual object through his identification with the characters living the narrated story.² For the author, *functional bundles* are “mental units that are invented, mind-grabbing, attention-grabbing, and widely communicated” (Grodal 2009: 33). It is the union of elements associated with functions that may relate to a narrative action, a character, or an object and that make such a bundle easily recognisable and useful for the enjoyment of the story: for example, Grodal, speaking of children's stories, proposes that the union of the characteristics of ‘old age’, ‘ugliness’ and an object such as a magic wand constitute the bundle of the ‘wicked witch’ (Grodal 2009). We want to emphasise two aspects: on the one hand, the *functional bundle* constitutes a core of values and content that can take on a universal value and be imitated; on the other hand, this universality can, however, coexist with variables and modifications that depend on the cultural context in which the bundles are shaped. Two clarifications are necessary to explain this. Grodal considers the *functional bundle* comparable to a tool that is exceptionally functional to the point of being imitated and spread globally, such as the knife or the wheel. It is, therefore, a widespread object that is imitated and imitated for its primary function. This aspect means that it is present in many contexts; at the same time, while retaining its basic structure (which makes it, indeed, imitated and imitable), it can be shaped according to the specifics of the individual cultural group. In practice, *functional bundles* “perform easy-to-grasp functions in relation to quasi-universal needs and mental models” (Grodal 2009: 34). To compare the *functional bundle* to a tool (and thus to a ‘thing’) is to be able to consider it similar to any other artifact (and/or technology) with which we deal daily: if we read this condition from the perspective of enactivist theories, we could thus consider the *functional bundle* an agent with which man can initiate a mutually modifying relationship, including a cognitive one.³ The second clarification is that a bundle can vary because the cultural and social conditions in which the needs and preferences of the audience who benefit from these narratives emerge have changed. In other words, there is a “functional innovation” that occurs when

new ways are invented to satisfy existing preferences; this occurred, for example, with the invention of film and interactive media, or of new genres that satisfied existing emotional preferences. Change may also be due to influence and interference, as when certain products travel in time or space and therefore create a new context for the products they meet at other locations (Grodal 2009: 39).

4 Narrative Models and Educational Effects Compared: Animated Series and Films for Pre-Schoolers

In recent years, animated series have made their mark in the media offerings for children, especially those aimed at preschool-age audiences; these are, as has been said, narratives that aim in a simple but effective manner to enrich children's imaginations while also teaching valuable patterns of behaviour relating to everyday life. Two series in particular, among the numerous contemporary international productions, have been chosen as case studies: *Bing* (2014–2021) and *Tumble Leaf* (2013–2019), and compared with two products with a cinematic slant, the animated medium-length films *Room on the Broom* (2012) and *The Snail and the Whale* (2019). These products are emblematic of two recurring models among audio-visual narratives for preschoolers⁴: the serial typology, often with a more explicitly educational slant, and the filmic model, which instead emphasises the representation of universal values and characters with whom one can identify. The first two series mentioned, *Bing* and *Tumble Leaf*, are specifically aimed at a preschool audience and designed

2. In a similar vein, Calabrese and Conti (2020) emphasise the existence of schemata and narrative scripts — different depending on the geographical context of reference — that would be able to correspond to behavioural tendencies relating to a person's sense of independence and interdependence concerning the social group of which he or she is a part. See also Cometa (2023).
3. We cannot explore this issue further here, which moves from the field of anthropology and cognitive archaeology of Lambros Malafouris's Material Engagement Theory (2013), reinterpreted and declined in an *ecomedia* and mediocognitive key by Parisi (2019) and which offers an enactive interpretation of the human-technology relationship.
4. These are evidently also different production models. On the production aspects of different television formats for children see, among others, Steemers (2010).

to be enjoyed, from a cross-media perspective, on different devices and streaming platforms. While *Bing* is composed of short episodes lasting seven to eight minutes, which can be easily enjoyed by an audience under three years of age, *Tumble Leaf* is aimed at a slightly older target audience, being built on an episodic narrative structure lasting about twenty minutes, and with tighter and more complex dialogues to follow. Both series have animals as protagonists, whose adventures and small everyday obstacles are recounted and overcome at the end of each episode; the episodic structure has a recurring scheme involving a brief initial introduction entrusted to a narrative voice, a main theme (often a problem to be solved and, in the case of *Tumble Leaf*, a key-object), and an ending with an educational message for the young viewers. The two series have many points of originality and interest, both on a thematic and linguistic-formal level, but above all on educational proposals. At the same time, both series aim to offer virtuous schemes of behaviour, especially in the relationship with the other, and to teach in each episode new skills linked to concrete everyday life situations of children. Therefore, as in many other serial products for children, these narratives focus on transmitting ideas and values and teaching skills and competencies such as problem-solving (Fisch 2014). In *Bing*, the main narrative line guiding each episode stages children's most frequent everyday experiences. Depending on their age, kids can more or less recognise and easily follow them by drawing lessons from them. It is not a question of abstract morals from which to draw a final lesson but rather of explanations and demonstrations that can have a practical effect and enable children to acquire a set of basic skills valuable for their age group. In *Tumble Leaf*, on the other hand, the setting in an imaginary land does not allow for the staging of realistic experiences in a domestic context of everyday life. The story unfolds from an object that is both concrete and symbolic — e.g., a torch, a kite, a magnifying glass, and so on — which becomes the pivot of the narrative and the starting point for a series of new discoveries by the protagonists. It is precisely the fascination with discovery and knowledge that is at the centre of this series, which emphasises the value of play and the actions of doing, trying, and failing (Johnson 2018) while also bringing out the feelings of fear and attraction towards the unknown that are typical of children. Also, in this case, in addition to the emotional involvement and the drive to participation, accentuated by the presence of a narrator's voice, what is relevant is the fallout on a specifically experiential level, which often distinguishes, in general, serial animations from purely cinematographic ones. While the former, which tend to be enjoyed daily and thus accompany children's daily routines, emphasise the pedagogical aspect and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, animated films designed for children generally focus on the representation of stories and characters that can, above all, excite by transmitting models and values (Rosa 2022). We can highlight these aspects in the second two narratives examined: *Room on the Broom* and *The Snail and the Whale*, two animated medium-length films based on the illustrated children's books by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler.

Although they have some elements in common with the previously mentioned animated series — for instance, the presence of a narrator who leads the young viewers through the developments of the narration and the thoughts of the characters, who are also animals — the two films follow a different educational criterion, which mainly calls into question the capacity, typical of the media and media narratives, to construct identities and model moral values (Giroux 2000), and which is also expressed through different use of audio-visual language.

In the case of animated products, in particular, it has often been pointed out how they can have an impact on children's attitudes, values, and beliefs (Lacroix 2004, Giroux 2000) and how the construction of the characters and the dynamics that bind them is fundamental in this. As *Room on the Broom* and *The Snail and the Whale* are purely cinematic products, the approach towards the viewers is less didactic. They are not addressed directly (as is the case, for example, in *Tumble Leaf*) through an explicitly pedagogical posture. However, characters who deal with the great themes of man are put on stage, such as fear of the unknown, the value of solidarity and gratitude, and the importance of friendship and collaboration.

The Witch protagonist of *Room on the Broom* overturns the figure of the conventionally evil witch to instead put into practice the values of solidarity and inclusion, welcoming diversity and reminding us of the importance of respecting others. The character of the whale in the film *The Snail and the Whale* goes in the same direction, whose function is also to encourage people to overcome their limitations and to have faith in their own possibilities. Like many contemporary animated products aimed at children, these works are intended to promote a better understanding of the other and lead to greater empathy (Jarvis 2012), highlighting the fact that the experience of loving and wanting to emulate (or not) certain characters can transform the entire viewing

experience into an opportunity for growth, learning and change (Hoggan and Cranton 2015).⁵

Compared to the previously mentioned TV series, in these films, there is no explicit reference to practical experiences and problems that children may encounter in their everyday lives, but what emerges above all is the desire to convey emotions by exploiting the expressive potential of the language of film.

As has also recently been pointed out (Gichuki et al. 2023), in fact, the latter can enhance certain aspects of the narrative of animated films: elements proper to real-life cinema such as camera movements, the construction of the filmic frame, angles, can amplify the meanings and emotions of the animated film, and in some cases strengthen the viewer's identification with the protagonists of the stories.

In both *Room on the Broom* and *The Snail and the Whale*, it is no coincidence that the visual effects of the main cinematic shots are created (especially pan shots and aerial shots used to show the natural environments), and extensive use is made of extra-diegetic music with an empathetic function, which participates in the emotions of the characters, emphasises and amplifies them. In the two medium-length films there is also, for example, frequent use of the point of view shot (albeit often very rapid), which reinforces identification with the protagonists and their emotions, leading the spectator to share their point of view. This engagement dynamics also happens with the use of the zoom-out and the resulting optical effect, which, in some scenes of the film *The Snail and the Whale*, for example, amplifies the feeling of disorientation and loneliness felt by the snail protagonist of the story. As has been observed in this regard (Gichuki et al. 2023), the use of elements of film grammar in animated films often aims at enhancing certain central functions and aspects within the narrative, including, for example, the function of guiding young viewers through the developments of the story; that of revealing narrative information visually; or, again, that of visually representing the emotions of the characters and the main themes of the narrative.

Going back to the comparison between the serial animation scheme and the filmic one, it clearly emerges that the different styles of the two types of productions imply a distinct use of audio-visual language, corresponding to two different drives toward identification. In the first case, that of the *Bing* and *Tumble Leaf* series, the narration appears functional to the identification of the audience in behavioural models that have to do with everyday life situations and, at the same time, to the acquisition of essential practical skills. In the case of animated films, on the other hand, the teaching passes through emotions and empathy. As we have seen, the drive for identification is towards symbolic and universal identity values, of which the characters and stories are the spokespeople.

5 Characters and Values through the Lens of the *Functional Bundle*

The audio-visual products just analysed can also be effectively read through the theoretical line offered by Grodal, which brings out further significant aspects, especially from a cognitive point of view. In particular, we will try to highlight how the *functional bundle* concept illustrated above can emerge in the products examined and what effect it can have on the users. As already pointed out, in *Room on the Broom*, the protagonist is a witch (the Witch) who visually presents all the typical connotations of folkloric representation: she is old and has a hooked nose, shabby clothes, a large pointed hat on her head; she uses a magic wand and a potion muffer; she flies on a broom.

From this point of view, the Witch responds well to an easily recognisable (we could say, in some ways, universal) *functional bundle*. However, perhaps in response to an innovative preferential impulse of the audience (and, probably, due to an implicit modality of value transmission that aims at inclusion and the overcoming of certain stereotypes), the protagonist of the medium-length film is not evil, as tradition would have it. However, good: this could therefore be a case of "functional innovation", in which the bundle is modified based on a changed demand — implicit or explicit — on the part of the target audience. Furthermore, Grodal (2009: 27) indicates as "very prominent emotional concerns" those elements that he considers universal, i.e., those themes that, by human nature, viewers are wont to look for in the filmic and narrative experience as an unconscious response to innate needs and preferences.

5. The authors refer primarily to the enjoyment of children's books, from which, among other things, the animated films examined here are taken.

This particular need goes back, as mentioned, to the fact that there are “innate dispositions” (Grodal 2009: 27) in children’s heads to which narrative material seems to be able to respond. As a rule, these themes can satisfy the need for belonging and mirror the emotional dynamics that the spectator experiences when witnessing a narrated story, which are actually characteristic of the human experience. In this sense, the value content of *Room on the Broom* and *The Snail and the Whale* (friendship acceptance, caring, trust, sharing, cunning, collaboration, etc.) goes in the direction proposed by Grodal.

For example, in *Room on the Broom*, the animals cleverly learn to collaborate with each other to defeat the red dragon that wants to eat the Witch, conveying to the viewers the value of collaboration and relationship with each other and offering them a kind of abstract behavioral schema to help solve a problem (Gottschall 2012, Calabrese and Conti 2020).

In *The Snail and the Whale*, the friendship between the two animals brings out a sense of care and attention towards the other, demonstrating the importance of acting to save the other. Likewise, the challenges that the characters have to overcome are often part of the so-called “hazard–precaution system”, a dynamic that Grodal borrows from the anthropological studies of Boyer and Liénard (2006) and considered valuable to train the brain to precaution and related strategies for managing danger. According to Grodal, indeed, “fear and the overcoming of fear are a recurrent phenomenon in stories for children” (Grodal 2009: 30). Concretely, in *Room on the Broom*, the Witch risks losing the magic items; falling several times from the flying broom and losing the items; being eaten by the dreaded red dragon. In *The Snail and the Whale*, the snail is in danger of getting lost in the waves of the sea, becoming prey to the sharks; the whale is in danger of being stranded on the beach and thus losing its life.

In both products, then, there is the theme of affective attachment (in our analysed products, it manifests itself in the different friendly relationships between the characters), an argument that Grodal places among “vital concerns for any child” for which “films [...] are able to offer salient representations” (Grodal 2009: 27). In stories and children’s films, the relationship between animal characters makes explicit this theme of affectivity and its dynamics, as our examined objects demonstrate: *The Snail and the Whale*; the traveling companions of the Witch (a cat, a dog, a frog, a green bird); the black bunny Bing and his friends (an elephant, a panda, a bunny); the fox Fig and the other protagonists of *Tumble Leaf* (a polar bear, a crab, a beaver, a frog, some chickens).

The use of animals is functional because, according to Grodal, “animals are salient agents that children can use to try out various models of agency and test their theories of how other minds work” (Grodal 2009: 29); moreover, the use of animals seems to favor dynamics of identification–immersion with the narrated reality and, at the same time, to simulate attitudes typical of a given relationship: for example, understanding and experiencing an affective and attentive relationship of parents towards their children, in a kind of role play that would allow children to learn behaviours and assume a “control by assuming a double perspective, that of a child and that of an adult” (Grodal 2009: 29).

In this sense, one could also think of an initial and nuclear attitude of the critical and detached gaze of the young user towards the film product. This dynamic can be configured well both in the two medium films and in the two serials, *Bing* and *Tumble Leaf*, in which the actions are performed exclusively by animal characters. Moreover, besides the animal protagonists in *Bing*, non–human figures play the role of ‘adults’ (Flop, Amma, etc.), who seem to be the educators of the little protagonists. In this way, the episodes of the series propose in fiction that schema of care and attention mentioned above, in addition to the child–adult dynamic.

6 Identification with the Hero of the Series as an Implicit Tool for Problem–Solving

As underlined in the paragraphs on audio–visual language, there is no doubt that the choice of specific frames, machine movements, and editing impacts the viewer’s perception. Indeed, from many studies in the field of cognition, it is clear that “the more the motion of the camera resembles the movement of a human being approaching a scene, for example, the more the motor simulation is activated by simulation mechanisms” (Carocci 2018: 120).

In this sense, in many episodes of *Bing*, for example, the point of view shot (POV)⁶ provides a valid identification channel between the protagonist and the small spectator, who seems to be easily led to simulate — sometimes even imitate with real movement — the action performed by the character.

It is now well known that the question of identification is also the result of the activation of the so-called mirror neuron, to which we refer here also as a potential channel for acquiring unconsciously — in other words, pre-consciously — the competences of action through the mechanism of identification with the protagonists of events.

According to Grodal, indeed, “the simulation of fictitious worlds is essential in prompting action tendencies” (Grodal 2009: 182), and

people try to understand from a first-person perspective by running a simulation: if I were in that situation, what would I think or do? Such a simulation does not need to be a copy of the mental processes of the characters, only that the viewer resonates with the characters' cognitive, emotional, and situational experiences (Grodal 2009: 187).

We shall see a few examples relating to the two series examined. As mentioned in the other paragraphs, we could hypothesize that the *Bing* series is a helpful tool to promote the acquisition of modes of action and behavior in the face of small everyday situations.

Each episode revolves around the proposition of a minor problem — which is instead ‘enormous’ for Bing — and the related ways in which the other characters and figures of educators help the black bunny to disentangle from the problem: here, for example, emerges a representation of the daily management of the precaution-risk flow. Moreover, the mechanism of identification and, at the same time, of superiority (the child-adult binomial, as Grodal argues) that the child has vis-à-vis the animal characters seems to be quite evident; in the same way, however, it is clear that in certain narrative situations the simulation and the consequent identification are not so explicit, but, instead, the user assumes a more detached position. In this case, a greater awareness of using fictional content implies less identification but a more remarkable ability to process what we are witnessing. We could say that the different levels of immersive and non-immersive conditions in relation to the narrative allow the user — in our case, the child — to acquire the ‘bodily’ of the inputs and begin understanding them. We could glimpse this hypothesis of detachment also in the representation itself: in *Bing*, the characters of the educators (Flop, Amma, etc.) could be clarifications of the rational aspects and elaboration — emotional and procedural — of the protagonists (Bing, Sula, Pando, etc.). In any case, this immersive/non-immersive dynamic could also explain why there is not always a ‘rigid’ identification in the characters, but why, in any case, even with a simulation interspersed with moments of pause (and thus ‘detachment’), the audio-visual product can be helpful in the acquisition of knowledge.

In *Tumble Leaf*, for example, the identification with the character seems less immediate than with *Bing*. The cartoon is designed to stimulate in the small viewer the desire to discover the functionality of everyday objects (the umbrella, the spring, the kite, the magnifying glass, etc.) that the fox Fig and his friends fish in the sea and about which they wonder. As we said, the precaution-risk dynamic — which in *Bing* is very explicit — is masked more with a narrative choice focusing more on discovery and reasoning. The user knows and recognizes the objects through a narrative line that is based on a succession of trials by error: the protagonist, Fig, understands the function of the object only after having tried several times its use in contexts or incorrect ways: in this sense, Fig acts by deduction and abduction, behaving like an investigator who collects clues and who works to solve the problem (for example, in “Fig Files a Kite”,⁷ the fox understands how to make the kite fly after having observed how the kite fly makes the leaf move and rotate). In this product, too, it is possible to observe a process of identification of the user with the protagonist (an anthropomorphic animal, in this case, too), which makes functional the child-adult dynamic identified by Grodal as a reflection of the relationship of care already mentioned in this article.

6. Similarly, Eugeni (2012) speaks of a *first person shot*, indicating by this name the typical shooting in the first shooter videogame (FPS), whereby the player is ‘inside’ the action and ‘in’ the character, ultimately assuming his or her role in the game’s media environment. Likewise, looking at the world through Bing’s eyes makes the viewer experience the character directly and ‘feel’ his sensations, perceptions and emotions.

7. Season 1, episode 2.

In general, in both products examined, the viewer can, by identifying with the character, understand the situation the protagonist is experiencing and thus absorb from it all tendencies to act. According to Grodal, “simulation is a two-way street: as cognitive learning theories have pointed out, we watch other people not only in order to learn how and why they behave as they do, but also to learn how to behave ourselves” (2009: 190). It is important to stress once again that these acquisitions take place at the bodily level and, therefore, in a pre-rational condition, since “the simulation is both mental and physical, involving both brain and body” (2009: 204).

7 Conclusions

In this article we have focused on some audio-visual products for children and tried to provide an analysis on two levels. A first look offers a reading of the texts chosen from the point of view of audio-visual language. We were particularly interested to see how — with equal linguistic choices — the different nature of objects led to different modes of narrative management. The two medium films, *Room on the Broom* and *The Snail and the Whale*, have the typical structure of a cinematographic product. Consequently, they seem suitable for dealing with wide-ranging themes related to transmitting social values such as friendship, care, attention, relationship with others, inclusion, cunning, acumen, instinct, and the desire to collaborate and share. The serial products analysed (*Bing and Tumble Leaf*) seem to be better suited to transfer the user's basic skills and competencies in overcoming minor daily difficulties — both physical and emotional — and to offer schematic modes of action (the “tendencies to action” of which Grodal speaks) towards the discovery of everyday life. The second level concerned the reading of the same audio-visual products starting from the studies of Torben Grodal, whose lines of research fall within the area of Film Studies related to the role of emotion and cognitive aspects in the production and enjoyment of film. We have thus recognized some basic categories of Grodal's theory in the objects examined, distinguishing, in particular, some functional bundles, that is, functional associations of elements and values that make the products easily recognizable and able to provide certain emotional ‘responses’ to the needs of the users themselves. Finally, starting from the concept of simulation and simulation embodied in the cinematographic experience — which Grodal borrows from Welsh studies — we mentioned the processes of identification with the character and the possible effects, at the level of behaviour, that this dynamic can entail in the user. However, this article is the starting point for broader research that aims to deepen the themes introduced here — the role of audio-visual language and narration and its weight in cognitive processes — identifying reference canons for the production and use of audio-visual for children at the same time verifying the reasons why children are so attracted to the medium and how the medium can effectively act as a kind of educator for their behaviour and learning.

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