Arts and Popular Culture as Creative Potential for Education: A Case Study on the Teaching of Graphic Design

Cristiana Serejo

Instituto de Investigação em Design, Media e Cultura ID+, Barcelos, Portugal
Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave, Escola Superior de Design, Barcelos Portugal, Portugal

Abstract

This paper presents a project developed during the first year of the Graphic Design degree program at the School of Design, Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave (Barcelos, Portugal). The primary objective was to introduce students to the fundamental principles of graphic design through a series of experimental and conceptual exercises. These exercises aimed to explore the potential of communication and graphic materialization in relation to both textual and musical narratives.

The central challenge was to design a graphic object that would embody and communicate the selected narratives, drawing upon a musical composition and poetry rooted in traditional Portuguese culture. The project unfolded in three phases: (1) the analysis and interpretation of the textual and musical components; (2) the observation and study of relevant precedents; and (3) the conceptual development and materialization of a final proposal that functioned as both a narrative and graphic artifact.

The outcomes indicated that, within a foundational and exploratory pedagogical framework, emphasizing the creation of open-ended, interactive graphic or digital objects significantly enhanced students' engagement with the narrative material. This approach not only deepened their interpretative understanding—reinforcing the interplay between music, text, and form—but also effectively introduced key themes relevant to graphic design education. Furthermore, the process fostered an environment conducive to the development of a critical theoretical and cultural foundation, supporting students' growth as reflective and context-aware designers.

Keywords: *Design; Creativity; Cultural Narratives; Graphic Materiality*

1. Introduction

The projects presented were developed within an academic setting as part of the Graphic Design Fundamentals course, aimed at first-year students in Graphic Design degree at the School of Design, of the Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave, in the north of Portugal.

These projects challenged students to address a classroom assignment designed to foster design thinking and introduce key concepts and tools fundamental to graphic design practice. Within this framework, students explored how materials and technologies function as mediums of communication. The objective was to encourage students to engage with type, form, format, and material, and to understand their potential as design tools in shaping the tangible expression of a distinct sound (music or word). This sound was explored through its oral qualities and translated into a variety of physical objects.

2. The Challenge

For this presentation, we will discuss two projects developed in the classroom. The first is based on the musical piece *"Trângulo-Mângulo"*, a traditional children's rhyme interpreted by the musical group *Gaiteiros de Lisboa*. The second is inspired by the text *"Os Habitantes de Barro de Barcelos"* (The Clay Inhabitants of Barcelos), written by the artist and poet *Amélia Muge*. In both projects, students were challenged to create a graphic object that explored the intersection of textual and musical narratives, drawing from Portuguese cultural traditions and expressive forms. The objective was to interpret the lyrics, words, melody, and both the oral and instrumental interpretations through various graphic

elements, such as typography, drawing, colour, photography, materials, and technologies. The project sought to understand how these elements can communicate and enhance the narrative.

While there were no restrictions on format, colour, materials, or technologies, students were encouraged to consider the rhythm of the music, the narrative of the text, and to ensure both the legibility and functionality of their final design solution.

No standardized or specific tools were provided, allowing each student to follow their own unique analytical and creative process in developing the project.

After introducing the brief, students were shown examples of graphic solutions created in similar contexts, especially works related to narrative and its graphic realization. Special attention was given to some of *Bruno Munari's* iconic children's books, such as:

. **I PRELIBRI** *(Italy, first edition 1980)* – A set of 12 small books designed for young children who are not yet able to read or write. Offering a range of sensory experiences, the books stimulate emotions and perceptions through images, colours, textures, and unique binding methods.

Fig. 1. *"I PRELIBRI"* (The Pre-Books) (Munari, 1980)

. **LIBRO ILLEGGIBILE MN 1** *(Italy, first edition 1949)* – A book that renounces textual communication in favor of aesthetic function alone. Paper is not merely a support for text but also, the message itself, communicating through its format, colour, cuts, and the rhythm of their alternation. Traditional elements of the book, such as the title page and colophon, are deliberately omitted. In their place, reading becomes an experience similar of listening to a musical composition—cadenced, tactile, and immersive—where each turn of the page introduces a new visual and sensory timbre.

Fig. 2. *"LIBRO ILLEGGIBILE MN 1"* (Illegible Book MN 1) (Munari, 1949)

. **NELLA NOTTE BUIA** *(Italy, 1956)* – A rich experience that awakens the senses. Night and day are vividly presented as we follow two cats on a quiet nighttime adventure. With the arrival of morning, we are drawn into a lively meadow filled with insects and their daily routines. The reading experience is tactile and immersive, enhanced by the brilliant use of textures, cutouts, and layered illustrations that invite the reader to explore through both sight and touch.
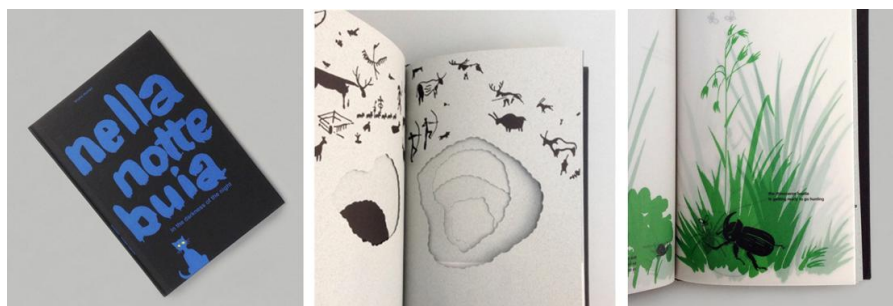
Fig. 3. "*NELLA NOTTE BUIA*" (In the Dark Night) (Munari, 1956)

Some examples of books by Portuguese illustrators were also presented, namely, some editions from *Planeta Tangerina* Publisher:

. Trava-Línguas (2008, ed. Planeta Tangerina), co-authored by Dulce Gonçalves and Madalena Matoso, is a notable example where text becomes illustration. The book transforms traditional tongue twisters into visually dynamic compositions, challenging the reader to engage with the rhythm and form of language both verbally and visually.
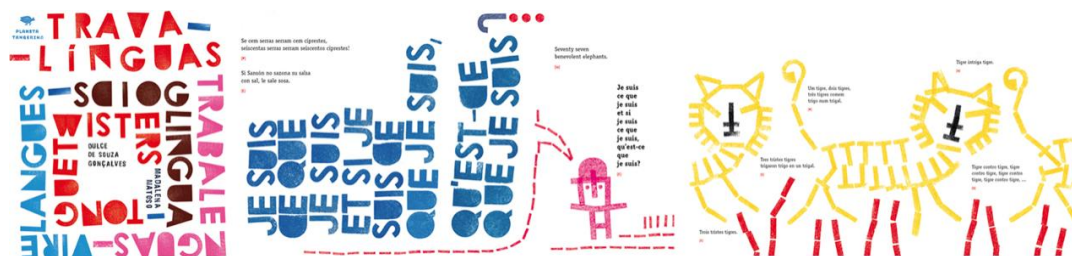

Fig. 4. *"Trava-Línguas"* (Tongue twister) (Gonçalves & Matoso, 2008)

. Tantos Animais e outras lengalengas de contar (2013, ed. Planeta Tangerina), co-authored by Manuela Castro and Yara Kono. Another example of illustration applied to traditional tongue twisters.

Fig. 5. *"Tantos Animais e outras lengalengas de contar" (*So Many Animals and Other Counting Rhymes*) (*Castro & Kono, 2013)

3. The Projects

These two projects were developed within an academic setting (1st year, 1st semester students) as part of the *Graphic Design Fundamentals* course. Based on two themes—"*Trângulo-Mângulo"* and "*Os Habitantes de Barro de Barcelos"*—the objective was for students to explore how image, text, illustration, and the plasticity of materials, through sequence and narrative, can offer possibilities for the graphic materiality of narratives rooted in Portuguese culture and traditions.

3.1 "Trângulo-Mângulo"

As previously mentioned, for this exercise the study theme was "*Trângulo-Mângulo"*, performed by *Gaiteiros de Lisboa* on their 1997 album "*Bocas do Inferno"*. Formed in 1993 by Paulo Marinho, *Gaiteiros de Lisboa* brought together a group of seasoned musicians, each with a background that spans key moments and figures in contemporary Portuguese music. Their collaborative synergy results in a dynamic blend of experience and innovation.

Figs. 6, 7. *Left: "Bocas do Inferno" CD cover (1997). Right: Performance by Gaiteiros de Lisboa (2009).*

The music of *Gaiteiros de Lisboa* is deeply rooted in Portuguese folk traditions, yet it is anything but static. Through their arrangements and performances, they revisit ancient forms with a modern sensibility, often reimagining traditional instruments or inventing new soundscapes. This balance between heritage and innovation allows them not only to preserve but to revitalize cultural memory.

"Trângulo-Mângulo" exemplifies this creative process. With its intricate rhythms, unconventional instrumentation, and evocative melodies, the piece captures the spirit of Portuguese musical storytelling while also reaching outward to broader European and global folk traditions. In doing so, *Gaiteiros de Lisboa* contribute significantly to the construction of a renewed Portuguese musical identity—one that is respectful of its roots yet open to change.

Trângulo-Mângulo

I had twenty-four nuns
I told them to make a dessert
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only twelve were left.

Of the twelve that remained
I told them to dress in bronze
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only eleven were left.

Of the eleven that remained
I told them to wash their feet
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only ten were left.

Of the ten that remained
I sent them to the nineteen
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo

And only nine were left.
Of the nine that remained
I told them to bake cookies
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only eight were left.

Of the eight that remained
I sent them to the seventeen
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only seven were left.

Of the seven that remained
I told them to count the kings
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only six were left.

Of the six that remained
I sent them to João Pinto
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only five were left.

Of the five that remained
I told them to cut tobacco
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only four were left.

Of the four that remained
I sent them back again
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only three were left.

Of the three that remained
I told them to put on their gloves
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only two were left.

Of the two that remained
I told them to eat turkey
They got the tragulotrico trangulumangulo
And only one was left.

I had twenty-four nuns
I made them walk in the dust
They all died on me
In a great drunken mess.

Traditional Portuguese song, author unknown.
(Unofficial English Translation. Original version at:
hyps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoJzqgFRHtE *)*

3.2 *"Os Habitantes de Barro de Barcelos"* (The Clay Inhabitants of Barcelos)

"*Os Habitantes de Barro de Barcelos*" was used as a central text in this project. Written by *Amélia Muge*, it is a poetic narrative rooted in Portuguese folk traditions, particularly the Barcelos figurado and the many characters that inhabit the rich imaginarium of Barcelos arts and crafts. At the beginning of the project, students were given access to both the written text and an audio recording in which the author recites it. This element of orality served to enrich and deepen their understanding of the narrative's tone, rhythm, and symbolic dimension.

"The Clay Inhabitants of Barcelos

Look there!!
There go the figurines, brightly colored, in groups at the processions, gathered in the bandstands, in nativity scenes, on crosses, bringing from the countryside gestures of balancing baskets on heads, guiding ox yokes, spinning flax, and all the other labors life demands.
Listen to the singers, guitar in hand, to the chirping of birds, the clucking of poultry, the light footsteps of hedgehogs, sometimes carrying apples, the hissing of coiled serpents, evoking paradises of seduction.
Serpents that, in the same howling breath of temptation, transform into big-headed devils, challenging both religious and pagan transgression.
Notice those who ride backwards, bringing into the world the artifice of imagined forms,
inhabiting beliefs, the night, and our fears. The bogeymen with sea-monster teeth, goat hooves, lolling tongues, and bulging eyes that haunt the cradles rocking children to sleep.
Read the stories they tell with clay words. How they were born in the corner of the kiln, where there was no more room for pots and jugs, created in a gesture of love, just to entertain the grandchildren. Small pieces that whistle joy, insignificant in the eyes of someone looking for a pan or pitcher, yet full of the will to offer warmth.
Today, we know that the life of Barcelos, in all its dimensions, lives within these figurines. Even the sorrows of death and the prayers to the divine can bloom in a crucified Christ glowing with the golden color of clay, fired in the furnace of the world's pain.
These figurines hold, in the living part of us, everything that has died, and which, through the meeting of dust and the water of memory, is born again." (Amélia Muge, November 2024)

(*Unofficial English Translation. Click to listen the original version >>* ⊙)

Amélia Muge is a multidisciplinary Portuguese artist born in Mozambique, where she studied History and taught at Eduardo Mondlane University before relocating to Lisbon in 1982. Her artistic work spans music, theatre, animation, literature, and visual arts, supported by formal training in music, design, and audiovisual media. As a composer and performer, she has collaborated with artists such as *Ana Moura, Camané, and José Mário Branco*, as well as internationally with *Amancio Prada* and the *Kronos Quartet*.
Her multicultural background and interdisciplinary approach inform a creative practice deeply engaged with questions of cultural identity and the interplay between artistic languages across time and space.

Figs. 8, 9, 10. *Left: Cover of Amélia Muge's first album, "MÚGICA" (1991). Center: Illustration by Amélia Muge (2007). Right: Photo of Amélia Muge with a piece of figurado from Barcelos*

4. Methodology

Each project was developed by a different group of students over the course of eight class sessions (three hours each). Within each group, students were organized into teams of two or three. The work took place in a project-based (atelier) setting, combining periods of independent group work with supervision and guidance from instructors. At the end of each phase, students presented their progress and participated in group discussions and critiques. As previously mentioned, the project unfolded across three main phases:

a – The first phase consisted of research and contextualization of the project theme. This included reflections on the design methodology to be adopted, identifying the specific challenges to be addressed, collecting data on similar existing materials, and finally, critically analysing and reflecting on the gathered information.
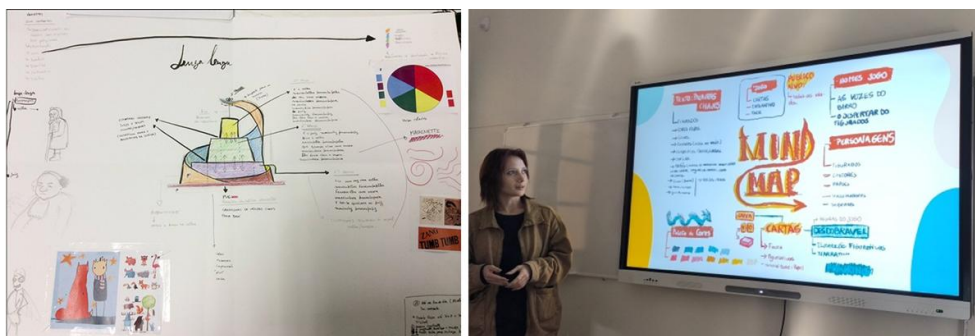

Fig. 11. *Mind map and Mood Board, research and analysis / discussion of concepts.*

b – In the second phase, the focus was on developing ideas and exploring creative possibilities, with presentation and discussion of the results. This was followed by planning and production studies, research and selection of materials and technologies to be used, and exploratory testing of the characteristics of the chosen materials and tools.
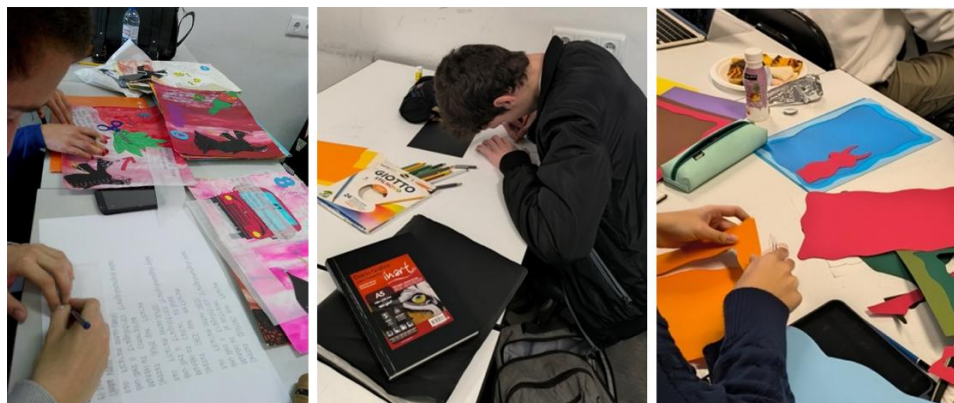

Fig. 12. *Classroom work: drawing, sketches and testing materials.*

c – In the third phase, after defining the supports to be used, the focus shifted to studies of graphic composition (figurative and typographic elements), colour, and the technologies associated. This phase was concluded with the reproduction and production of the prototype.
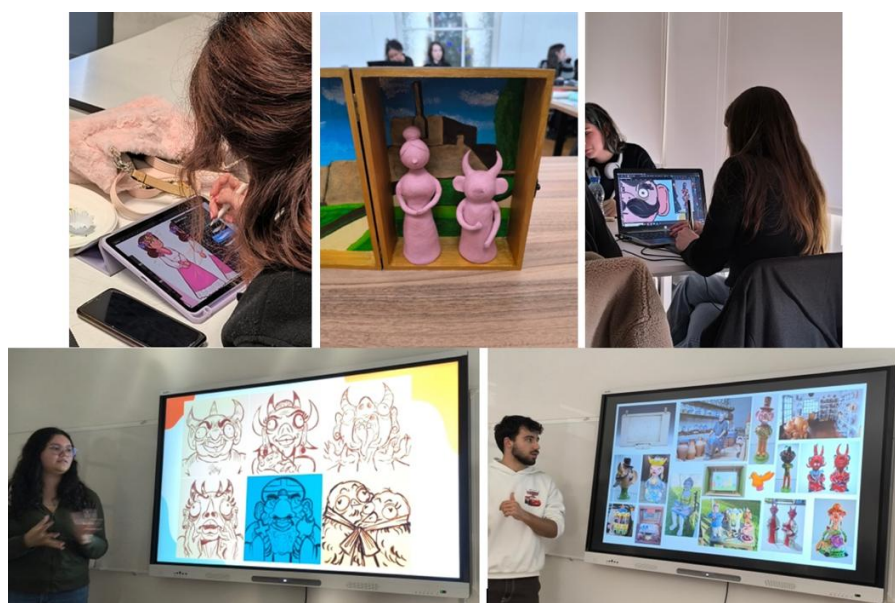
Fig. 13. *Classroom work: Digital drawings, prototypes and presentations.*

5. Results

One of the initial observations concerns the choice to create three-dimensional supports or objects that encourage active interaction with the reader. These design decisions reveal a pronounced symbolic dimension, which could be described as a form of *graphic theatricality*, characterized by an equally strong presence of *figurative orality*. This approach invites a constructive, performative experience—particularly evident in the representation of characters such as the nuns—evoking a kind of *theatre of figures* expressed through formats like pop-ups, cups, bottles, lamps, games, books, postcards, and other interactive objects.
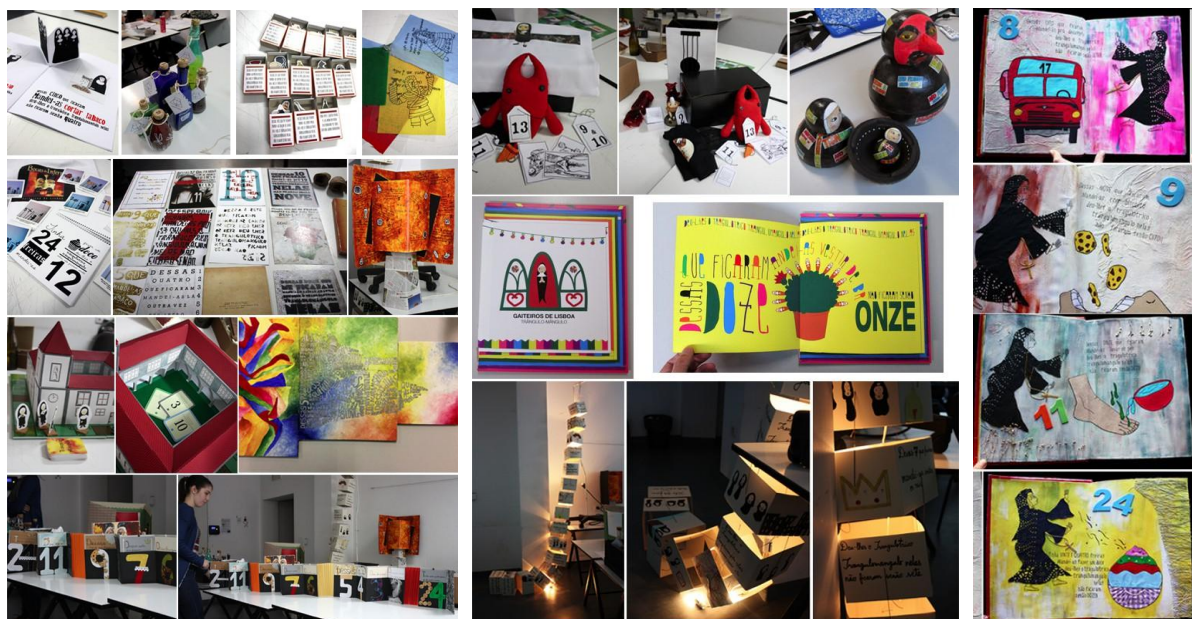
Figs. 14, 15, 16. "*Trângulo-Mângulo*" *final projects*.

Figs. 17, 18. *"The Clay Inhabitants of Barcelos" final projects*.

This was not merely an exercise in exploring various tools, technologies, and materials—such as hand drawing and illustration, calligraphic design, collage, and more. Rather, the experimentation and learning took place within a context already rich in textual and musical imagination. The thematic connection to a broader symbolism of renewing tradition created diverse opportunities for appropriation that extended beyond the basic teaching of discipline-specific content. Several traditional objects were used—such as the cut-paper designs from Viana—and graphic pieces were also created within the conceptual framework of the artist's book. Other key concepts, such as *graphic narrative* and *sequence*, were significantly strengthened through this experience, particularly in how *visual and sonic embodiment* can enhance the expressive potential in the development of a story.

6. Final Considerations

Throughout the projects, students engaged in a hands-on, exploratory process, experimenting with diverse materials, visual styles, and narrative techniques. Each interpretation of the poems reflected a unique perspective on Portuguese cultural identity, blending traditional references with contemporary graphic language. The resulting works showcased a wide range of solutions—from tactile, hand-crafted books to digitally composed sequences—demonstrating the students' ability to translate poetic imagery into visual storytelling. This process not only deepened their understanding of narrative structure and material expression but also encouraged a critical reflection on the role of design in preserving and reimagining cultural heritage.

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[8] [Fig. 8.] Cover of Amélia Muge's first album, "*MÚGICA*" (1991). Digitalization from the original.
[9] [Fig. 9.] Illustration for the presentation concert of the CD-Book "*Não Sou Daqui*" (Amélia Muge, 2007)
[10] [Fig. 10.] Photo of Amélia Muge with a piece of figurado from Barcelos. In: Expresso Notícias Magazine(02/02/2025).
[11] [Figs. 11 - 18.] Images/photos of classes and final projects © Cristiana Serejo