

Dioramami.
Paths of Remediation between
Photographic Memory and Paper Engineering

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the experimental project *Dioramami*, an in-depth investigation into the narrative potential of the interactive book understood as a threshold device between documentary reality (photography) and dreamlike fiction (illustration). The research is situated within the contemporary debate on the remediation of media, proposing the animated book as a physical space where private memory is transformed into a collective and tangible experience. Through the critical analysis of three original case studies – *The World Above*, the family memory carousel, and the autobiographical box in the form of a tunnel book – the research explores how different paper engineering structures can act as tools for translating private memories and pedagogical concepts. Drawing on the author's roots in the world of historical Milanese publishing, the essay describes a hybrid workflow that combines the precision of digital design with meticulous and reflective manual craftsmanship. The goal is to demonstrate how the recovery of ancient artisanal techniques, integrated with multimedia languages and artistic photography, allows the interactive book to function as a modern 'cabinet of wonders'. This device proves capable of meeting the needs of contemporary visual communication by opposing the speed of digital consumption with a 'pedagogy of slowness' through the tactility and care of the artistic artifact. The book thus becomes not just an object to flip through, but a dynamic architecture that requires active and multisensory participation from the user-explorer.

KEYWORDS

Artist's book; photographic remediation; tunnel book.

CITATION

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1. Introduction: The Legacy of Paper and the Warehouse of Memories*

The proposed investigation is rooted in a family legacy linked to the history of Italian publishing. Growing up among the offices and warehouses of a historic Florentine publishing house, Giunti Editore – a reality led by the author’s uncle, Sergio Giunti, in its Milanese headquarters in the Ticinese area – meant internalizing the book as an architectural, material, and labyrinthine object. In this context, the warehouse was not just a logistics site, but a vibrant ecosystem of paper and ink. Childhood memories are populated by massive carts for moving volumes which, in the eyes of a child, were transformed into vessels ready to sail among piles of books resembling islands or skyscrapers. This physical perception of the ‘mountain of paper’ generated a vision of the book not as a simple text support, but as a “space of wonder” (Munari 1977, 45).

The legacy of this historic Milanese publishing house was not just a matter of printed volumes, but a true education of the gaze. The Ticinese headquarters, with its bright offices contrasted with the dense shadow of the warehouses, plastically represented the duality between the intellectual idea of the book and its physical realization. In those spaces, the book was treated as a living body: its fiber consistency, the transparency of the tissue paper, and the precision of the cuts were evaluated. This familiarity with the book-object allowed the author to develop a design approach where technique is never an end in itself, but is always at the service of an emotional narrative. The *Dioramami* project thus follows a theoretical path that sees the animated book not as a simple toy, but as a complex cognitive device, capable of activating a sensory participation in the reader involving sight, touch, and movement.

This ‘personal archaeology’ of paper intertwines with the history of the animated book understood as a mechanical device. The Milanese warehouse, with its metal shelving reaching the ceiling, was not just a storage facility but a true city-book. Every volume moved by the carts represented a brick in an identity construction. The transition from seeing the book as logistical merchandise to an art object occurred precisely through the observation of printer’s sheets (*mazzette di stampa*): untrimmed sheets where images appeared repeated, almost in a cinematic montage *ante-litteram*. It is in this scenario that the concept of ‘interactivity’ stopped being a technological term to become a tactile experience. The child’s hand touching the rough paper, feeling its weight and the pungent smell of fresh ink, anticipates the artist’s hand that today cuts and folds to recreate those same spaces. The *Dioramami* project thus attempts to map this sentimental geography, transforming the book into a place where time is not linear, but stratified, just like the sheets of a historical archive which, once opened, reveal unexpected worlds (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. || Logo of the *Dioramami* project.

* The translation of this contribution, originally written in Italian, was carried out by the Author and was produced in order to provide wider dissemination of the content to an international audience. This contribution originates within the framework of artistic and design research dedicated to the remediation of photographic memory through interactive devices. Special thanks to the Tancredi di Barolo Foundation for the constant inspiration provided by its collections and for its commitment to the promotion of animated books. A special mention goes to the memory of the Milanese headquarters of the Giunti Editore publishing house and to Sergio Giunti, whose sentimental and material archive constitutes the genesis of this project.

2. Operational Methodology: The Hybrid Workflow between Digital and Analog



Fig. 2. || The working process: detail of manual intervention with soft pastels on photographic print to create the shades of memory.

The *Dioramami* methodology is articulated in a complex workflow that integrates the precision of digital design with the sensitivity of artisanal care. The process begins with the decomposition of the narrative into cinematic sequences, an approach derived directly from the author's studies in media design. A selection of original photographic shots – family portraits, urban landscapes, or childhood details – is digitally processed to transfigure documentary reality into a dreamlike atmosphere. This phase of iconographic 'cleaning' serves to isolate subjects from their original context to prepare them for the new staging. The crucial phase, however, lies in the return to the analog. Once the draft is printed on fine papers, the artist intervenes manually with soft pastels and pencils. The use of soft pastels is not a simple aesthetic choice, but a poetic statement of intent. While digital pixels tend to define edges in a sharp and sometimes brutal way, pastel dust spread with the fingertip allows for the creation of that 'shade of memory' that characterizes remembrance. This process of material remediation is exemplified in **Fig. 2**, where the layering of color transforms the photographic shot into a vibrant pictorial plate. Similarly, the decomposition of the original figure and its isolation from the period context allow for the generation of new narrative planes, as highlighted in the die-cutting phases of the individual layers (**Fig. 3**). The artist's skin touches the skin of the paper, in a hand-to-hand struggle that is almost a ritual of re-appropriation. This analog post-production process allows for the resolution of one of the main problems of remediation:



Fig. 3. || Detail of manual die-cutting of photographic layers before final assembly.

the loss of “aura” of the reproduced image (Bolter & Grusin 2002). By manually intervening on every single print, the author ensures that each copy of the book is, in fact, a unique piece. The choice of paper plays a decisive role in this process. It is not simply about choosing a support for printing, but about identifying the correct ‘skin’ for the diorama. For the tunnel book structures, for instance, various weights were tested to ensure that the side accordion had the right structural resistance without being excessively rigid when opened. The tension between the apparent fragility of the paper and the solidity of the paper engineering creates a material paradox that invites cautious and respectful manipulation. Each prototype is repeatedly tested to verify that the planes do not jam and that light can filter correctly through the die-cuts, creating that play of Chinese shadows which is an integral part of the work. Manual die-cutting, performed with precision scalpels, follows the logic of ‘removing to show’: every cut in the paper plane opens a window onto the next plane, forcing the eye into an exercise of continuous focusing (Fig. 4). This physical depth forces the reader to slow down the pace of vision, opposing the speed of digital consumption and bringing attention back to the material quality of the support. This ‘movement test’ phase transforms the artist’s studio into a micro-architecture laboratory (Fig. 5), where every millimeter of error can compromise the perspective yield of the entire volume. Collaboration with professional bookbinding workshops finally ensures that the artifact respects the standards of the artist’s book (Fig. 6). This tension between the immateriality of digital data and the resistance of paper fully manifests at the moment of assembly. Remediation, as theorized by Bolter and Grusin, does not act here as a simple format change, but as a process of “hypermediation” in which the physical support openly declares its presence. The reader of *Dioramami* cannot ignore the texture of the surfaces or the sound of the paper folding; these paratextual elements become an integral part of the message. Furthermore, the act of manual cutting recovers what Benjamin



Fig. 4. | *The gift of magic: the physical detachment of the subject from the two-dimensional carousel towards the real space of the book.*



Fig. 5. | *Technical documentation (WIP): processing phase and manual die-cutting of tunnel book layers.*

Fig. 6. | *The book object: the bound cover of the memory carousel.*



defined as the “aura” of the work of art, removing the photographic image from its infinite technical reproducibility to confine it within a unique and unrepeatable object. In this perspective, paper is no longer a passive support, but a reagent that transforms static memory into a performative event.

3. The Case Studies: From Pop-up to Tunnel Book

3.1. *The World Above*: Tridimensionality as a Pedagogical Game

In this project, the pop-up technique is used to give substance to a dreamlike universe where childhood explores fantastic scenarios. The work ranges between different narrative ‘islands’: from choreographic celebrations among trolls to surreal races on ostrich back. In one of the most significant plates (**Fig. 7**), the integration between photography and paper scenography allows a pink T-Rex to visually erupt from the pictorial background of the page, acting as a majestic narrative engine that welcomes childhood play. While the prehistoric figure welcomes childhood on its back, the actual paper engineering of the pop-up planes develops in the front wings: here, the figures of the little girls engaged in an egg hunt and the surrounding flora physically rise toward the reader. The non-naturalistic color choice emphasizes the detachment from documentary reality to embrace the freedom of imagination. The interactive book here challenges the static nature of the support, acting as a catalyst for adventures and a pedagogical tool to make abstract concepts tangible through the physical movement of the paper.



Fig. 7. | *The World Above*: detail of the spatial construction between the background (T-Rex) and the foreground pop-up layers (figures and flora).

3.2. *The Memory Carousel*: The Cyclical Ride of Family Memories

The carousel book uses its 360-degree circular structure to activate an endless narrative. An emblematic example of photographic remediation is the plate that joins two historically unrelated portraits: the grandmother portrayed as a little girl and the grandfather in fencing attire. Through paper engineering, the artist reunites these childhood memories, coming from different times and spaces, under a lighted portico (**Fig. 8**). The plate stages an encounter impossible in reality, but concrete in the fiction of the book: the comparison between the original shots and their tridimensional translation allows one to observe how paper can suture the wounds of time. Photography stops being proof of ‘what has been’ to become building material for ‘what could have been’. The rotatory fruition of the object invites the reader to



Fig. 8. | *Family remediation*: comparison between the original vintage photographs (fencing grandfather and grandmother as a child) and their tridimensional recomposition in the carousel plate.

turn around the memory, just as one would on a carousel, transforming the book's consultation into a choreographic and kinetic experience.

3.3. The Autobiographical Box: Iconographic and Structural Analysis of the Six Plates

The central core of the research is represented by a box containing six scenes structured as accordion tunnel books. Each plate is an optical device that invites an overlap of at least three layers of depth in addition to the text frame, recalling the fascination of 19th-century peep shows:

Plate 1 – *The Chamber of Wonders*. Explores the archetype of the nursery as the first creative laboratory. The insertion of colored tissue paper fragments into a die-cut lantern allows external light to filter through, projecting colored shadows on the background. This technical device recalls pre-cinema devices and transforms the page into a small shadow theater (**Fig. 9**).



Fig. 9. | *The Chamber of Wonders*: detail of the magic lantern effect through the use of die-cut tissue paper.

Plate 2 – *Metropolitan Little Red Riding Hood*. In this scene, the tunnel book becomes a theatrical stage where the classic fairy tale is remediated in a contemporary urban context. The use of layers in slight photographic fade creates a motion blur effect, simulating cinematic movement in the dance between the characters and the wolf.

Plate 3 – *Paper Treasures*. This is the most direct tribute to the author's publishing heritage. The depth of the tunnel allows for the visual reconstruction of the labyrinthine corridors of the Giunti warehouses (**Fig. 10**). The protagonist is portrayed navigating on a cart-ship among material 'waves' made of rolled-up waste pages, transforming logistical work into a maritime epic.

Plate 4 – *The Creative Mosaic*. Represents the transition toward abstraction and self-portraiture. The artist's face fragments into textures recalling starry skies and galaxies, while her camera-hand is composed of a collage of book fragments and pencils, indicating the fusion between the technological eye and the artisan hand.

Plate 5 – *The Gift of Magic*. This plate celebrates the generational transition. A horse, a recurring element in childhood dreams, physically detaches from the two-dimensional carousel of the background to enter the real tridimensional space of the book (Fig. 4), welcomed by the astonished gaze of a child positioned on the third perspective level.

Plate 6 – *A Journey That Continues.* The concluding plate acts as a definitive gateway to the universe of paper. From within an open book, a castle built entirely of book spines erupts, marking the reader’s definitive passage into the realm of pure imagination.



Fig. 10. | *Paper Treasures*: perspective view of the tunnel book reconstructing the historic Giunti Editore warehouses of the Milanese headquarters.

4. Conclusions: The Casket of Memory and the Challenge of the Future

The *Dioramami* project demonstrates that the recovery of traditional pre-cinematic and paper engineering techniques can effectively respond to contemporary digital saturation. Transforming photography – a medium dedicated to static documentation – into a plastic and dynamic element opens new paths for the artist’s book and the preservation of private memory. The future challenge of the interactive book lies precisely in this capacity to be a ‘guardian of slowness’. *Dioramami* does not intend to be a nostalgic celebration of the past, but a bridge toward new forms of hybrid narration. Analyzing the path taken, it is evident how the interactive book can today act as an antidote to the dematerialization of memories typical of the social media era. While digital images flow quickly on a screen, the diorama forces a pause, a physical change of perspective. The research conducted with *Dioramami* suggests that there is a growing audience interested in objects that possess a physical presence and a story to tell.

The success of this experimentation lies in the ability to combine the methodological rigor of contemporary design with the poetry of manual error, that minimal discrepancy that makes the artistic artifact alive and vibrant. The future of this research will move toward the integration of even more complex elements, exploring the use of translucent papers and sound activation mechanisms, to make the book experience a total immersion in the senses. Ultimately, the value of *Dioramami* lies in its ability to act as a device of ‘temporal resistance’. In an era characterized by an hyper-production of ephemeral images, the interactive book imposes a dilated fruition time. The manipulation of the die-cuts and the discovery of the perspective planes require a hand-eye coordination that activates different cognitive areas compared to simple screen viewing. The research suggests that the future of the artist’s book lies precisely in this form of ‘conscious hybridization’, where digital technology does not replace craftsmanship but enhances its expressive capabilities, allowing for the construction of increasingly complex and narrative paper architectures. Remediation is not a process of replacement, but of enhancement: photography

gains a third dimension and the book gains a cinematic depth. In a publishing landscape increasingly oriented toward standardization, the production of artifacts that require hours of manual assembly represents an act of cultural resistance.

The interactive book thus becomes a 'narrative ecosystem' where the author, the designer, and the artisan coincide in the same figure. Looking through the paper tunnels of *Dioramami*, the reader is not a simple passive spectator, but an explorer who, with the gesture of flipping and moving the page, activates the machine of memory, making alive and present what would otherwise remain confined to the silence of a traditional photo album.

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