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Popularizing art for children at the MoMA: A multimodal analysis of the audio-delivered pictorial descriptions

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate popularization practices in museum communication for children. More specifically, the study proposes a multimodal investigation of twenty audio-delivered pictorial descriptions in English specifically designed for children, available in the official website of the Museum of Modern Art (*MoMA*) in Manhattan. The scripts of the pictorial descriptions were retrieved from the website's dedicated section and annotated by means of *QDA Miner Lite* according to a set of codes: 'type of speaker', 'speech', 'music', 'sounds', and 'prosody'. Then, they were analyzed from a multimodal perspective in order to identify key popularization strategies, as well as to investigate how the different semiotic resources are combined to enhance children's art experience. The results show that the encounter with the artwork is shaped as the child's own discovery, in which observation skills and critical thinking are challenged by means of several popularization strategies. A key role is played by questions and invitations (to observe, to think, etc.), as well as by soundscape in which speech, music and sounds are meaningfully combined to increase listener involvement.

Keywords: popularization for children, pictorial descriptions, soundscape, *MoMA*, multimodal analysis.

1. Introduction

With its stated aim to “encourage more people to discover and engage with Europe's cultural heritage”, European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 has placed emphasis on the need to involve the widest audience possible in order to enhance appreciation for cultural heritage. In line with the definition of

institutions “in the service of society” (ICOM 2007)¹, over the last decade museums have explored new approaches for increasing accessibility and inclusion in cultural heritage experience. To this purpose, they have attempted to diversify practices for popularizing art so as to involve those social groups who are not always provided with equal opportunities in the museum experience, such as children, the visually impaired, etc. This approach has resulted in multimodal forms of communication in which different semiotic modes are combined to meet the needs of such categories of visitors.

Defined as “a vast class of various types of communicative events or genres that involve the transformation of specialized knowledge into ‘everyday’ or ‘lay’ knowledge, as well as a recontextualization of scientific discourse” (Calsamiglia – van Dijk 2004: 370), popularization – or knowledge dissemination – practices are crucial in making art accessible and inclusive. A key aspect that needs considering in popularization of specialized knowledge is the target audience, as the popularization strategies that will be adopted to make contents accessible will strictly depend on the target audience’s knowledge of the topic or domain involved in the communicative event. Although popularization for children implies the same processes involved in popularization for lay adults (Calsamiglia – van Dijk 2004; Gotti 2014), it may be particularly challenging for a number of reasons. First of all, bridging the gap in knowledge between experts and non-experts might be problematic due to the fact that children’s cognitive and linguistic skills are not fully developed (Myers 2003). As a result, concepts and vocabulary that are common for lay adults may well become specialized knowledge for children. Furthermore, if on the one hand simplification is necessary to make contents accessible to children, on the other hand simplification may lead to trivialization (De Marchi 2007: 27).

Popularization for children has been investigated in various domains, such as science (Myers 1989, 2003; Bruti – Manca 2019; Cesiri 2019), newspaper articles (Diani 2015), history books (Sezzi 2017), EU institutions (Silletti 2017), legal knowledge (Diani 2018), health knowledge (Diani 2020) tourist promotion (Cappelli 2016; Cappelli – Masi 2019), and cultural heritage (Synodi 2014; Sezzi 2019). As noted by Bonsignori and Cappelli (2020: 214), spoken genres in the domain of tourism and cultural heritage promotion tend to be unexplored, with a few exceptions (Rosypalova 2012; Synodi 2014; Lopriore 2015; Fina 2018; Francesconi 2018).

¹ <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed February 2023.

The present study aims to investigate popularization strategies in audio-delivered pictorial descriptions in English specifically designed for children and available in the official website of the Museum of Modern Art (*MoMA*) in Manhattan. The *MoMA* describes itself as a museum celebrating “creativity, openness, tolerance, and generosity” and aiming to provide “inclusive places – both onsite and online” where “diverse cultural, artistic, social, and political positions” are preserved and where “the most thought-provoking modern and contemporary art” is shared.² The website is structured into four main sections: ‘Plan your visit’, ‘What’s on’, ‘Art and artists’, and ‘Store’. The ‘Art and artists’ section contains four sub-sections, including the ‘Audio’ one which, among others, contains the audio-delivered pictorial descriptions designed for children. To the best of my knowledge, the present study is the first attempt to investigate popularization for children in a cultural heritage-related spoken genre. As will be seen in the analysis, Sezzi’s (2019) case study on *Tate Kids*, the website of the Tate Gallery family entirely dedicated to children, is particularly relevant to the present investigation, as similar features were identified.

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical background for the investigation of the *MoMA Kids* audio-delivered pictorial descriptions revolves around three aspects. The first one is the stylistic nature of the pictorial description as a text type. Drawing on Fina’s (2018) study of city audio guides, this will be illustrated by referring to the stylistic discourse categories developed by Crystal and Davy (1969). The two scholars investigated the category of ‘medium’ by looking at the distinctive features of speech and writing in reference to the classification of texts in the *Survey of English Usage (SEU)*³ (Quirk 1959), which is based on the fundamental distinction between speech and writing. The two scholars focused their attention on the “undesirable asymmetry” (Crystal 1994: 36) arising from the fact that not always does language stay in one category (either written or spoken), but there are cases in which switch occurs as, for example, in dictation, where speech is produced to be written down. This is also the case of the *MoMA Kids* pictorial descriptions, since in the dedicated section of the *MoMA* website each audio file is matched by its script. Thus, at a first stage the pictorial description comes as a written script which

² <https://www.MoMA.org/about/>, accessed February 2023.

³ <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/about/history.htm>, accessed February 2023.

provides information about the artwork; however, at a second stage this script is read aloud by a professional speaker and recorded for subsequent publication. Therefore, the pictorial description is characterized by what Crystal and Davy term “complex medium” (Crystal and Davy 1969: 71) to classify “certain features of a variety which would fall as a general rule within one kind of discourse by reference to features which would normally be expected to occur only in another”. On the basis of these theoretical observations, the *MoMA Kids* pictorial description as a text genre can be considered an informative script-based oral presentation, whose aim is to popularize art for children. Since the final product is audio delivered, the semiotic mode involved in this text genre is the aural mode, which is based on sound in all its semiotic forms (Kress – van Leeuwen 2001).

Thus, the second theoretical aspect relates to multimodality: since the *MoMA Kids* pictorial descriptions feature script-based speech, music, and sounds, they can be theoretically framed within van Leeuwen’s (1999) model of soundscape. Van Leeuwen defines ‘soundscape’ as a composite semiotic system consisting of speech, music, and sounds, which interact at different degrees of loudness. ‘Sound’, however, does not refer to sounds from external sources only, but it also relates to the way we use voice. Indeed, voice itself is a physical sound, as “the same voice that whispers can also sing, shout, and scream [...]” (Cluett 2013: 116). Van Leeuwen’s model consists of an analytical framework aiming to investigate speech, music and sounds as interrelated phenomena, in terms of “sound-as-sound”, “sound-as-music” or “sound-as-language” (Van Leeuwen 1999: 6). The model comprises six parameters, which are *not* intended to provide a code, but are rather considered as tools to establish some “meaning potential” (Van Leeuwen 1999: 10, emphasis in the original) always to be referred to the specific context in which the sound event occurs. The parameters are the following:

- Perspective, i.e., the relative loudness of simultaneous sounds which places sounds at different distances from the speaker;
- Time and rhythm, i.e., the tempo characterizing sounds;
- Interaction of voices, i.e., how the plurality of voices involved in the soundscape intertwine (by taking turns or simultaneously);
- Melody, which is realized through pitch movement, pitch range and pitch level, with pitch being modulated in order to convey specific emotions;
- Voice quality and timbre, which includes varying degrees of tension, roughness, breathiness, loudness, pitch register, vibrato;
- Modality, which refers to the degree of truth assigned to a sound and is determined by a combination of the previous features.

The main feature of interest in the analysis will be how these three elements interact to create meaning, facilitate understanding and increase children involvement, with a focus on the key popularization strategies.

The third aspect concerns popularization discourse as theorized by Calsamiglia – van Dijk (2004) and Gotti (2013), and in particular on the different types of explanations they identified as one of the most widespread knowledge dissemination practices. The focus of the analyses will be on ‘denomination’ (or ‘designation’), whereby new terms are introduced by indicating the specialized terms, and ‘definition’, which implies the explanation of unfamiliar words through the description of some properties or components of the thing being referred to.⁴ Other strategies that will be analyzed are ‘anchoring’ to the reader’s background, and ‘analogy’ (or ‘association’), which involves a comparison with objects or concepts that are cognitively familiar to the layman, as in similes or metaphors.

3. The study: Data, methodology and research questions

The data include twenty pictorial descriptions in English downloaded from the *Kids* section of the *MoMA*’s website⁵:

Table 1. Corpus of *MoMA Kids* pictorial descriptions⁶

1.	<i>The Red Studio</i> (Henri Matisse)
2.	<i>Broadway Boogie Woogie</i> (Piet Mondrian)
3.	<i>One: Number 31</i> (Jackson Pollock)
4.	<i>Vir Heroicus Sublimis</i> (Barnett Newman)
5.	<i>The Dream</i> (Henry Rousseau)
6.	<i>Frontal Passage</i> (James Turrell)
7.	<i>House by the Railroad</i> (Edward Hopper)
8.	<i>The Sleeping Gypsy</i> (Henri Rousseau)
9.	<i>The Piano Lesson</i> (Henri Matisse)
10.	<i>Still Life #30</i> (Tom Wesselman)
11.	<i>Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin</i> (Gino Severini)
12.	<i>The Migrants Arrived in Great Numbers</i> (Jacob Lawrence)

⁴ Paraphrase and exemplification were not found in the scripts.

⁵ <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/289>, accessed February 2023. The pictorial descriptions in Table 1 are those that were available at the time of the research.

⁶ Due to regular re-organization of the *MoMA* website, the pictorial descriptions analyzed in this study (or some of them) might no longer be available.

13. | *Christina’s World* (Andrew Wyeth)
 14. | *Untitled* (Mike Kelley)
 15. | *Splatter Chair I* (Richard Artschwager)
 16. | *Guitar* (Pablo Picasso)
 17. | *The Magician* (Jean Dubuffet)
 18. | *1Flag* (Jasper Johns)
 19. | *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (Umberto Boccioni)
 20. | *Martin, Into the Corner, You Should Be Ashamed of Yourself* (Martin Kippenberger)
-

Each pictorial description lasts about two minutes and can be listened to on the website itself. While listening, the picture of the artwork and the script of the recording are displayed. The contents of the scripts were copied and pasted in single Word files, compared with the recordings and checked for consistency, and then annotated by means of *QDA Miner Lite* (Provalis Research 2011), a software for qualitative data analysis. This software allows users to annotate the data by creating codes and assigning them to selected text segments. The segments labelled with a specific code can then be retrieved, and co-occurrence with other codes can also be displayed.

The scripts were annotated according to five code categories (or node codes) – ‘type of speaker’, ‘speech’, ‘music’, ‘sounds’, ‘prosody’ – each including a set of related sub-codes. The category ‘type of speaker’ includes the types of speakers – apart from the narrator – who might intervene in the description, such as actors or young visitors; the category ‘speech’ includes a set of codes which label content types and their communicative aims or specific verbal strategies, such as different types of question, invitations, popularization strategies (e.g., denomination, definition, etc.). As for extra-verbal features, the category ‘music’ includes sub-codes that label music in relation to its relevance or non-relevance to what is being narrated or described, as well as musical pauses or aspects related to the parameter of ‘perspective’ (see section 2); the category ‘sounds’ draws on a previous classification (Fina 2018, adapted from Crook 1999) and includes sub-codes that classify sounds as ambient sounds (i.e., sounds describing indoor or outdoor environment), sound signals (e.g., those marking the end of a section), confirmatory sounds (i.e., sounds representing or reinforcing the mentioned action, event or situation), or impressionistic sound effects (i.e., particular effects applied to voice or sounds). Finally, the category ‘prosody’ includes the following codes: pause, sentence stress, non-verbal emotional vocalization (e.g., laughter), voice quality (e.g., lax vs tense), and rhythm, which is determined by specific patterns of sentence stress, pausing, alliteration, etc.

The categories and related sets of codes do not operate separately: instead, they integrate with each other to create meaning, increase accessibility and enhance the young visitor's museum experience. Thus, the analysis will develop around the following research questions:

- What strategies, at both the verbal and extra-verbal levels, are adopted in the *MoMA Kids* audio-delivered pictorial descriptions to popularize art for children?
- What is the role of the soundscape⁷ in the popularization process?

The multimodal analysis of the pictorial descriptions will shed light on the key popularization strategies and will highlight how the different semiotic resources characterizing the soundscape are combined to create meaning and involve the young listener.

4. Analysis

Before proceeding with the analysis, a number of general features of the pictorial descriptions need describing. First of all, the general structure of the pictorial description involves two phases: a narrative or descriptive phase and an explorative phase. In the former, the story underlying the painting or the description of what is depicted in it is provided; in the latter phase, the young listener is invited to visually explore the painting or encouraged to interact with it. However, as we will see in the analysis, these phases are often blended. A second key aspect is second speaker intervention, which involves either actors impersonating fictional characters that narrate the represented story, or children engaged in a 'peer-to-peer' discussion of the represented objects or people in the paintings. This leads to a third key aspect, which is the frequent use of questions and invitations, by which the young listener is addressed directly and encouraged to explore the painting and subsequently to reflect on the meaning underlying it. Finally, the narration and description are often enhanced by music and sounds, which do not seem to have been chosen randomly, as in several cases they actually mirror the story or concepts which are being delivered by the speaker. Analyzing these aspects separately would not successfully exemplify the integration of the different semiotic resources involved in the popularization process. For this reason, the analysis will be carried out from a multimodal perspective:

⁷ For a detailed study of soundscape in the *MoMA* pictorial descriptions for children, see Fina (2020).

it will begin with verbal strategies and will then be expanded to extra-verbal strategies. The type(s) of narrator involved, the type of music and sounds, the presence of musical pauses ('musical P') and distinct pauses lasting around 1 second ('[P]') are all indicated in the analyzed excerpts.

4.1 The role of questions

The frequent use of questions as a strategy of popularization for children has already been highlighted in previous studies (Diani 2015, 2020; Sezzi 2017, 2019; Silletti 2017). In this study, questions were classified into the following types according to their main function:

1. narrative questions, i.e., questions regarding possible outcomes in the story represented in the painting and posed to sustain tension and keep the young visitor interested (e.g., "What do you think will happen next?" or "Is he[the lion] going to eat her?");
2. didactic questions, i.e., *wh*- questions regarding the objects or characters represented in the painting (e.g., "Now what do you see?"); these were found to be frequently used also in museum websites (Sezzi 2019);
3. questions aimed at description, i.e., questions posed by the narrator to indicate or describe details of the artwork, and often introduced by expressions like "Did you see...", "Can you see/find..." (e.g., "Did you see a ceramic plate and a white box of blue crayons?").

Types 1 and 2 are not mutually exclusive, as didactic questions can be considered a sub-type of narrative questions and the two functions involved may co-occur in the same question. Furthermore, both types belong to the same type of exploration, since they both encourage the child to describe what is represented or to imagine the story behind the depicted scene. A different type of exploration is involved in type 3, instead, since questions aimed at description usually provide ready-made descriptions which are meant to facilitate item identification. As such, types 1-2 and type 3 are mutually exclusive.

We will now begin the investigation by analyzing the following excerpt:

- (1) [Male narrator]: This painting by artist Henri Rousseau shows a mysterious scene. ^[1]*Where is this woman*, and ^[2]*why is there a lion with her?* Look closely at the painting. [P] ^[3]*What clues can you find?*
 [Kid 1]: It's night time – the stars and the moon are out.

[Kid 2]: It looks like a desert, but there's water behind them.
 [Kid 1]: ^[4]*How did she even get there?* I don't see any footprints.
 [Kid 2]: She's got an instrument with her, ^[5]*maybe she's a musician?*
 [music performed by a mandolin]
 [Male narrator]: And ^[6]*what about that lion?* ^[7]*Is he going to eat her?* [lion roaring softly] ^[8]*Or is he here to protect her?* [lion roaring softly]
 Maybe the lion is part of the woman's dream as she sleeps. Or, maybe the woman is in the lion's dream! [lion roaring louder] Oh, sorry!
 [whispered] ^[9]*What do you think will happen next?*
 (*The Sleeping Gypsy* – Henri Rousseau)

This script relies heavily on questions so as to make the meaning of the painting manifest to children, but these questions serve different aims. Questions [1], [2] and [3] are didactic questions, by means of which the young listener is invited by the main narrator to describe the scene. Thus, far from providing ready-made descriptions, the child's observation's skills are challenged from the start. In terms of soundscape, interaction of voices takes place, since the answers to such questions are not provided by the narrator himself, but by two children who participate in the discussion. This dialogic dimension may produce two interrelated effects: the description takes place not in the form of a 'lecture' but of an informal discussion among peers; as a result, the formal distance between the expert narrator and the non-expert listener is neutralized. Furthermore, since question [4] is asked by Kid 1 rather than the narrator, the young listener will feel encouraged to visually explore the painting and draw hypotheses about its meaning exactly as his/her fellows do in the recording. Questions [6]-[9] can be classified as narrative questions, instead, since their aim is to encourage the listener to use his/her imagination to go beyond what can be seen in the painting and come up with possible outcomes of the story. At the extra-verbal level, in the Kid 2 line about the instrument lying next to the gypsy, music plays a key role in popularization. The name of the instrument – a mandolin – is not named verbally, but this omission is compensated for by the music that can be heard after the utterance "maybe she's a musician", which is performed by a mandolin. Furthermore, the lion depicted in the scene is also brought to life by the roaring sound (confirmatory sound), which aurally marks questions [7] and [8]. Finally, the concluding lines "Maybe... Or maybe..." seem to encourage the listener to reflect on possible meanings of the artwork beyond objective representation, and a connection between the observer and the painting is

created in the aural interplay between the lion, who roars louder, and the narrator, who apologizes for disturbing him.

We will now analyze the use of questions in the following excerpt:

- (2) [Sound of steam train in the background]
 [Female narrator]: You're in a train car over 65 years ago, in America, leaving the deep south.
 [Actor impersonating the train driver]: [sound of train in the background] You'll be lucky if you find a place to sit – on this car every seat is taken. Excuse me, ma'am, you'll have to move your bag – i-it's blocking the aisle.
 [Female narrator]: ^[1]*But where are all these people going?*
 [Actor impersonating the train driver]: They've left their homes and they're traveling north! Places like New York, Chicago [increased loudness].
 [Female narrator]: ^[2]*Why?*
 [Actor impersonating the train driver]: They're hoping to find work in the big cities. ^[3]When so many people travel, it's called [P] a migration. Next stop, Philadelphiaaaaa! [increased loudness] [sound of train] [sound of train ends]
 [Female narrator]: Artist Jacob Lawrence created sixty pictures. [...] *(The migrants arrived in great numbers – Jacob Lawrence)*

Wh- questions [1] and [2] can be classified as didactic questions, but they actually relate to the part of the story that is not visible in that painting. Indeed, what the young listener sees is black people walking and holding luggage: 'where' and 'why' are not manifest in the painting and require some background knowledge which a child, especially if little, is unlikely to possess. Thus, these questions could be better defined as narrative questions, as they focus on possible outcomes of the story and probably aim to raise the child's curiosity and stimulate his/her critical thinking. Such questions, however, are uttered by the narrator herself, who does not (directly) address the listener but the train driver, a fictional character brought to life by the voice of an actor. Thus, in this case the dialogic dimension involves dramatization:⁸ the temporal gap is nullified by placing the narrator in the scene herself, and the story behind the painting is brought to life by

⁸ For a detailed analysis of dramatization in the *MoMA* pictorial descriptions for children, see Fina (2020).

means of the dialogic dimension between the narrator and the fictional character. In this case, too, the formal distance between the expert narrator and the non-expert young visitor is neutralized, as the ‘where’ and ‘why’ of the story are seamlessly explained to the children by a fictional character. Worthy of particular attention is line [3], in which popularization takes place through the strategy of definition (“When so many people travel”) followed by denomination “it’s called a [P] migration” (see sub-section 4.3). The word “migration” is preceded by a distinct pause (signalled by ‘[P]’ in the excerpt), which emphasizes the concept and makes it easier for children to memorize. Sounds of a steam train are used as “immersive triggers” (de Jong 2018) to make the scene vivid in the young listener’s mind, in the same way as the marked accent of the English spoken by the train driver conveys authenticity. The end of sounds marks the end of the dramatized scene, and standard narration begins (“Artist Jacob created sixty pictures. [...]”).

We will now analyze the use of questions in the following excerpt:

- (3) [Female narrator]: ^[a]Take a moment to look all around this painting. [7s musical pause – classical piano music starts, moderato, melancholic – well audible during speech] ^[1]Where do you think we are? [2s musical P] ^[2]How do you know? [2s musical P] ^[3]See all the paintings in this painting?! ^[b]Don’t forget to look on the walls AND the floor. There are a few sculptures, too. ^[c]Try to find them. [4s musical P – louder after speech] ^[4]And what about on the table? ^[5]Did you see a ceramic plate and a white box of blue crayons? [5s musical pause] [sound signal] [music ends].

This is a painting of the studio where the artist Henri Matisse made his art. You can also think of it as a portrait of Matisse himself, because it contains so many things he made.

(The Red Studio – Henri Matisse)

Questions [1], [2] and [4] clearly challenge the child’s observation skills, as they invite him/her to identify the type of room represented in the painting based on the objects that are depicted in it. Questions [3] and [5], instead, are questions aimed at description, in which details of the painting are introduced by the rhetorical question “Do/Did you see...?”. Thus, their actual function is to direct the listener’s gaze towards specific items in order to facilitate exploration and identification by providing precise details about the objects (“ceramic plate”, “white box”, “blue crayons”). At the extra-verbal level, music can be argued to play an important role in the exploration process. The music consists of a melancholic melody performed

by a piano at a moderato tempo: thus, it can be classified as narrative- / description-independent (as opposed to narrative- /description-specific), as it has merely a mood-setting function and is neither explicitly nor implicitly linked to what is being narrated or described by the speaker. Music is used to fill the pauses⁹ in-between the questions and invitations uttered by the speaker. The musical pauses after invitations [a] and [b] and the one after question [5] last around 7, 4, and 5 seconds respectively, presumably to give the young listener some time to visually explore the painting. The end of the explorative phase is marked by a sound signal and by the end of the piano music. In terms of perspective, the music is well audible during speech without compromising intelligibility, but its volume is louder in musical pauses and lower when speech resumes.¹⁰ Finally, at the level of prosody the conjunction “and” in invitation [b] bears prosodic stress [signalled by the use of all caps] so as to more firmly encourage the listener to thoroughly observe all the parts of the painting.

Further examples of questions aimed at description are provided in the following excerpts:

- (4) [rhythmic music with drums in the background] ^[1]*How about this critter?* [cry of the elephant] ^[2]*Did you find the elephant, behind the orange tree?* (*The Dream* – Henri Rousseau)
- (5) ^[1]*In the upper right corner see the string of colorful flags?* [2s musical P] ^[2]*And the little cat face?* [cat meowing] (*Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* – Gino Severini)

In these excerpts the questions intertwine with confirmatory sounds which reinforce the concept or item mentioned by the speaker. In excerpt (4), the gradual discovery of the animals dwelling in the jungle depicted by Rousseau is marked by confirmatory sounds reproducing the animals’ cries or movements, and the sounds occur before the animals are mentioned, thus serving as hints about what to look for in the painting. The critter sound is introduced by didactic question [1], which prompts the listener to associate the sound with the animal producing it and identify the animal in the painting. Then, the identification process is facilitated by question

⁹ Musical pauses lasting around 1 second and reflecting the normal duration of full stop were not annotated in the script.

¹⁰ This pattern characterizing the interaction between speech and music was found in all the pictorial descriptions analyzed.

aimed at description [2], which also indicates the position of the animal in the painting (“behind the orange tree”). In terms of perspective, the critter sound is foregrounded against other animals’ cries as well as the musical soundtrack, which is characterized by rhythmic, energetic music performed by drums. In excerpt (5), instead, the confirmatory sound reproducing the cat meowing occurs after the cat is mentioned in question aimed at description [2]; furthermore, similarly to excerpt (4), question aimed at description [1] indicates the position of the object to be identified (“in the upper right corner”).

To sum up, in line with Sezzi’s (2019) results, the examples analyzed in this section have shed light on the crucial role played by questions in the popularization process, up to the point that they become “an integral part of knowledge dissemination” (Sezzi 2019: 170).

4.2 Invitations

The dialogic and informal style characterizing the pictorial description is determined not only by the frequent use of questions but also by invitations. The young listener is often addressed directly and prompted to observe the painting or identify items in it, as in excerpt (1) (“Look closely at the painting”) and in excerpt (3) (“Take a moment to look all around this painting”, “Don’t forget to look on the walls AND the floor”, and “Try to find them”). Other instances of invitations, instead, prompt the young listener not only to observe, but also to play or ‘interact’ with the artwork. An example is the following:

- (6) ^[a]Take a few more steps back. [xylophone-like descending scale representing the steps the kids have to take] ^[b]Now look at the most important part of the painting. [P] ^[1]What? *You can’t see one?* In most paintings the artist shows us what’s important. But here, the colors and paint are spread all around so your eyes roam all over. [3s musical P] ^[c]Okay, now walk up closer [xylophone-like 3 ascending notes representing the steps the kids have to take] and ^[d]choose one thread of paint. [3s musical P] ^[e]Don’t get too near, but use your finger in the air to trace where your thread is going. [2s musical P] ^[f]Follow it as far as you can. [2s musical P] ^[2]*Can you keep track of it under all those layers, or do you get lost in the tangle?* [7s musical P, then end of music]

(*One: Number 31* – Jackson Pollock)

The child is invited first to step back from the painting (invitation [a]), and then step closer to the painting (invitation [c]) in order to fully grasp

the peculiar use of colours made by the artist. Invitations [b], [d] and [f] aim to make the young listener an active participant rather than a passive observer. Indeed, the child is here invited to experience personally on the one hand the impossibility of finding a core subject, and on the other hand to realize the complexity of the artwork. In this process the child is guided also by questions [1] and [2], which can be defined as rhetorical questions. If distance from and closeness to the painting serve educational purposes, the three-note descending and ascending scales performed presumably by a xylophone have a pragmatic value, as they accompany the invitations to change proximity to the painting.¹¹ Thus, at the extra-verbal level, the use of musical patterns conveys the idea of fun and game, which definitely make the educational experience more appealing for children.

We will now analyze the following excerpt:

- (7) Now, stand in front of the painting, in the middle. ^[a]Move closer, but not too close. [xylophone-like ascending notes representing the steps the kids have to take]

^[1]*Is it scary?* [scary music] ^[2]*Exciting?* [exciting music, as in the culminating moment in a film] ^[3]*Or does it make you feel warm, like you're in front of a fireplace?* [sounds of flames]

[...] Here's a fun game to play with your grown-up. ^[b]See if you can each come up with five words that describe this painting without using the word "red." Give it a try!

(*Vir Heroicus Sublimis* – Barnett Newman)

This excerpt shares similar patterns with excerpt (6) in terms of invitations and use of music. However, it also features three questions which can be said to indirectly invite the child to identify the emotion(s) produced by the use of red in the artwork. Once again, the listener is guided in this process, this time by the scary music occurring after indirect invitation [1], the exciting music accompanying indirect invitation [2], and the confirmatory sound reproducing flames in a fireplace occurring after indirect invitation [3]. The pictorial description ends with a further invitation ([5]), this time to play a game, whose aim is probably to challenge the child's skills in describing things but also to foster imagination and critical thinking.

The following excerpt is worth analyzing, too:

¹¹ The same pattern was also found in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* by B. Newman and *The Dream* by H. Rousseau.

- (8) This figure seems to be right in the middle of running, [1s P] like when you take a photo of someone moving and it's blurry. [musical P] ^[a] See if you can make the same pose. [3s musical P] ^[1]Where did you put your legs and [1s P] ARMS? Hey, the arms on this sculpture seem to be missing! [...] ^[b]Try making your own action pose. ^[2]How can you show energy and motion?

(Unique forms of continuity in space – Umberto Boccioni)

Here the child is invited to reproduce the same pose as the sculpture (invitation [a]) so as to make him/her realize that the sculpture has no arms (*wh-* question [1]). To guide the child through this process, the speaker prosodically delays the word “arms” by making a 1-second pause before pronouncing it, as well as by marking it with high pitch. Towards the end of the pictorial description, the child’s imagination and critical thinking are challenged by invitation [b] and didactic question [2], by which the child is invited to use his/her own body to mimic a sculpture conveying energy and motion. It is also worth noticing that the popularization strategy of analogy is used to better describe the pose of the sculpture ([...] “like when you take a photo of someone moving and it’s blurry”). The analogy anchors the concept of “being in the middle of running” to the child’s everyday life experience; at the prosodic level, it is preceded by a 1-second pause which makes the core message more memorable. Further examples of analogy will be provided in the next section.

4.3 Other popularization strategies

As rightly noted by Calsamiglia and van Dijk (2004: 371), “popularization discourse must always adapt to the appropriateness conditions and other constraints of the media and communicative events”. This aspect is particularly crucial in the case of the *MoMA* pictorial descriptions for children, firstly because concepts that can be classified as non-specialized knowledge might actually be specialized knowledge for children due to likely gaps in their cultural background, but also because the text is to be delivered orally, thus posing issues related to balancing information load, a need for synthesis, and time constraints. In line with Sezzi’s (2019) results, a frequent strategy adopted in the pictorial descriptions is explanation, in all its various forms. Denominations and definitions tend to co-occur in the same utterance, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

- (9) Wesselmann's kitchen is a collage – but he called it '*a still life*', which means a bunch of objects grouped together. (*Still Life #30* – Tom Wesselmann)
- (10) It's twelve and a half feet long, made up of different colors and patterns and forms – pink, blue, orange, and green stripes. *And orange shapes with eight sides, called octagons.* (*Untitled* – Mike Kelley)
- (11) Can you find the letters V–A–L–S–E? [Viennese waltz begins; it decreases in loudness when speech resumes] *They spell "valse" – French for "waltz" – a dance where two people whirl round and round in circles!* (*Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* – Gino Severini)
- (12) Painters often make *pictures of people to capture how they look – they're called portraits.* (*House by the Railroad* – Edward Hopper)
- (13) How is this flag different from others you've seen? [andante music begins, piano and other instruments repeating the same notes in unison] Look closely and check out the materials he used to make it. [musical P] Johns used *encaustic paint, which is hot wax mixed with color, to give it that bumpy, thick, smeared texture.* (*Flag* – Jasper Johns)

In excerpts (9) and (13) the definitions of the specialized terms "still life" and "encaustic paint" are provided by means of a relative clause, while in excerpts (10) and (12) the denominations "octagons" and "portraits" are introduced by the metalinguistic item "called" (Gotti 2008). The following excerpt is worth discussing, too:

- (14) Instead of listening to the birds chirping, [birds chirping ends] he has to concentrate on the beat of the *triangular metronome on the piano.* (*The Piano Lesson* – Henri Matisse)

Here, no definition of the term "metronome" is provided, but this object is made easily recognisable by indicating its position ("on the piano") and its shape ("triangular") (Fina 2018).

Another popularization strategy is 'analogy', which is also used to simplify concepts by associating them with things characterizing everyday life, as in the following examples:

- (15) [playful music conveying the idea of colours and game] These patterns and woolly materials may look familiar. [3s musical P] [music turns

into soft, reverberating sounds similar to a lullaby] Cozy. *Like something to curl up in if you're chilly, or cuddle when you're afraid.* (Untitled – Mike Kelley)

- (16) Artist Jacob Lawrence created sixty pictures. They tell the true story of a time when thousands of African-Americans moved from the farmlands of the south to cities up north in search of a better life. [guitar music begins] Each picture tells an important part of the story, like illustrations in a book. (*The migrants arrived in great numbers* – Jacob Lawrence)

At the extra-verbal level, in excerpt (15) the analogy is reinforced by music. In the part of the script preceding the excerpt the music is a playful one, with a rhythmic pattern that conveys the idea of different colours and shapes. Then, when the speaker utters the adjective “cozy”, the music turns into a lullaby, which certainly conveys feelings related to cosiness and comfort. Thus, in this case music is description-specific, as it evokes the concepts mentioned by the speaker.

Finally, the strategy of ‘anchoring’ was also found to be used for the artwork to be perceived by the child as close to his/her own world rather than something abstract and unfamiliar, as in the following excerpts:

- (17) *Many traditional still life paintings show fruits and vegetables on a table. But not packaged foods! Do you recognize any from your own kitchen?* (*Still Life #30* –Tom Wesselmann)
- (18) *Have you ever molded anything out of clay or playdough? Or have you seen something carved from stone or wood? That's how most sculptures had been made before Picasso. But Picasso decided to cut shapes out of sheets of metal and put them together to build this guitar and make a work of art!* (*Guitar* – Pablo Picasso)
- (19) [evocative music in the background] [...] *Have YOU [P] ever taken an ordinary object – a rock, a stick, or something you found – and turned it into something else? I bet you have.* With imagination, EVERYONE is a magician! Put “ordinary” things together [p] and you can create an “extraordinary” thing. Then... Abrakadabra, Allakazan – you've learned to see [P] like an artist can! [sound reproducing a charm] [music ends] (*The Magician* – Jean Dubuffet)

In excerpt (17) reference to ordinary reality (“many traditional still life paintings”) is made to introduce the extraordinary feature characterizing Wesselmann’s artwork (“But not package foods!”). However, despite the peculiar feature of the painting, anchoring occurs (“Do you recognize any from your own kitchen?”) so as to move the artwork closer to the child’s reality. In excerpts (18) and (19) the child is indirectly invited to be and think like an artist him/herself, with the question “Have you ever...?” clearly aiming to stimulate the child’s curiosity, imagination, and creativity. Excerpt (19) is particularly interesting because of the soundscape involved in it. The only narrating voice is that of an actor, who brings to life the artwork by impersonating the Magician himself. Thus, the child is immediately immersed in a dimension of magic, with evocative music in the background characterized by an alternation of medium-pitched notes produced by sustained pressing of keys on an organ (or a similar instrument). The music conveys an aura of mystery, against which reverberates the vibrato, rough and tense voice of the Magician, which makes the story intriguing. Prosody is masterfully used to keep the listener’s attention, with varied pitch range and tonic stress on the words “you” and “everyone”, and a distinct pause after the word “you” and before “like an artist can”, which clearly aim to encourage the child to self-identify with the artist. The dimension of magic is further enhanced by a sound reproducing a charm, which is repeated in the key moments of the Magician’s tale. Like in excerpt (1), in this pictorial description dramatization is used as an edutainment strategy, too, so as to reduce the formal distance between the expert narrator and the non-expert young visitors, as well as to make art closer to the child’s world.

5. Concluding remarks

The analysis has shown that the encounter with the artwork is shaped as the child’s own discovery, in which the child’s observation skills and critical thinking are challenged by means of several popularization strategies. Questions were found to be a recurring item in the script, especially *wh-* didactic questions. Their use seems to confirm that they express “an imbalance of knowledge between participants” (Hyland 2002: 530), but such imbalance was found to be neutralized by means of dramatization, as in excerpts (2) and (19), and peer-to-peer learning, as in excerpt (1). Indeed, second speaker intervention, which may involve actors who impersonate fictional characters or children interacting with the adult narrator, reduces

the formal distance between the expert narrator and the non-expert child. As a result, the exploration of the artwork does not take place in a lecture-style approach, but in an interactive and collaborative way, which may also involve edutainment strategies such as dramatization and gamification. From an interdiscursive perspective, edutainment can be said to determine “genre embedding” (Bhatia 2010: 35), since features belonging to two other distinct generic forms, namely drama and game, are embedded in the audio-delivered pictorial descriptions. Furthermore, invitations are often used not only to encourage the child to visually explore the painting, but also to interact and play games with the artwork in order to experience first-hand particular visual features or emotional effects, as in excerpts (6)-(8). More overtly didactic strategies are denominations and definitions, which often co-occur to explain the meaning of words or concepts that might be difficult for children to understand, while analogy and anchoring are used to ‘move’ art closer to the child’s world, so that s/he can feel an active participant in the art experience rather than a mere, passive observer.

Soundscape has proved to play a crucial role in the popularization process, since the various different voices, i.e., the speaker’s voice, speech, music, sounds, and prosody, meaningfully combine and integrate to shed light on what is not immediately retrievable, to bring to life the story behind the artwork, and to make the meaning of the artwork manifest and accessible to children. Music was found to ‘punctuate’ the exploration of the artwork by means of musical pauses, while confirmatory sounds are used to bring to life the objects in the painting and to create vivid pictures of the story in the listener’s mind.

In his discussion on museum discourse for children, Sabatini (2017: 66) observes that the “co-construction of knowledge through children’s engagement can be dazzling but, at the same time, boil down to ‘fun but forgettable’”, and that museum communication for children sometimes “seem[s] to [...] long for offer marvels, coming close to show-business and advertizing discourse, where children are often used as ‘actors’ in a kind of spectacularization”. Whether this is the case of the *MoMA Kids* pictorial descriptions can only be determined by means of cognitive studies involving children directly. On the basis of the multimodal analysis, it can be reasonably argued that edutainment does not seem to occur at the expense of the educational function of the art experience. Indeed, this seems to be preserved thanks to the cognitive relations activated by didactic questions, invitations, analogies and anchoring. The study presented in this paper

only draws hypotheses about the possible effects that popularization strategies may have on children, but also sets the ground for defining analytical criteria and formulating research questions for future cognitive studies.

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