

FRANCESCA CASNATI

# COMMUNICATION DESIGNERS

A FEMINIST MODEL  
TO ACTIVATE GENDER  
DE-BIASING PATHS

# FOR FAIRNESS

ESSAY BY  
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Il progetto della collana Design della comunicazione nasce nell'ambito dell'attività di ricerca e didattica di Design della comunicazione del Politecnico di Milano.



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ISBN e-book Open Access: 9788891717528

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**Francesca Casnati**

## **Communication designers for fairness**

A feminist model to activate gender de-biasing paths

*Essay by Valeria Bucchetti*



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# Communication Design and Gender Cultures

## Disciplinary identity and interconnections

### 1. Time and context

There are subjects that embody the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time, and *gender-sensitive* communication, in this sense, does not merely reflect a cultural trend of our era but corresponds to a need: the necessity to bridge a gap that has arisen, particularly between the representation of women in the media sphere and the reality that concerns them, in the many aspects that define their identity. We operate within a framework densely populated by *iconic acts* that, through their messages, hinder the path toward a more equal society.<sup>1</sup> These acts, all too often, fall into the lower part of the gender-based violence iceberg – those subtle and invisible manifestations that contribute to sustaining a ‘system of images’ rooted in a sexist culture. A culture that has grown out of a model of hypertrophic communication, one that has spread an amplified and misrepresented fixed portrayal of women, obsessively repeating it. This portrayal has been locked into a dominant *cliché*, incapable of reflecting the complexity and multifaceted roles of women in society.

More broadly, it is essential to emphasize that the communicative context, which we continuously expand with every text-icon we produce, is marked by hypervisibility. This hypervisibility appears to have firmly rooted itself in what Fulvio Carmagnola described as the *era of the all-visible*, where «the power of visibility is besieged by its own visibility»<sup>2</sup> (author’s translation). Density and pervasiveness, amplified by the internet’s ability to redistribute and expand the ‘space’ of visibility, give rise to phenom-

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1. See what has been reiterated and brought to the attention of the Member States of the European Union: Resolution of the European Parliament of September 3, 2008, on the impact of marketing and advertising on gender equality (2008/2038(INI)); Resolution of the European Parliament of April 17, 2018, on gender equality in the media sector in the European Union (2017/2210(INI)).

2. See F. Carmagnola, *Visibilità*, 1989, p. 9.

ena that overwhelm us: *communicative overload*, *information overload*,<sup>3</sup> and even *image overload*. These factors, taken together, inevitably lead to an overall intensification of communicative performance, underpinning an idea of competition as a necessary condition to escape invisibility. This increasingly frantic race to emerge from the undifferentiated flow places us within what Giovanni Anceschi described as the *multisensory clamor of civilization*<sup>4</sup> and what Luigi Zoja, with an even harsher perspective, referred to as *psychic rape*.<sup>5</sup>

We are all confronted with images that perpetuate discriminatory messages based on gender, depicting women as sexual objects through faces and bodies that conform to predetermined aesthetic standards rooted in male and heteronormative ideals. These representations are enhanced by overt forms of manipulation, such as framing, perspectives, and the posing of subjects, as well as the emphasis on anatomical details and photo editing, which promote an idea of formal perfection bordering on myth.<sup>6</sup> But not only that, there is another category of images, those rooted in an androcentric perspective where men are seen as the “human standard” and women as the “other”. These images reinforce and sustain male dominance in society, perpetuating gender inequality by concealing the masculinity of the male gender behind a so-called *neutral standard*.<sup>7</sup> These are images that embody a principle of *separation*, where the male and female are divided according to opposing principles. This division is tied to a *hierarchical framework* that positions the masculine as the *norm* encompassing the world, while the feminine is defined instead as a *deviation from that norm*.<sup>8</sup> This is a widely studied phenomenon that goes by the name of *male as norm* (MAN), *universal masculinity* or *man as default*,<sup>9</sup> and

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3. *Information Overload* – or informational overload – began to be discussed in 1996, when Reuters commissioned a study titled ‘Dying for Information?’ during which interviewees described the effects of information overload, which resulted in compromised work performance. By extension, we can refer to an overload generated by images, leading to a metaphorical blurring of our vision. For this interpretation, see: V. Bucchetti, 2021.

4. See G. Anceschi, 1999, p. 14.

5. See L. Zoja, 2018, p. 120.

6. Cfr. M. Niola, 2012.

7. Cfr.: S.L. Bem, 1993; A.H. Bailey; M. La France and J.F. Dovidio, 2019. See also V. Bucchetti, 2021.

8. See V. Bucchetti, 2022.

9. Cfr. H. Kotthoff and R. Wodak, 1997.

which quite often, as Alma Sabatini<sup>10</sup> stated, is an expression of a ‘false neutrality’ of the masculine when passing off as universal what is only man’s. In other words, we are facing forms of representation in which the feminine is implicated as *alterity* and whose effects spill over into every sphere of our social and cultural dimension, in the form of *exclusionary matrices*<sup>11</sup> that contribute to fuelling inequality and gender inequalities, which nullify the existence of identities themselves or harness them, stiffen them, confine them, thus giving rise to crystallised and stereotypical sets (Bucchetti 2022).

## 2. Communication Design and social responsibility

At the core of the discourse, therefore, we cannot fail to consider the role played by communication design and its responsibilities. Through the design of artefacts, cultural contents are defined, a relationship with images is developed involving the direct implication of the media in the reflexive process of the self and in the construction of social reality. By providing images, fragments of images, iconic elements, the media are influential in the understanding of the individual’s role in society and in the determination of an aesthetic and ethical universe, implicitly transferring profound questions: “What do I like about myself and others? What are the rights and duties as a male or as a female? On the basis of what do I feel intelligent, or skilled, or beautiful?”. As Jean-Marie Floch would say, what is being recalled is the level of the relations between the values *reproduced* by the image and the values *produced* by the image, which, by acting subtly, generate forms of devaluation, humiliation, invisibility and contempt for women, through unfair and degrading stereotypical images, anchored in limiting models, incapable not only of restoring the complexity of the contemporaneity they wish to refer to, but also of merely alluding to it. These images, which should be part of a remote past, seem on the opposite side to continually regenerate their own clichés: *Women-bottles* by assonance of curves, women’s bodies used as a unit of measurement

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10. This refers to the 1987 text, written for the *Commissione Nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna*.

11. See V. Bucchetti, 2022.

to describe the tactile qualities of materials, whether plastic surfaces or foodstuffs, female hands whose touch, as Erving Goffman observed, charges any object with sensuality; women as object-holders holding the most disparate goods, charging them with desirability, women portrayed with orgasmic expressions always ready to express pleasure. But also passive women, depicted in the background intent on observing in admiration the amazing tasks performed by a leading man, women engaged in secondary or domestic roles, relegated to expressing feelings of care or compassion.

Dealing with these issues means considering the several manifestations of immaterial domination which, as is well known, are among the most powerful and which act on the market of symbols in the absence of physical constraint, just as is the case, in an invasive and widespread form, for the media order. Forms of immaterial domination that belong to the sphere of symbolic violence, which permeate the socio-cultural dimension and which presuppose, as Bourdieu asserted (author's translation), «a social relationship in which the “dominator” exercises on the “dominated” forms of indirect violence, acted through the imposition of a certain vision of the world, social roles, cognitive categories and mental structures».<sup>12</sup> Expressions of domination that pass through the *male gaze*,<sup>13</sup> a gaze exercised by men in which women see themselves through their eyes, internalise male expectations, seeking to please them and to adhere to the image that the male has of them.

In this process, which acts by reiteration and concatenation, the function that discourse and language play within the media – and visual language in particular – is a pivotal function, exercised through the re-proposition of models that act as amplifiers of social conventions and affect the acquisition of behaviour and practices.

Mirzoeff in his text *How to See the World* reminds us that we represent what we see and know on screens that accompany us everywhere, and it is precisely the relationship between what we see, the images we feed on,

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12. See P. Bourdieu, *Il dominio maschile*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1998.

13. The *male gaze* is the erotic desire through which, in the history of art and media, the representation of women has been filtered, reducing them to an ‘object of vision.’ See also S. de Beauvoir (1949), A. Heller (2017).

according to a form of *iconophagy*,<sup>14</sup> that needs to be investigated. When we refer to stereotypes we are talking, as is well known, about a phenomenon that is self-feeding, that self-produces positive feedback and that results in the repetition and amplification of the stereotype itself.<sup>15</sup> And it is therefore fundamental to produce a reversal, to succeed in ‘changing the sign’ so that this trend between the two poles – construction and mirroring – is transformed and a virtuous circularity is established.<sup>16</sup>

Also for these reasons, the communication designer must necessarily go beyond merely recognizing their own skills and penetrate into the very core of consciousness in order to guide future behaviors. They cannot, therefore, make the mistake of acting within the space of the *common-place* (Barthes 1979), of staying in the orbit of the stereotype that presents itself as immediately available, but which is nothing more than a fixed and unchanging impression, an expression of an ideologically oriented connotation that hardly fits the reality it claims to represent.<sup>17</sup> Just consider the implications this issue has in contemporary design, for example, when using *stock images* provided by image banks<sup>18</sup> – whose selection criteria are based on the success achieved by an image – or even more evidently, when design processes generate images through generative machine learning systems. That is, when the model is only familiar with the images and concepts within the dataset it has ‘learned’ from, starting with a prompt (caption) (Benjamin 2019; Broussard 2018, 2023; D’Amico 2020; D’Ignazio & Klein 2023), the significance of studies on stereotypes and *unconscious biases*, as well as the definition of the datasets themselves and their impact on the entire process, becomes clear.

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14. This is how it is defined by N. Baitello Jr. in his text *A era da iconofagia. Reflexões sobre imagem, comunicação, mídia e cultura* (2014).

15. Reference is made to the vicious circle of stereotyping argued by V. Bucchetti and F. Casnati in their essay “Icons: Normativity and Gender Inequalities” (2019).

16. Cfr. P. Montani (2010).

17. Cfr. S. Zingale (2012).

18. Cfr. M. Rossi (2022).

### **3. Visual Cultures and Gender Cultures, building a research field**

The transformative role of the communication designer, expressed and conveyed through the artifacts and systems they create, is to guide the choices and behaviors of the recipients, altering their perception of the reality in which they operate. This contributes to the formation of viewpoints and opinions, participating in awareness-raising processes concerning problems and emergencies. And, thanks to their directorial and mediating role, the designer has the opportunity to influence social reality. Through the design of artifacts, cultural content is defined, and a relationship with images is developed that directly involves the media in the reflective process of the self and in the construction of social reality (Resnick 2019). Therefore, we are dealing with the ability to produce and manage content and its translation. Processes that, as is well known, require both theoretical and systemic skills from an intermedial and crossmedial perspective. But also a set of knowledge concerning the solidity of managing the processes of producing ‘meaning effects’ and the strength of the cultural and ethical spectrum<sup>19</sup> (Baule and Caratti 2018; Bucchetti 2021).

If we were to examine the reasons that lead designers to so easily accept and replicate clichés, we would have to consider multiple closely related factors. Among the most obvious, on one hand, there is the issue of education, which is not always able to provide sufficient methods of discernment and cultural knowledge. On the other hand, there are emotional factors where the sharing of a common place or idea creates solidarity, commonality, and a sense of belonging to a group (Priulla 2013), often determined by the prevailing cultural context. Changing this status quo, invalidating a cliché, means having solid information and argumentative skills, but also being willing to risk the support of the group (to which one belongs or addresses). Alongside these reasons, there is also a form of cognitive immunity to anything that might jeopardize a set of opinions that, having become ingrained over time, form the foundation of our daily actions and thoughts.

It is within this framework, where the social value of communication takes on a priority role and where the communication designer must

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19. Regardless of whether the iconic utterance or communicative artefact was realised in analogue or digital form or obtained through the most advanced forms of AI.

be seen as a subject who acts for and within the community, that the research path, traced from the intersection between *communication design and gender cultures*,<sup>20</sup> should be situated. A path that develops by bringing into play the contributions that *Visual Cultures* can make in terms of critical knowledge and methodological approach, placing them alongside those historically developed by the *Social Sciences* and *Gender Studies*, thus giving rise to an area of study that takes shape from these disciplinary axes.

The work undertaken, which has evolved progressively, has been strengthened over the years by intersecting *research* experiences with *teaching* experiences, both aimed at developing tools to reinforce self-reflective processes and to establish a design approach centered on awareness. This orientation, in fact, reaffirms a perspective of responsibility that should be a prerequisite for communication in general, but becomes an indispensable characteristic when it involves gender issues (Bucchetti 2024), with the goal of not only overcoming but also counteracting the generation of discriminatory iconic texts and their transmission.

The field outlined is an experimental area that has developed thanks to the convergence of disciplinary interests, which allowed for the formation of a research group within the broader *communication design* group.<sup>21</sup> Pioneering in nature, the focus of the research has been on the relationships and responsibilities that designed communication forms have when they carry discriminatory content, hindering the path toward overcoming deeply rooted patriarchal structures.

Working in this field required, on one hand, the creation of disciplinary tools, and on the other, the *construction of networks* capable of promoting an interdisciplinary perspective essential for addressing multidimensional issues. A key role is played by the Interuniversity Research Center on Gender Cultures,<sup>22</sup> which was founded in 2013 and in which we participated.

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20. This term is therefore used to designate a specific field with its own centre of gravity in Communication Design, but with a continuous interdisciplinary relationship.

21. This refers to the research work in the scientific field and didactic experimentation developed by the *dcxcg* research group (<http://www.dcxcg.org/>) within the Department of Design and the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano, aimed at the development of critical reflections, the definition of analytical tools and the advancement of knowledge regarding the relationship between the disciplines of Communication Design and Gender Cultures.

22. The *Centro di Ricerca Interuniversitario Culture di Genere* (Interuniversity Research Centre on

This center allowed for the explicit contribution of communication design to this building of interconnections, while simultaneously fostering its disciplinary growth.

Over time, experiences have followed in which research and teaching have mutually supported each other – among these, in 2010, the seminar and workshop *Types and Stereotypes* and the conference *Communicative Antibodies*<sup>23</sup> – the first opportunities to develop a framework in transformed sub-themes; later, in more in-depth paths, followed by numerous other activities. In the development of this field, the research-teaching relationship has marked important experimental steps, such as the introduction of a new course specifically dedicated to it – *Communication Design and Gender Cultures*<sup>24</sup> – the first national course to be included in a master's curriculum. There was also the activation of extracurricular training activities in which communication design becomes both a means and an end: a means because it serves as a tool for designing artifacts that communicate gender issues among peers, and thus produce advocacy actions;<sup>25</sup> an end for the maieutic component of the design process itself, capable of triggering a path of awareness and reflection on the topic. This was evident in the campaign designed on the topic of *digital catcalling*, which originated within the university and was aimed at its own members (Bucchetti, Ferraresi, and Magaraggia 2019), or in the *We Say Stop* project (Bucchetti and

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Gender Cultures) was set up in 2013 with the aim of giving a permanent impulse to studies, research and positive actions related to the topic of gender cultures and thus contributing to the growth and dissemination of respect for women's dignity and skills, bringing together six Milanese universities (<https://www.culturedigenere.it/#homepage>).

23. The workshop *Types and Stereotypes* was activated within the Degree Course in Communication Design – Politecnico di Milano –, in November 2010 (lecturer Elena Caratti, scientific supervision Valeria Bucchetti); the conference 'Communicative Antibodies. Stereotypes of gender: the contribution of communication design' in which the role of communication design within a process of social criticism was addressed, was held on 18 November 2011 at the Politecnico di Milano.

24. The course *Communication Design and Gender Cultures* was activated for the first time by the School of Design (Politecnico di Milano) in the academic year 2014-2015 (regular lecturer Valeria Bucchetti), is aimed at master's degree courses and is part of the didactic offer of the *Ambassador Inclusivity Design programme*.

25. An example is the Bracco Foundation's *Mind the Stem Gap* project for which the dxcg research group of the Department of Design developed the framework of project activities to produce communicative actions between peers (students towards students) in order to counter the spread of stereotypes.

Casnati, 2024), designed to combat violence against women.<sup>26</sup> Reaching the formalization of a *manifesto for gender-sensitive communication*,<sup>27</sup> which includes a statement of intent and principles, available for endorsement and support. In this case, it is a document that clarifies a stance fueled by the desire to create change and act upon it, starting from the disciplinary axis of communication design.

The path outlined is one shaped by studies and theoretical reflections, design actions, and experiments that have found natural spaces for growth in doctoral research, such as that of Francesca Casnati.<sup>28</sup> Through her work, she has firmly taken up the baton to further develop what has been built over the years, focusing on the tools that the theory of directorial construction and staging offer to communication designers. These tools are essential when designers are called to act from a perspective of cultural innovation and *critical design* (Baule 2015: 26)

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26. The project *We say stop. Graphics to counter violence against women* has been joined by the Politecnico di Milano, which promoted it, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Politecnico di Bari, University of Campania 'Luigi Vanvitelli', University of Camerino (<http://www.wesaystop.it>).

27. The *Manifesto for a gender-sensitive communication from the perspective of communication design*, online from october november 2022, was created within the dcxcg research group. Scientific coordination V. Bucchetti; editorial staff: V. Bucchetti, F. Casnati, M. Rossi; it is promoted by the Interuniversity Research Centre Gender Cultures. <https://www.comunicazionegendere-sensitive.polimi.it>.

28. Reference is made to Francesca Casnati's doctoral thesis (2024) *A system of de-biasing practices for future gender-sensitive designers. Navigational tools for a step-by-step revolution*, Design Department, Politecnico di Milano (Supervisor: Prof. Valeria Bucchetti, 36th Cycle) giving substance to the preliminary work addressed by Marta Isabella Reina (2018) in her research *Communication design for gender cultures. Models and tools to explore gender issues in design education*, Design Department, Politecnico di Milano (Supervisor: Prof.ssa Valeria Bucchetti, 30th Cycle).

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In a framework still strongly marked by androcentrism, how can we equip future communication designers to challenge gender bias and propose new perspectives that diverge from the hegemonic ones? The reflection on the depatriarchalization of Design is central to feminist debates on the discipline, as it opens up new critical pathways for rethinking both design practice and education. Emerging from a critical reinterpretation of the intersections between **FEMINIST THEORIES AND VISUAL CULTURE**, and building on the work pioneered by the *dcxcg* research group, this volume explores **STRATEGIES, TOOLS, AND METHODS** aimed at training gender-sensitive designers. Designers who are not only competent in generating sustainable communicative artifacts that respect and give voice to alterity but also advocating for a systemic revolution in communication design. This work can be seen as an attempt to respond – one among many possible responses – to the need of **SPREADING AND NURTURING A FORM OF FAIRNESS CULTURE IN DESIGN**.

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