Playful readings of an artwork or how a book can "sneak into" a museum

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Abstract: The present paper aims to investigate and to provide a discussion of how we can approach the exhibits of a museum in a creative way so that we can attract student's interest in museums and how a book can "sneak into" a museum to bring to "life" an artwork. For this purpose, we incorporate in Museum Education approaches concerning Children's Literature by using the "tools" of postmodern fiction and the logic of hypertexts to approach an artwork as a museum exhibit.

Key-words: museum education, children's literature, hypertexts, postmodern approach

Introduction

"Playful readings of an artwork or how a book can "sneak up" in the museum" is a creative program that connects museum education and children's literature. Our learning goals are to achieve:

• Learning and awareness for contemporary issues and problems aiming at safeguarding cultural heritage and protection of the environment

• Cultivating empathy, acceptance, and interaction with the 'other', aiming at peaceful and harmonious co-existence

• Development of imagination and creativity in order to be able to imagine a different world

• Observation and sensitization towards artistic creations (visual, literary, musical, etc. works) as well as acquaintance with their creators

• Aesthetic enjoyment and release of their creative forces in the production of texts, musical works, artistic creations, theatrical expression, etc.

The questions we are asked to answer through this project are:

a. How can we approach the exhibits of a museum in a creative way so that we attract students' interest in museums and instill pleasure?

b. How can we "bring an artwork to life" and make students participate to this "reanimation"?

c. And how is children's literature related to a program of museum education?

Our suggestion is that in order to approach an artwork, we may use the basic principles of teaching children's literature and also the "tools" of postmodern fiction as well as the logic of

hypertexts. A hypertext is a particular kind of text that allows the readers to skim through it in a non-linear way as it consists of different "paths" and "links" (Landow, 2006). In comparison to the ordinary printed texts, hypertexts present significant differences that relate to their structural characteristics and differentiate the reading process (Landow, 2006).

The proposed program is suitable for primary school students but with the appropriate adjustments it can also be applied to classes of other educational levels.

About a reading program: Three keywords

The aim of reading literature is for young students to familiarize themselves with the book itself, the process of actually reading and the gradual consolidation of a relationship between the young reader and the literary text (EKEBI 2012). This familiarization requires the development of motives in order to enchant the reader into the world of books and, in turn, to enable them to love the entire process. Ada Katsiki-Givalou notes that "the text, the book in general, must intrigue the reader-student so as to establish a dialogue between the two, to create a curiosity about the characters and the unfolding plot" (Κατσίκη- Γκίβαλου 2008).

The first keyword is the word that will gain the attention of the reader and is, of course, no other than the word "pleasure". Considering that "the element of enjoyment –which goes hand in hand with reading a literary text- is the attracting feature that will allure the recipient into the world of books" (Κατσίκη- Γκίβαλου 2008), the pleasure of reading is derived from the involvement of the reader with the unravelling events of the narrative (Καλογήρου & Λαλαγιάννη 2005). In fact, modern literary theories tend to support the above notion, emphasizing the role of the reader and the process of interpreting and interacting with a text. Keeping this in mind, a teacher may be able to exploit this literary path of discovery "by involving the student in a game of reading literature, thereby transforming the indifferent perusal of a text into an active and critical product" (Κατσίκη- Γκίβαλου 2005). The active participation of the reader, then, constitutes the second keyword of a literature program.

The cultivation of reading becomes possible when the relationship between the reader and the literary text is based on joy and elation, just as in playing a game (Αγγελοπούλου 1994). This brings us to the third keyword. Christian Poslaniec stresses that "successful reading …is the creative energy emerging from the connection between play and imagination" (Ποσλανιέκ, 1992). Playing and reading appear to have a strong affiliation and for this reason, the concept of play can be viewed as being the most significant of all three keywords in reading literature. In particular, the idea of 'play' is so empowering in that it functions in unison with the previously mentioned notions of pleasure and actively engaged participants.

Postmodern fiction in a reading and a museum education program

In postmodern fiction we have a change of perspective; the postmodern writer adopts and uses techniques and strategies which reveal to the reader that what he reads is a construction or a

play, and that is what he also does: he plays and experiments with the texts; and a text, in academic terms, is not only written materials (books, magazines, newspapers etc.) but also, movies, paintings, television shows, songs, political cartoons, online material, advertisements, maps, works of art, and even rooms full of people. In brief, if we can look at something, explore it, find layers of meaning in it, and draw information and conclusions from it, we're looking at a text (What is a text, n.d.).

Some of the key features of postmodern fiction are metafiction and inter-textuality. Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh, 1984). The definition of intertextuality includes: "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double" (Kristeva, 1986: 37).

Children's literature can display postmodern characteristics through (for more on this topic see the dissertation: Αφεντουλίδου, 2015):

  a. *An invitation to co-shape the protagonist*

Gianni Rodari in his story "Adventure with the TV" invites the reader to co-shape the protagonist: "*One night Mr. Verucci was returning from work. Mr. Verucci could be a postman, but he could also be a dentist. We can do whatever we want with him. Should we put a mustache on him? A beard? Let him have a mustache and a beard. Let's try to imagine how he is dressed, how he walks, how he talks. Now he is talking to himself… Let's listen to what he says…*"(Ροντάρι, 2011:157).

In the case of an artwork, that could be translated as an art-creation that one can "play with", such as the parodical representations of the Mona Lisa, like Andy Warhol's *Colored Mona Lisa* (1963) or Botero's Mona Lisa (1978). Another "postmodern" approach of an artwork is the paintings from which a person "escapes", that is images that break out of their frames (*Cigarette break,* Banksy, image 1) or create this effect through a technique known as trompe l'oeil, approaches that aim to blur the boundary between real and fictitious space (Grovier, 2016).

Image 1, Cigarette Break, Banksy

https://www.artofthestate.co.uk/archive/banksy-2/banksy_versus_bristol_museum_004_cigarette_break/

b. Intertextuality

Image 2, Scream and Selfie of Four classical paintings mash up (fotoshop, MindChirp)

https://www.redbubble.com/i/art-board-print/Scream-and-Selfie-of-Four-classical-paintings-mash-up-Mona-Lisa-Girl-with-a-Pearl-Earring-The-Scream-The-Starry-Night-by-MindChirp/46124615.7Q6GI

A typical example for an interrelationship between a text and other texts is the book *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* by the author Eugene Trivizas, a twist on the classic tale "*The three little pigs*" where the roles of the pigs and the wolf are reversed. The intertextuality in the case of an artwork can be expressed through a painting where three depicted people of different paintings meet in one (such as the *Scream and Selfie of Four classical paintings mash up*, image 2).

Methodology of approaching a book

The methodological scope suggested in such projects is a combination of research-based, collaborative, actively participating approaches, in unison with experiential learning techniques. The Project Based Learning Method (PBL) is considered most appropriate as it can entail all three phases of Reading and is implemented through experiential learning techniques. Schematically, the three phases can be described as follows:

1st phase: before the reading (Pre-Reading phase).

The aim is to trigger reading processes, motivate students to read and to create an environment that introduces the student to what will follow <u>so as to</u> provoke his interest.

2nd phase: the main reading (While-Reading phase)

The actions align with the actual reading, comprehension, and analysis of the book.

3rd phase: after the reading (post-Reading phase)

The activities related to the book are expanded. The students proceed to activities that arose in the process and are related with issues and concerns that emerged from the book (Curriculum, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2007)

In the case of a visit to a museum this can be adjusted as follows:

- Before the visit: Creating the right learning environment /stimulating students' interest in the artwork

- During the visit: Being acquainted with the artwork / Getting to know the artwork better

- After the visit: Expanding the activities

An example

A pair of gold earrings with lion heads (4th century, found in a woman's tomb), which are exposed in the Archaeological Museum of Abdera (Xanthi, Greece) becomes the triggering point to develop the suggested program.

For our purpose we use an experiential approach that involves visual, theatrical, musical, and linguistic expression in front of the artwork, theatrical performance, dramatization, role plays, artistic creations, acquaintance with various painting techniques, creative writing, continuation of stories and creation of new ones, linguistic games using various techniques, musical-kinetic games, music-soundtracks etc.

a) Before the visit:

In order to stimulate the imagination of our students we put some questions and we encourage them to make assumptions using the technique of Gianni Rodari *What would happen if…* (Ροντάρι, 1985)? *What is this? What is depicted? Where was it found? What material do the earrings seem to be made of? What if I found them? What would I do? Would I wear them? Would I give them away? Would I change them? What form would I give to them?* The next step is to choose a children's book (a story/a fairy tale) that does not seem to be related to the "earrings" e.g. *The wolf is back* by Geoffrey De Pennart (De Pennart, 1994, watch on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0k_TYTQQrU); then, we print the artwork on a slide and place it in the plot on a page of the book. What role does this play? E.g. for the case of *The wolf is back* the earrings can decorate the mailbox as a design or can be worn by the mom-goat of the 7 little goats or -why not?- by the evil wolf. How does this change the main story of the book?

b) During the visit:

In this second phase the interest focuses on the earrings and our purpose is to find out more about them. Through a playful approach the students try to get pieces of information (e.g. where the earrings came from) by conducting an interview or research as archaeologists or as journalists or even as inspectors who investigate the death of the woman in whose tomb the earrings were found (role-play). So, the students' research looks forward to answering questions like these:

a) *Why did they put these earrings in the woman's tomb?*

b) *Why might she have loved them more than others?*

c) *Which item is most valuable to you? Why?*

d) *Which animal would you choose to decorate your favorite object?*

We are also making assumptions about *what would happen if* the artwork had a "voice":

- If the lions of the earrings came to life, what would they say?

- What if we assumed that they "froze" while they were alive and were captured forever? What could be the reasons that "froze" them? (a spell, a camera that freezes the subject?)

Some of these assumptions could be invested with musical-kinetic games as the following:

What would happen if the earrings fell down? What sound would they make? We combine the phonetic words/sounds of the book (Knock Knock, Toc Toc Toc, Boom boom) with the metallic sound from the earring and compose a piece of music that sounds maybe like... glig glig (earrings).

c) After the visit:

In this phase the artwork comes "to life" and follows the logic of hypertexts through an activity which "borrows" their playful character, eliminating the linear approach and simultaneously requiring the engagement of the students. The hypothesis is that the "earrings" decide to escape from the museum and the students have to make their own assumptions: where to? where do they want them to go? At this point, three options are offered, three "paths" to be chosen:

i. *Meet Picasso's brush?*

ii. *Look for a lion guarding a gate?*

iii. *Get lost in the depths of the seabed?*

i. *Meet Picasso's brush*

The students deal with questions such as: how is an earring worn? On the nose, on the ears? New assumptions are made to find what happens when the earrings go to Picasso's lab and his "ladies" (portraits) wear the gold earrings from Abdera. The use of some visual thinking strategies can help the students examine the painting carefully. But, first of all we can explore who Picasso is and what kind of female figure depicted in his portraits we choose to wear the earrings. Some comic and enjoyable graphics help us understand Picasso's paintings.

(Images and quotation source: Mike Venezia, Οι μεγάλοι ζωγράφοι, Αθήνα, εκδ. Modern Times, 2003)
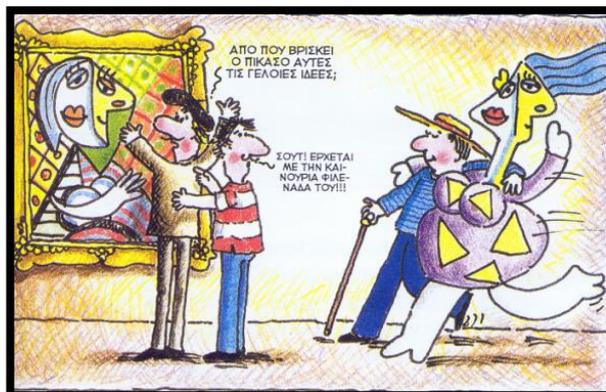
Image 3, "Where does Picasso get these ridiculous ideas from?

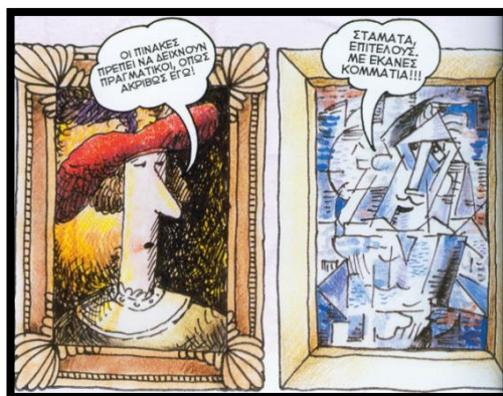**-Shhh, he is coming with his new girl-friend" (Venezia, 2003)**

Image 4, "The paintings must look real just like me

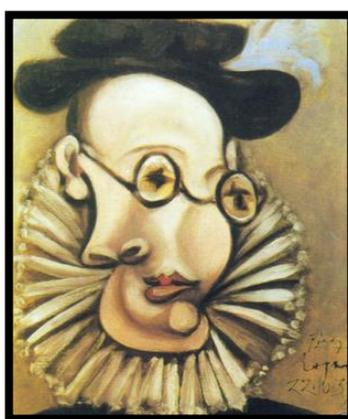**-Stop it! You tore me to pieces!" (Venezia, 2003)**

Image 5, "Imagine how he would have painted me if I had not been his friend" (Venezia, 2003)

As mentioned, the students can choose what kind of woman they want to wear the earrings (e.g. *a. A Skeptical one? b. A Sad one?),* a choice that brings them in front of a "crossroad":

1. *If you want her to be skeptical, choose three works by Picasso, think about what he thought when he painted them and show us a pantomime.*

2. *If you want her to be sad, say, as fast as you can, three things that make you sad and your classmates will suggest three ways for you to be happy.*

Another proposed activity concerns the material (gold) from which the earrings are made. The material leads us to the Myth of Midas, so that we can imagine that the earrings come from the river Paktolos which gushed gold or we can choose another material and make our own brand-new story: e.g., what would happen if the earrings were made of sugar?

ii. Look for a lion guarding a gate?

The logic of the hypertexts will be adopted and, in this case, the students will come across another crossroad. Thus, they have to choose which lion they would like to meet:

1. A lion guardian? (Da Vinci's Mechanical Lion)

2. A robot lion scattering flowers?

And after their choice, they have to choose again:

1. If you choose Lion-guard, which of them do you prefer?

    ✓ The Nemean Lion

    ✓ The Lion Gate in Mycenae

    ✓ The Lion of Amphipolis

2. If you choose a robot lion that scatters flowers?

    ✓ Da Vinci's mechanical lion, commissioned by Pope Leo X for King Francois I in the early 1500s to entertain the French monarch by walking and placing flowers at his feet

3. If you get lost in the depths of the seabed?

    ✓ Deities of water

    ✓ Mermaid women

    ✓ The book "*The Little Triangle-Fish*" by Vangelis Iliopoulos (Ηλιόπουλος, Β, 1997) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGY9H48RJzw)

With any of these options, we can use stories such as the Myths of Aesop or children's books such as *How to hide a lion at school* by Helen Stephens, while simultaneously reading, playing and connecting with each other. Or we can "explore" other animals in earrings, for instance in

Benakis Museum or other museums, and work what "role" we could give to these animals. Maybe a pigeon-messenger? A dolphin-carrier?

Furthermore, one more new assumption may stimulate the interest of our students: What if we fished in a sea or a river…

- … a pair of earrings? Who might they belong to?

- … something else? (make a new story such as *The fisherman from Cefalu* by Gianni Rodari (Telephone tales)

The next crossroad brings the students in front of a new dilemma:

- Do you want to discover known and unknown heroes at the bottom?

- Do you want to discover archeological treasures under the sea?

Needless to say, a postmodern perspective has no end; so, there is an "after" after the "happily ever after". A new project can be connected to this present one: how can the earrings be related to a mirror?

So, in Aigai (Vergina), in the tomb of a young girl (4th century BC) archaeologists found earrings and a small mirror, a bronze masterpiece. On the lid of the mirror, Eros, in the shape of a tender child, comes flying to embrace the god of lust and passion, Dionysus, who, in the form of a young man, sits on the rocks where the panther's hide is laid…

Let us ask the mirror how this can go further:

<div align="center">

"mirror mirror

on the wall…

what's the future of them all".

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