

# The materiality of picturebooks

## Creativity activities

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Although books are considered as mere texts, they are also physical objects that may be used for decorating bookcases and hiding faces on the beach or as doorstops and paperweights. In art, books are symbolic objects or even construction raw material, such as in Giuseppe Arcimboldo's *Librarian*, a painting of a lover of books made up of books or Su Blackwell's delicate book sculptures (e.g. *Down the Rabbit Hole*). Moreover, the hybrid category of book-toys, that as fascinating readable objects for young children flourish in today's publishing market, shows that, apart from words and images, books are visible and tangible entities.

In our digital era, that challenges the ongoing existence of print-books, at the Department of Preschool Education at Athens University (2013), during the course "Picturebooks in Schools", students studied picturebooks not only as texts but also as physical objects. They browsed through different books, examined their physicality and even made their own –for creative ideas for book design see Taylor (2008). Also, during their teaching practice in kindergartens they focused on the same topic and discussed with preschoolers about books in interesting shapes, odd fabrics (e.g. flannel, plastic), different sizes (e.g. miniature and big books) and unual formats (e.g. fold outs, moveble parts). After that, preschoolers were asked to create their own books. The results are quite interesting; especially because not only university students, but also kindergarteners realized that the materiality of picturebooks serves many different functions:

## **1. Books as commercial products**

Books are considered mainly as texts valued for their literary merits, but they are also consumable products. They often avoid the conventional aesthetics of their time, genre and audience and favour innovative formats in order to attract consumers. Nowadays, the book industry has become colossal and the marketing that looms large shows that the book business is a very strong financial sector which in fact epitomises today's entertainment economy (Brown 2006).

A striking example is (low quality) Christmas picturebooks. Being both texts meant to be read and ornaments designed for Christmas decoration, these books circulate in many different shapes and sizes (e.g. as Christmas bells, stockings) and are endowed with many extras, such as music, flashing lights and toys, that often act as a powerful distraction for storytelling –see books with Christmas carol buttons (Yannicopoulou 1999).

Since even preschoolers could realize the strong commercial power of 'bizarre' picturebooks, they tried to make books attractive for consumers. It was amazing how much glitter and how many feathers were spent on books about beautiful princesses! Also, love-books were re-issued in new formats that imitated flowers, hearts and sweets, while books about superheroes were shaped as Batman and Spiderman.

On the other hand, the materiality of books may also act as a tangible metonymy of an outstanding text. In many cases valuable context is communicated by an ornate book –concerning fabric, binding (e.g. hardback versus paperback) or even size and format (see folio and quarto for Shakespeare's plays). The paramount example remains Holy Gospels, which, in a synecdoche that stresses the glory of spiritual truths through materialistic luxury, are often adorned with gold, pearls and precious stones.

In addition, the assumption of a latent analogy between context and content has resulted in the appearance of a new genre. When the cartoonist Will Eisner wrote a story of a religious man who gives up his faith and honest life after the death of his

daughter, he drew from his own deep feelings over the death of his sixteen-year-old daughter. For the book *A Contract with God* (2009), Eisner abandoned commercial comics and released it through a mainstream publisher (Baronet Books, 1978) as the first graphic novel in literary history. Humble comics were considered as an inappropriate means for the heartbreaking mourning of a father, whose deep grief demanded the decency of a quality book and a respectable genre.

Preschoolers' precious books were decorated with beads and glitter and often had locks on them. Valuable context, like *Magical Recipies, Secrets and Spells*, were safely protected inside these beautiful books.

## 2. Books as cultural objects

Books are often considered as art in their own right. This tendency reaches its peak with artists' books, that, as an alternative space for art documentation and exhibition, adopt any form of contemporary art (such as painting, photography, collage, etc) and craft (e.g. bookbinding, typography, calligraphy, papermaking, etc) in order to create genuine artistic objects that deserve not only to be read but also cherished (see Salamony et al 2012).

Although artistic picturebooks have been designed by talented artists for children, their aesthetic qualities transform them into crossover readings (see Beckett 2012: 19-80). Artistic picturebooks as book-sculpures challenge the concepts of how a book looks and blur the boundaries between print conventions and art innovations. For example, Bruno Munari's *Libro Letto (Bed Book 1993)*, is composed of large differently coloured pieces of fabric that can be opened flat like a bed or folded up like a tent. Also, pages that can be zipped together in many different combinations permit the multiple constructions of stories (pict. 1). Munari's book inspired Komagata's *Pata Pata* (2004), a soft, wordless book which forms wonderful places in which children can hide and invent infinite stories (pict. 1).

Also, *The Bed Book* became the inspiration for university students, who in an attempt to highlight the genre of the literary text with the physicality of the book,

made up a quilt-book after stitching together pieces of cloth with a lullaby at one side and a drawing on the reverse. Also, students reissued as another quilt-book Brumbeau's *The Quiltmaker's Gift* (2002) that narrates how a quiltmaker helps a selfish king to understand that giving is the true secret of happiness (pict. 1). Page by page, piece by piece, all the parts of the story, all the patterns of the quilt were stitched together in a symbolic gesture that equates weaving with story-making and texture with text.

On the other hand, the materiality of a book, is indicative of its cultural history through the ages. Since book history is connected with book making technologies (Howard 2005), the difference between the ancient wooden book-like objects and today's e-books is more than obvious (for more see the *Book History* journal). Print culture and 'books' have undergone massive changes even regarding the way they look.

During exhibitions of old, used books preschoolers enjoyed tracing down the marks of their reading history –e.g. marginalia, that personalize books and establish varieties through ownership (Pearson 2008: 93-140). They spotted the differences between old and contemporary books, even if the text (e.g. Grimm's fairy tales) remains the same (e.g. the binding, the feeling, the smell). Also, they created books of past cultures (see Diehn 2006). Imitations of old Egyptian papyrus scrolls, slate books from ancient China, palm leaf books from Southeast Asia and accordion books from Mexico were made by preschoolers who enjoyed experimenting with uncommon formats (pict.2).

### **3. Books define their readers**

Furthermore, a book's materiality contributes mainly to the construction of its readership. Especially today when "literacy begins at birth" (Bohning & Radencich 1989) and there are books even for babies, picturebooks define their readers through their 'thingness' (Monaco 2000: 15). Toy-books, books with sound and motion, board books, touchy-feely, soft-bath and lift-the-flap playbooks are among those that offer a

multimodal experience and are suitable for a very young audience. It seems that the materiality of the books is such a crucial factor in determining the age of the readers, that changes in it bring about changes in their audience –see the pop-up edition of *Little Prince*.

Picturebooks rely not only on verbal text which asks for a reader, and visual text that requires a viewer, but also on their materiality that often calls upon a player (Kanatsouli 2012). Apart from books that combine the features of a book with a specific-themed board game –look, for example, the series of the *Board Game Books* published by Savvalas– there are others that ask for a participator in a hide and seek game (see lift-the-flap *Where's Spot*, 2011) or in criminal investigations (see the split-paged *Art Fraud Detective: Spot the Difference, Solve the Crime*). The book becomes a plausible excuse for playful reading, which asks players to read and readers to play.

Preschoolers were thrilled with reading-playing books that became the springboard for their imagination. Imitating Sellier's *My First 10 Paintings* (2012), which asks readers to guess famous paintings by peeping through real holes that reveal parts of them, they created their own guessing-books with cut-out pages. Also, since Carle's *Mister Seahorse* (2008) introduced some very caring marine fathers hidden behind acetate overlays, preschoolers made books with peek-a-boo pages and endowed reading with colourful surprises. Surprise-books were also made after folding a piece of paper into two unequal parts, and drawing two pictures that shared a common part, e.g. the edge of a boot is also the hand of a girl. The inspiration came from books with fold out spreads, such as *OH!, Guess What-Flowers?* and the Greek *When the Ball Makes Crazy Dreams*, that present certain objects which become entirely different when the flap is lifted, e.g. a cup is transformed into an ocean liner.

On the other hand, a book's materiality aims at the readers' active participation. In some cases books require their involvement in order to make the story happen. In *The Game of Finger Worms*, an inventive board book, children draw faces on their fingertips and stick them through holes in a figure puppet show that is also interactive story-reading. Furthermore, the book as an artifact brings into the picturebook's

domain interactivity and the notion of reader as co-author. In the hilarious *Mixed up Fairy Tales* (2005) and *Fables in the Blender*, split pages allow readers to mix up well-known narratives and create their own unique, even surrealistic, fictional constructions. Also, Sharratt's *Once Upon a Time* and *Pirate Pete* ask readers to create and recreate their own stories by slotting one out of six cut-outs.

University students are thrilled to make their own creative books-games. Inspired by *A Book with a Hole*, which has a real hole that permits readers to complete pictures locating the book against different backgrounds –e.g. a crown is depicted above the hole and depends on the reader to decide who is the king– students created books with holes and gave readers the right to make decisions about both the pictures and the story. For example, in a book-with-a-hole version of Red Riding Hood, it is up to the reader to choose what is inside the basket of the girl, the grandma's bed and the belly of the wolf. As preschoolers put peculiar objects behind the hole, e.g. Little Red Riding Hood carries a gun, the old plotline develops into a rather intriguing twist.

## **5. Books contribute to narrative**

In a multimodal communicational environment book format affects its text and materiality contributes to the construction of the meaning (McKenzie 2004, Tanselle 2009). In many cases the physicality of the book emphasizes certain points (like the pop ups in *Mommy?*) and the book design is treated as a means of an interpretive activity.

For example, regarding Red Riding Hood, if the book is cut in the form of a standing girl, the emphasis seems to be on her disobedience, and her narrowly-escaped punishment makes the story an admonition for naughty children (see Lydia L. Vary 1863). On the other hand, if the book imitates the format of a house, such as in a Czech edition, the story is watered down to a mild version whose main concern is not to terrify children. On the contrary, preschoolers' wordless 'horror' version of a wild, threatening wolf was hosted in a book shaped as a wolf's open mouth (pict.3).

As blank books in different shapes and sizes were available to preschoolers in order to be used for their own stories, children preferred circles for happy stories (“because they are like sweets”), pentagons for family stories (“because they look like houses”) and thunder-like ones for horror stories (“because I am afraid of lightening”). It was also interesting that when children chose between different book-sizes, they used miniature-books not only for stories about tiny protagonists, but also for the adventures of the big, bad wolf. Their explanation was: “Now he is very little, he cannot hurt anybody”. It seems that children believe that materiality may either accentuate the textual meaning or diminish it.

On the other hand, even book extras, like fold outs, not only endow reading with welcome surprises, but they also aid storytelling. For example, in Trivizas’ *Anastasis and the Queue at the Bus Stop* or *Miss Difficult Princess* fold outs are used to emphasize the size of the crowd. In a similar manner, preschoolers added fold outs full of mice in *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* in order to stress the number of rats invading the town of Hamelin.

Narratives interact with book-objects as story agents perform their actions. As *A Hungry Caterpillar* (2006) makes its way through a variety of fruit and vegetables, real holes appear in Eric Carle’s book, while in Emily Gravett’s *Again* a flaming dragon even appears to burn real holes in the book. It is the other way round with picturebooks in which readers interact with books as physical objects at a supposed out of text level and their interaction is inscribed into the textual one (Do Rozario 2012). For example, Child’s *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* shows how story-characters react to the reader’s misuse of the book, e.g. in Cinderella story the prince’s mother is furious with the reader who made her, a lady and a queen, walk around with a thick moustache.

In addition, in *Open Me... I’m a Dog*, a playful ontological game is set by a story-agent who makes great efforts to convince the readers-viewers that the thing they hold in their hands is not an inanimate object, a book, but a real animal, a dog. University students thought that in Iliopoulos’ short story *The suitcase*, where a

neglected child is gradually transformed into a ... suitcase, the effect of this surreal transformation will be reinforced through the modification of the book into a big, blue suitcase with the face of the devastated boy (pict.4).

It is obvious that in the vast majority of cases in which both students and preschoolers had proposed new formats, their shaped books mirrored the theme or the protagonists of the narratives. Echoing established publishing practices, like the animal books by Le Balloon, books were transformed into a wide variety of objects from gifts (Bonniol's *The Gift*) and diaries (*Dora's Diary*) to bags (*The Bag's Fairy Tales*) and sink plug (*Who Pulled the Plug out of the Sea?*). Preschoolers also enjoyed 're-editing' *Mr. Men and Little Miss* series in order to create new book formats in accordance with their different personalities—e.g. a tiny book for Mr Little, a tall one for Mr Tall and a plump shaped book for Mr Greedy (pict.4).

In addition, as it happens with certain picturebooks that emphasize their inter-print loans through elaborated materiality —e.g. *Meerkat Mail* looks like a parcel and in *The Jolly Postman or Other People's Letters* detachable letters are incorporated—students made books that called upon other print material —see their 'edition' of *Walking through Months and Seasons* as a calendar. More interesting is students' proposal regarding the evocative wordless *Waves*, that because it reminded them of a silent animated short film, they changed it into a flip book. As the pages are turned rapidly, the image of the girl comes to life.

It seems that different formats suit different narratives. Accordion books, for example, fit in linear plotlines that narrate the process of a movement, such as *Rosie's Walk*. University students made for the fable *The Turtle and the Hare* an accordion book with movable animal-figures that could be moved along a horizontal track all the way from the start to the finish. Also, Triviza's *The 88 Stuffed Vine Leaves* was shaped imitating an i-pad, functioning as a tangible indication for its hypertextual structure. Also, cumulative or chain tales, in which actions or persons are repeated, while new ones are added at a certain pace/ pattern, e.g. *The Gigantic Turnip* (2002) by Aleksei Tolstoy, were remade in books that resembled folding meter sticks. Page by page and

piece by piece the story-plot develops and the book unfolds in an analogy between the type of narrative and the book format (pict.5).

On the other hand, *Our Big Blue Sofa* is a strokable book about a sofa, that due to its real velvety cloth on every spread, the sofa becomes identifiable though it is constantly transformed into something else, a blue submarine, a floral hospital bed, a smooth hot air balloon. Preshoolers made their own books using different textures in order to stress the qualities of story-characters or certain plot episodes. Thus, for Cinderella they chose, among various papers, a crumpled one for the pages narrated Cinderella's days of suffering with her family and pinkish velvet for her meeting with the prince. Also, they preferred fine transparent paper for a homemade book about fairies, in an attempt to capture the extraordinary, fragile personality of the legendary creatures.

Moreover, the materiality of the book is also used even for accenting literary techniques. It happens with *Time for a Tale*, in which the the box-structuring of the narrative is manifested in a big, hardbinding book (frame narrative) that incorporates a series of small, paperback booklets (boxed narratives). University students worked with intertextuality and tried to give clues about it through the manipulation of the book as a physical object. Zarambouka's *Cats Inspired from Paintings from the Prado Museum*, that present cat-versions of the paintings at Prado Museum, was re-issued with the addition of a golden frame that hinted its artistic inter-pictoriality, while for the picturebook *The Kid*, an adaptation of Charlin Chaplin's well-known film, the book was remade as an imitation of an old film reel.

## **6. Books contribute to the ideological point**

It sounds weird but the physicality of the book can really convey an ideological point, which not only reinforces the meaning communicated by the text, but it can also be even contradictory to the ideology of the text (Yannicopoulou 2009: 316-331).

All three terms, 'upside-down books', 'reversible books' or 'tete-beche' ('head to toes' in French), refer to two books that have been bound together in such a way that

the edition has two front covers. The reader has to flip the first book 180 degrees in order to read the second. Although those bindings were first produced (see *Ace Doubles* in 1950s) for keeping production costs low, many contemporary picturebooks adopt this binding style in order to tell a story from two different viewpoints. Multi-focalized fairy tales, such as *The Untold Story of Snow White* or *Jack and the Beanstalk/ Giants Have Feelings too* present the story facts from two contradictory points of view, the hero's and the villain's, and establish an uncertainty about the story world. "As subjectivity is stressed in literature, a pervasive insecurity about reality is inevitably implied" (Yannicopoulou 2010: 79).

However, the most striking upside-down book that circulates in Greece is translated from Portuguese *What is Responsible for the Crisis, Dad?* written by the right-wing journalist Tavares and illustrated by the leftish Saraiva in an attempt to offer its audience both political explanations. The reader can start either from the blue cover and read about a fat, voracious bear –the deficit of the country– that ate plenty of honey and now has to be on a strict, life-threatening diet or from the red one that talks about angry bees –the markets– that, although they had given lots of honey to the bear, now they decided to stop feeding it. In this book a two-fold narrative provides readers with two alternative ideologies to choose from. However, the book format conveys a message beyond the ones made by the two different viewpoints, proving the ideology constructed by the paratext stronger than those conveyed by the texts: a) Readers need both aspects in order to decide which is better, b) Any viewpoint by itself is always half-truth and unreliable and, what is most important c) The only certainty for the citizens of a democracy is the free expression of all views, no matter which they are.

University students experimented widely with different book formats in order to express different aspects for a specific issue (e.g. Is the wolf good or bad?). They decided to use a 'dos-a-dos' (from French 'back to back') format where two, or even more, separate books were bound together so one book faces outwards and the other inwards. This binding style, that dates back to 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries in England and was

used for books needed together, e.g. the New Testament and Psalter during church services, was considered ideal for stressing the fact that for every question there is more than one answer.

The materiality of books also makes implicit ideological points concerning gender issues. A sexist ideology is conveyed by books about princesses circulated in 'feminine' colours and shapes, e.g. pink flowers. In addition in Cinderella books peritextual elements, such as an abundance of glittering details, are added as a metaphorical affirmation for glossy dreams and a glamorous life. Also in *Cinderella: A Pop Up Fairy Tale*, a similar point is stressed, since, as the stunning dress is actually brought in front of the reader's eyes, it is made absolutely prominent and its value literally tangible.

In an attempt to object to the feminine ideal propagated by Cinderella's fairy tale (Dowling 1981), university students retold her story in a book that its spine and front/back covers consist of bars reminiscent of a prison cell. Although this volume was inspired by the project *Among Human* by Cassandra Fernandez who by presenting birds in cages comments on the theme of freedom, Cinderella's book shows how trapped is a woman inside 'her' own pink dreams.

The contribution of book as an object to the construction of the ideological message is so crucial that eventually its materiality can make a point absolutely contradictory to that of the narrative. The most outstanding example consists of the environmental books that their materiality (e.g. paper made out of trees, whitening bleaches, poisonous inks, transportation) comes in sharp contrast with their ecology-minded text (Beeck 2005). For this reason eco-friendly books made entirely from 100% recycled material and printed using soy-based inks attempt to plant the seeds of eco-consciousness in their readers –see for example *What do You See?*, a lift flap board book about endangered animals published by Eco Toys.

As a result of ecological awareness regarding books' role in destroying the sustainability of the planet, preschoolers decided to make homemade notebooks from recycled paper in order to write down their own eco-stories –for creative ideas see

Taylor (2009). Children got actively involved in re-using natural resources and thus reinforced the ideological point of an environmental text with an eco-friendly book.

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## **Abstract**

Since picturebooks are not only text, but also material objects, university students and preschoolers, after browsing through a wide assortment of them, were asked to make their own books. Through creative activities both groups realized the importance of book's physicality in many aspects: a. Books are commercial products and their intriguing materiality attracts consumers. b. Books are true cultural objects and

valued for their aesthetic merits. c. The materiality of books defines its readership. d. Books as physical objects contribute to the constructions of the textual meaning. e. The paratextual element of materiality interferes with the ideology of the narrative.