

THE USE OF ART WORKS IN THE DIDACTIC COMMUNICATION IN UNIVERSITIES

Anca Raluca PURCARU¹

¹Lecturer, PhD, "Apollonia" University of Iași, Romania
Corresponding author: Anca Raluca Purcaru; e-mail: ralu_pur@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this article I describe the use of art works as alternative to introduction seminars at the academic courses, namely children's illustrated books that have important teachings for both children and adults, and cinematographic art works that are relevant for illustrating the main concepts of the courses. The art works, I suggest, generate debate on important topics and represent a pertinent way of didactic communication. I therefore present my suggestions from two courses: Institutional and Personal Branding and Intercultural Communication.

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The didactic communication in universities, as a means of didactic communication, may benefit from the exemplification of art works. Thus, I use in my courses and seminars some art works that I find relevant for debating academic issues. Academic teaching may rely, in seminars at least, on art works in order to help students better process the academic information, to interiorize it and to get it in touch with their creativity. At Apollonia University we have a modular structure, and since the first courses are dedicated to the introduction in the domain, the first seminars I think that instead of dwelling upon those academic notions are better used as an occasion to debate on artworks.

Ever since I started teaching, I introduced cinematographic art works to better argue the academic ideas, but as a mother I discovered a variety of children books that could as well have been dedicated to adults, books I found to be relevant for the academic issues I teach.

I chose for exemplification the seminars of **Institutional and Personal Branding**, where I use art works to explain the main topics and to

debate them with my students. The first two hours are dedicated to children illustrated books and the next two seminar hours are dedicated to a cinematographic art work.

I recommend students to read together the children's books below. They may be children book, but Bianca Mereuță, founder of Signatura, believes all the books published at this editorial house, she likes to say on the Facebook group **Cele citim copiilor**, are meant for children between the ages of three to one hundred and three. Some of these books have already been used, according to group testimonies, in the pre-grad teaching or even during personal development trainings or team building corporate trainings. Moreover, they are short and adults enjoy reading them as much as children do.

The children's book **Be yourself**, written by Luca Tortolini and illustrated by Marco Soma, published in Romanian at Signatura, (Tortolini & Soma, 2021) is very relevant for the section of the course dedicated to Personal Branding.

This book is "a moralizing tale about the necessity of „being yourself,” no matter the context. This book presentation begins with an imaginary exercise: "I urge you to look in the mirror! Analyse your face, the way in which you arrange your hair and the model printed on your T-shirt. Then, look around and let your thoughts linger upon all that surrounds you – the mustard-coloured corner, the painting on the wall, the car parked in front of your house. Continuing this exercise, imagine now which of these elements that constitute your comfortable universe you could do without. And ask yourself still if, by giving them up, you would still be yourself." (Tortolini & Soma, 2021)

The answer to that question is present in the book, whose main character is a celebrity (an actor). This book is an invitation to meditate, how one can be a celebrity without giving him or herself up. Celebrity comes with a price. One is never left alone; one cannot be how the others want him to, nor can he love whom they want - "I have a fiancée who I barely know. She was chosen by my agent, because she was supposed to consolidate my public image" (Tortolini & Soma, 2021) -, one must be the image to brands they do not like, and one must constantly regard the photographers and the press. "In this shallow world, the resort that drives the individual actions is the maintenance of the public image at contractual standards". (Tortolini & Soma, 2021)

At the seminars, based on the lecture of this book, we will discuss the concept of authenticity in personal branding, the necessity of being honest and authentic in order to avoid projecting a false image about oneself. Even the brands whose image one celebrity is must be brands they believe in and appreciate. Failing to be authentic means failing to be a celebrity, as the main character of the book gave it all up in order to go home and be himself. Duplicity will finally lead to failure. To avoid failure one must avoid deception, inauthenticity and one must never cease to be oneself.

Linked to personal branding and personal development, I recommend students to read **The Magic Hat Store** written and illustrated by Sonja Wimmer. "A story that inspires courage and which reminds us that we must not hide behind accessories in order to prove our beauty and uniqueness, because in us lies the power to will and do." But in this story, "as in a paradox game of details, these esthetical finds give a distinctive appearance to the individual who wears them. And they truly can change the character and alter the personality!" (Wimmer, 2020)

In an ordinary village, suddenly a hat shop appears, but the hats are not by far ordinary. Miguelito is always afraid, but he is the first to enter the store. After shopping for a hat at the store, he is no longer afraid and becomes bold. Other people undergo a similar experience: "Hermina the sad almost did not remember how it is like to smile. However, when she put on her new hat, she greeted every day with joy and

passed on that joy to everyone." (Wimmer, 2020) The hats were no longer accessories, but part of them. They provided the protection they needed in order to reveal the best of them. After the disappearance of the store, they kept the new found qualities.

This story invites us to meditate on our hidden qualities and urges us to find a way to get those qualities out in the open.

Another book for children that I recommend in this course is called **The Gardener's Surprise**, (Balzaretto, 2021) written by Carla Balzaretto and illustrated by Sonja Wimmer, which surprises the character twice, "placing him in the situation of making unconventional choices to his beliefs and convictions. But, when he finally decides which path to follow, he frees himself and becomes happy and master on his own choice. This way, he will make a big surprise to his employers and to the whole world." (Balzaretto, 2021)

The main character is Andrew, a train mechanic who lives with his family in a small apartment full of flowers. His dream is to have a house with a garden full of flowers. When a company offers him a new job with a house and a big garden, Andrew accepts without hesitation. What he does not know yet is that he will no longer fix trains for a living, but instead he will work on war airplanes. As he cannot find peace with himself otherwise, he lets go of his dream garden and transforms the war airplane into airplanes filled with flower seeds from his beloved collection, which he had hoped to plant into his own garden one day. "Andrew had found an even bigger garden. A vast stretching of fertile land. Black, moist land looking upon the sky and waiting a rain of seeds." (Balzaretto, 2021) Thus, the whole world becomes his garden.

The debates following this reading concentrate on the value of peace, the institutions that promote peace, peace as a value in branding strategies such as Signatura's, the necessity of following one's dreams without compromising the code of ethics, the appropriate way to achieve one's goals, the need for flexibility of one's goals and so on.

The last children book I recommend in this course to my students is **Maria and The Library**, written by Valentina Rizzi and illustrated by Natascia Ugliano. (Rizzi, 2018)

This book tells the story of the children who enjoy the reading experiences at the little library they so much love. The librarian, Maria, has a special reading talent, which made her readings seem magical: "Maria seemed taken out from a story (...) Every time she started reading, she completely changed. She took off her scarf, she turned the main lights off, and turned on a coloured light ball. Her fingers transformed into gloves that could bring to life the characters of every page." (Rizzi, 2018)

But the library closes when malls appear on the market, and in its place a video game hall is opened. Unlike the magical experience of reading books that made children feel full of life, people at the video hall looked disturbing and the machines that engulfed money frightened of the children coming to look for Maria and her library. The children tried to shop for books at the mall, but the big stores did not offer the same reading experience they were missing. The children missed Maria and her library. Maria could not stay away from her life as a librarian either, so she became a travel librarian with books in her car. With the aid of the community, the library reopens and the children rejoice.

Following this reading, the main topics I suggest for debate to my students are the need of appropriate branding strategies for the small businesses in order for them to survive the competition and the appropriate strategies aimed at maintain clients and even at convincing new people to become clients based on the uniqueness of the experience the small businesses provide.

The cinematographic art work I chose for this course is the movie **Branded**, also known as **The Mad Cow** and **Moscow 2017**. (Wiki, 2022a) It is a Russian-American dark fantasy dystopia produced and directed by Jamie Bradshaw and Aleksandr Dulerayn, released on September 7, 2012.

Misha Galkin, a young successful marketing director with special abilities to see things after being struck by lightning, begins a relationship with Abby, the niece of an American hired to promote the Western brands in post-communist Russia. Misha believes that the modern marketing was invented by Vladimir Lenin, and that the first true brand was communism. One of the characters, Bob even says: "This whole country is just like one Hollywood back lot". (Wiki,

2022a) Meanwhile, Marketing guru, Joseph Pascal meets with the managers of a fast-food company to plan changing the public perceptions of beauty, so that the fast-food industry becomes fashionable again and obtains profit. They plan on making the overweight people attractive: "Fat is the new fabulous". (Wiki, 2022a) In order to achieve this, Misha is hired to promote a new reality show – Extreme cosmetics, in which overweight people use plastic surgery in order to become slim and attractive, but one woman enters into coma. The campaign "Fat is the new fabulous" is utterly successful and changes the perception of the ideal body type.

Feeling guilty for the contestant's fate, Misha withdraws from the company, as he believes the power of the marketing is a curse. He begins to see the embodiment of brands into creatures that cling to people and he is the only one who does. Abby finds him and returns him to Moscow to their overweight sun who loves fast food. Then Misha begins a war with the brand creatures through an anti-burger campaign and towards Chinese vegetarian food. The brand creatures fight and destroy each other.

Misha is hurt during a violent protest against commercials that are soon banned in most countries. As he recovers in the same hospital as the comatose contestant, he witnesses her waking up in a commercial-free city.

There are many possible debate themes following the viewing of this film. After debating on manipulating the public perception in order to sell a product and using the ideologies in commercials, we debate on the importance brands have on our lives as consumers. One of the topics of the course is **Ethical branding** and we prepare this topic with a debate on the values brands should incorporate, such as health, and how they could become more socially responsible.

Branded is not the only cinematographic work I use in my courses. For the course of **Intercultural communication**, where we do not have any seminars, I reserved the last course for viewing and analysing the movie **The Good Lie**. An American drama film written by Margaret Nagle and directed by Philippe Falardeau, **The Good Lie** was released on September 7 2014. (Wiki, 2022b) This movie I actually encountered as didactic example in one of my peers' courses and

when I watched it, I immediately jumped at the occasion of introducing it to my students.

The movie tells the story of six siblings that escaped The Second Sudanese Civil War, during which their families were massacred. They emigrate to America, where the men are separated from their sister and they meet Carrie Davies, a brash employment counsellor who helps them find jobs and integrate them into a whole new culture that they previously knew nothing about. As the personal that assisted them was culturally unprepared to integrate them, the four men experience a cultural shock.

The most relevant for the course is the section of the movie starting with the flight to America and ending with the five siblings enjoying time in nature after finishing an interview coaching session Carrie had prepared for them after she noticed they are so unprepared to positively impress during a job interview. We debate in this course, with the help of this movie, on the difficulties of intercultural communication.

The movie presents one of the causes of emigration – war refugee – if ever so actual – and can change public negative opinion on war refugees, through the touching story of the siblings.

The movie also presents some cultural differences between the Sudanese and Americans and even cultural biases, such as Carrie's opinion that her wearing a woman lingerie would not matter to the Africans. There are gender differences between the two cultures. For instance, the Sudanese women rely on their husbands or children to support them, as the American women work for a living, such as Carrie, of whom they think "Your survival skills are most impressive". (Wiki, 2022b) The relation with the nature and animals, as the Sudanese's bond with nature is greater, the animals – such as the great white cow – can represent a symbol of great respect. In the movie there are also some technological differences presented (The Sudanese brothers never saw a phone), culinary differences and nonverbal communication differences. For instance, the Sudanese do not use the smile as a form of being polite, as they consider using it in this manner would be lying and this is why Carrie takes them to be couched on how to handle themselves during an interview.

But despite these differences, the Sudanese siblings translate correctly the body language of tension during a conversation Carrie has with her boyfriend after his refusal to employ them.

The movie also provides an occasion to understand the importance of cultural sensitivity – the importance of knowing the foreign culture whom you house and respect their traditions. If the personnel responsible for their integration had been better informed about those cultural differences, the five siblings may not have experienced such a great cultural shock. Luckily, Carrie quickly adjusts her behaviour to their needs.

Based on this movie I discuss with my students about cultural shock, cultural sensitivity, cultural differences and about the difficulties in intercultural communication. Afterwards, we debate on the causes of migration, the emigrants' rights, the multicultural polycentric model and the equality of cultures in a multicultural global landscape. We believe that no culture is superior, and that the importance of a culture does not reside in the technical progress it may or may not rely upon as a way of living.

In this course we analyse the barriers in intercultural communication, as well as the cultural gender differences. One example I give my students is the case of Malala Yousafzai, winner of the Malala Prize – The National Youth Peace award – in 2011 and Nobel winner for Peace in 2014, with the help of the children book **Malala for the Right of Girls to Education** written by Raphaële Frier and illustrated by Aurélia Fronty, published at Cartemma. (Frier, 2018)

Malala Yousafzai, whose Muslim father established the Khushal school, is raised "surrounded by the smell of school notebooks." She dreams of being a doctor, but her dream is in danger when the Talibans conquer the Northern area of Pakistan where she and her family lived and forbid girls to go to school: "How will I make my dream of being a doctor come true, if I cannot learn?" exclaimed Malala desperately." (Frier, 2018) She and her family must find shelter as refugees in the mountains. After a brief victory of the Pakistan government, Malala and her family return to rebuild the schools in Mingora, and she is elected the president of Children Assembly from Swat

region. But in a short while the Talibans return to the valley: "The schools are bombarded again, and the freedom supported executed. Thus, the songs disappear from the valley, and, with them, any trace of joy." (Frier, 2018)

However, Malala continues her fight for children's right to education, despite numerous death threats. Eventually, an attempt on her life is made and she almost dies. The assassination attempt raises world-wide awareness about the faith of girls in Pakistan. But Pakistan is not the only country where girls are forbidden to go to school, or at least discouraged to do so, as they have plenty of domestical responsibilities and they get married at a very young age. Malala continues to fight for girls' right to education and becomes involved in a number of humanitarian projects in areas where girls are being oppressed.

After the lecture, we debate on how fanaticism represents a barrier against intercultural communication, as it violently rejects every other cultural manifestation. I find that this book is a perfect occasion to debate upon the issue with the students, as it is written with sensitivity and is shorter than the adult version, which, of course, I also recommend to them.

In the same editorial collection, the book **Wangari Maathai The Woman Who planted millions of Trees** written by Frank Prévot and illustrated by Aurélia Fronty published by Cartemma (Prévot, 2018) tells the story of the famous Kenyan Environment Minister, the winner of the Nobel prize for Peace in 2004, the founder of Green Belt Movement in 1977.

Since she was little, Kenyan Wangari Maathai, whose name means "the one who belongs to the leopard" (Prévot, 2018) had a special relationship with nature. When she was little, her mother taught her that "a tree values more than its wood." (Prévot, 2018) She even had a garden in her care. At that time the British colonialists wiped out entire forests in order to sell the wood and plant tea. After she is lucky enough to be sent to school by her mother, in a culture where girls were thought that they did not need education and where many people could not read or write, she visits USA to study, at the invitation of John F. Kennedy. There she witnesses a foreign culture, one of both freedom and racial

discrimination. When she returns to Kenya, she finds that the colonialists were gone, but her own people continued wiping out the forests, which had a negative impact on the environment. She begins to plant trees, she founds the green party Mazingira, and fights a long battle against the dictator Daniel Arap Moi, against his projects to cut down the forests, despite the society's prejudice against women having a voice, even after being imprisoned and tortured. The dictator is finally removed in 2002 and she is appointed the Environmental Minister – at last she truly has the power of decision.

She is also known as "Mama miti" – "the mother of trees," as her life was dedicated to planting trees (she planted with the help of her supporters over 30 million trees). After being awarded the Nobel Prize, she "hurried to get at the foot of Kenya Mountain to take a bow. In this place, as a child, she learned the true value of trees. To celebrate this event, she planted there a beautiful tree of fire." (Prévot, 2018)

This book helps students understand the cultural value of the forest, the values of ecology, the gender differences in the African culture, as well as the historical and racial discrimination in the US.

There are other cinematographic works and books that could add up to the above selection. My suggestions are not exhaustive. For the other courses I teach I also try to bring students closer to art works relevant for the topic they study. From my experience, students are receptive to the use of artworks in the didactic communication and they do not perceive them as a disruption of the academic discourse, but rather as an argumentative aid to the academic topics. For this reason, I encourage my colleagues to use, without prejudice, art works in the didactic communication.

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