

Masha and the bear. A new educational paradigm

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Abstract

In the growth process children are influenced not only by models embodied by reference adults and transmitted by formal education agencies, but also – and, one might say, especially – by those models that the media propose. In particular, children read themselves, amplify their experiences, and open themselves to the possible, through the stories that the media offer.

While, nowadays, tv series as *Peppa Pig*, *Teletubbies*, *Dora the Explorer* or *Bo on the Go!* merely confirm adult expectations, confining children within models that act as ‘cages’ from which it is difficult to escape, *Masha and the Bear* breaks the rules and undermines traditional education systems. Like the outdoor education theories, and like the educational experiments related to them, *Masha and the Bear* also actively participates in the endeavour of educational renewal now in progress. And it does so on the basis of a privileged context: narrative imagery.

Nel processo di crescita i bambini sono influenzati non solo dai modelli incarnati dagli adulti di riferimento e trasmessi dalle agenzie educative formali, ma anche – e, verrebbe da dire, soprattutto – da quelli che i media propongono; in particolare i bambini leggono sé stessi, amplificano le proprie esperienze e si aprono al possibile, attraverso le storie che i media propongono. Nella contemporaneità, mentre serie televisive come *Peppa Pig*, *Teletubbies*, *Dora the Explorer* or *Bo on the Go!* si limitano a confermare le aspettative adulte e a rinchiudere l’infanzia entro modelli/gabbia dai quali è difficile uscire, *Masha and the Bear* rompe gli schemi e mette in crisi i sistemi educativi tradizionali. Come le teorie dell’outdoor education e le sperimentazioni didattiche legate ad essa, anche *Masha and the Bear*, infatti, partecipa attivamente al tentativo di rinnovamento educativo al quale stiamo assistendo; e lo fa a partire da un contesto privilegiato: l’immaginario narrativo.

Keywords: Imaginary, Storytelling, Outdoor Education, Media Literacy, Educational Models

Parole chiave: immaginario, narrazione, outdoor education, media literacy, modelli educativi

A brief introduction

Broadcast for the first time by *Pervyj kanal*, the main Russian television channel, in November 2009, *Masha and the Bear* made a timid appearance on European television screens in 2011. Inured to the flat, simple, stereotypical, and ubiquitous images of *Peppa Pig*, children did not seem to notice the new character. The cartoon series had been purchased by the children’s television networks more as a mere filler than because of real confidence in the validity of the product. More likely, however, it was not children but adults who were wary of Masha, a little girl with an overwhelming vitality, who behaved in a bizarre manner, and deviated greatly from the standard models. Then children discovered the television series, audience figures skyrocketed, and the cartoon *Masha and the Bear* exploded as a real imaginative phenomenon.

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Children now love the cartoon, but adults continue to be wary: the little girl is too free and rebellious with respect to the narrative norms of stories aimed at children. While *Peppa Pig*, *Teletubbies*, *Dora the Explorer* or *Bo on the Go!* merely confirm adult expectations, confining children within models that act as ‘cages’ from which it is difficult to escape, *Masha and the Bear* breaks the rules and undermines traditional education systems. The small protagonist is indomitable, instinctive, and not at all intimidated by her surroundings. Curiosity is the driver of her every action, and since no social and cultural superstructure has been able to instil the concept of restraint in her, she rampages through the woods like a cyclone, bringing disruption and sometimes sowing ‘terror’ among its inhabitants. The animals are afraid of her and seek in every way to avoid her; even the butterflies hide when they see her entering the wood (*Bon Appetit!* Episode 10, season 2); Yet, in highly Rousseauesque manner, when in contact with nature Masha learns to deal with herself and with others. In some respects she resembles “Pinocchio” (Collodi, 1883) when, newly-created by Geppetto, he runs away and gets into trouble. But the adventures of Masha do not serve to transform her into a ‘good little girl’ of whom adults can be proud: they are moments in which the protagonist (and with her the young television watchers) can grasp the essence of a divergent educational perspective aimed at enhancing the infantile dimension, capturing it at the very moment when it is manifest. All this, of course, makes Masha extremely attractive in the eyes of children, but equally troublesome and provocative in those of adults, who continue, generally, to prefer more approved characters and programmes.

At this point it seems appropriate to reflect on the awareness of contemporary adults concerning the relationship between media and educational processes. Adults born in the second half of the twentieth century grew up with television. They were accustomed to considering its programmes as habitual playmates, pastimes with which fill the empty hours, occasions for dialogue and exchange with other children. For those who were adults at that time, as in the current period – although today the situation is more complex because of the new media now flanking television – those programmes were considered opportunities to take a break from their responsibilities, as an easy excuse to carve margins of freedom from their being parents or “educating adults”. Rarely did those same adults – apart from periodic complaints about Japanese cartoons, from the giant robots to *Pokemon*, to mention only the best-known examples – consider that the television programmes (and the same applies to every type of narrative) proposed models significant from the educational point of view.

In the growth process, in fact, children are influenced not only by models embodied by reference adults and transmitted by formal education agencies, but also – and, one might say, especially – by those models that the media propose. In particular, children read themselves, amplify their experiences, and open themselves to the possible, through the stories that the media offer. On the other hand, because the narrative itself moves within the imaginative boundaries of contemporaneity, it more or less consciously transmits and reiterates – confirming or, conversely, rejecting – the reference paradigms (Antoniazzi, 2015). But what are these paradigms today? In what categories do they belong?

To generalize, contemporary “imagined childhoods” can be classified into certain recurrent categories. The first comprises ‘instructive stories’, i.e. those stories whose explicit intent is to teach something to children (new words, concepts, situations, or languages). The aforementioned *Dora the Explorer* is a significant example in this regard, and so too is *Barbapapa*: with their “ante litteram” ecologist thrust, these stories sometimes return, like echoes of memory, to remind us of the need to respect and safeguard the world in which we live. This first category is flanked by that of ‘prejudicial stories’, implicit in which is contempt for a childhood presumed unable to understand even the most elementary of complete sentences. The babbling of the *Teletubbies* well represents this attitude. There are then the “stereotypical stories”, often consequential on or related to prejudicial ones, in which the images of childhood are flattened into stereotypes unable to recount things different from what children experience in their everyday lives. *Peppa Pig* – which faithfully reproduces the contemporary family with its merits and flaws fixed within immobile and indispensable categories, is a case in point. Finally, there are – and here we come to the crux of the question – the “metaphors of childhood” able to recount the authenticity of the child’s gaze on reality. These are often utopian visions, i.e. stories which abstract childhood from its context in reality and set it in “another place” in which ample openness to the possible can be achieved. *Masha and the Bear* belongs fully in this category.

Masha and the Bear: a contemporary fairytale

Before analysing the characters, settings, and situations of the Russian animated cartoon series, it is appropriate to contextualize the stories of *Masha and the Bear* in the narrative dimension which encloses them: the fairytale. And to do so, a brief digression is necessary.

For nearly four centuries – that is, from when Giambattista Basile, between 1634 and 1636, published in Naples the *Pentamerone o Lo cunto de li cunti ovvero lo trattenemiento de peccerille* – the fairytale was a core component also of written narrative. The first collections, often consisting of extremely bloody or licentious stories, were not – despite the subtitle chosen by Basile – intended for children. Not even the famous fairytales of Perrault (1697) were. Like Basile, in fact, also Perrault set his stories at court, and his main purpose was to provoke strong emotions in an aristocracy become lazy and indolent. They are tales that derive from the folk tradition in which the narrator – primarily addressing adults and only incidentally children – evoked a parallel world populated by strange beings, cruel and disquieting, which accompanied everyday reality. Only in the domestic sphere were fairytales – or better certain types of stories, often set in rhyme and sing-song – narrated by women to children on the one hand as warnings about metaphorized perils (black man, wolf, witch, ogre, etc.), and on the other, as apotropaic rituals to ward off evil and threats to the children.

It was not until the nineteenth century that also in the literary domain – beginning with the famous stories of the Brothers Grimm – the fairytale was rethought and reworked for children. As stated by Dieter Richter, this transformation of the fairy tale “is evident in the progressive ‘infantilization’ of the various characters, in the more detailed description of child behaviour, the more differentiated psychological representation of the figures, and their inclusion in a family environment which – whether the stories take place in a woodcutter’s hut or a royal palace – is clearly patterned on the ideal model of the bourgeois family” (Richter, 1987, pp. 225-226). After the first collections of the Brothers Grimm, for over a century the idea that the fairytale was fundamental for growth accompanied the world of education: educational institutions, formal and informal, also used it for formative and moralizing purposes.

In Italy it was the *Fiabe sonore*, first published by Fratelli Fabbri between 1966 and 1970, that represented the “backlash” – striking, moreover, since reprints are still on the market – of the traditional fairytale. Beginning in the 1960s, in fact – with the illustrious precedent of *Il romanzo delle mie delusioni* by Sergio Tofano (1925) – the fairytale underwent profound changes. Rewritten, with reversals of roles, dulcified, and tamed, it began to lose its usual connotations: the forest ceased to function as a dangerous ‘elsewhere’ in which to become lost in order to grow; the protagonists, freed from a fate of misery and self-denial became more daring and emancipated; the villains (wolves, ogres, witches, etc.) increasingly assumed positive characteristics. The great exception was the witch depicted by Roald Dahl (1983), who was restored to her natural role as the cruel and nefarious enemy of childhood.

The turn of the century saw a revival of the traditional fairytale, but this was often an intellectual operation: critical editions interesting from the point of view of narratological, philological, historical, anthropological, social, etc., research, but devoid of any impact on childhood. Indeed, the traditional fairytale, frequently revisited as fantasy or horror, became an opportunity to recount to adults, or at least those who had moved beyond childhood, the complexity of reality in metaphorical manner: consider the many revisitations of “Red Riding Hood”, “Sleeping Beauty”, “Snow White”, “Tom Thumb”, etc., that the cross-media constantly propose.

Yet, just as the fairy tale seemed to have disappeared from childhood imagery, it now reappears, completely renewed, through *Masha and the Bear*. Numerous features ascribe this narrative to the fairytale genre: the child protagonist, the wood as an “elsewhere”, adventure, transgression, danger, the ability to talk to animals, the house in the woods, the bear as a helper, magic, the return home. The story concept is inspired by a Russian folk tale, collected and published by Afanasev (Pushkin & Afanasev, 2015), in which an astute and intelligent little girl, after becoming lost in the woods and living for a while as a maid in the home of a huge bear, is able to return home and again embrace her grandparents. But the Russian cartoonists go further than Afanasev. They recast the narrative by enacting a new story – i.e. *Masha and the Bear* – in which the roles of the main characters are not simply reversed but recast in light of a precise idea of childhood: autonomous, vital, determined to discover everything that reality has to offer. No longer,

therefore – to resume comparison with Afanasev’s fairytale of the same name – is this a segregated child, but one who chooses, entirely independently, when and how to go into the woods. The bear is no longer a tyrant, but a silent, discreet and attentive being, ready to intervene in the case of danger, but only if actually necessary. The woods are no longer dark and threatening; rather, it is a bright place, full of stimuli and entirely to explore.

The extraordinary intuition of the author, Oleg Kuzovkov, and his assistants has been to set the adventures of Masha within a genre – the fairytale – which on the one hand allows for the story’s immediate contextualization in a recognizable elsewhere, and on the other, frees it from the often rigid constraints of the “realistic” narrative. The real break of *Masha and the Bear* with respect to traditional fairytales – and their rewrites – consists in the idea that the story allows a suspension of the here and now that concerns not so much things impossible in real life, especially when they occur through the use of magic, as the creation of a place where children can express, without tricks and deception, their “authenticity”. This is an authenticity manifest in the identification of needs, even imaginative ones, lying well beyond those socially recognized to children. For several decades – already at the beginning of the 1970s Edgar Morin and Marcello Bernardi warned against the excessive care and protection of children (Martini, 2015, pos. 2594) – generations of overprotective adults have considered childhood to be some sort of ‘pathology’ to be contained and circumscribed, rather than as a concentration of potential and possibility that must find ways to express itself. As Laffi argues, a parent’s most frequent temptation is to “forgo experience in order to protect against risk” (Laffi, 2014, p. 51). On the other hand, “the rarity of children, and hence their preciousness, increases the sense of threat, with the consequent refuge in medicine (paediatrics comprises all the function of pedagogy) as a reassuring science” (Martini, 2015, pos. 461).

Cursorily inspection suffices to show the extent to which the obsession with control and “safety” generates educational practices intended to purge places and situations from any possible risk; practices that often affect even narrative imagery. The cross-media saga of *Peppa Pig* is the most emblematic example of this situation: adults excessively concerned to prevent every possible danger and/or simple difficulty render aseptic – and somehow non-educational – the environments in which children move and grow, leaving no space for their need, but also their right, to explore and experience the world on their own. This does not mean that “grown-ups” should keep their distance from childhood; but they must learn to recognize – and, above all, to respect – the spaces, the times, and the ways in which children approach the world. And they must do so also, and especially, when those ways seem bizarre, mysterious, if not, indeed, nonsensical (Antoniazzi, 2015, p. 53), as in the case of Masha: a little girl who seeks, and finds, in the woods a place where she can experience a freedom (of movement, expression, etc.) and a vitality that elsewhere, especially at home or at school, would be precluded to her. If, in fact, as Lorenzo Cantatore states “even before words, the domestic set is the most disruptive and invasive manifestation of education of children by adults” (Cantatore, 2015, p. 8), *Masha and the Bear* allows children to leave the home and venture into unknown territories. On the other hand, a good imaginative experimentation, implemented through stories, is crucial in order to increase a person’s experience and to expand the boundaries of his or her reality. As Umberto Eco put it, “Those who do not read, at the age of seventy will have lived only one life: their own. Those who read will have lived five thousand years: they were there when Cain slew Abel, when Renzo married Lucia, when Leopardi admired the infinite [...] because reading is a backwards immortality” (Eco, 1991). The same applies, I believe, to those who have known a number of fine narratives also from other media; including the adventures of *Masha and the Bear*.

Who is Masha?

As we have seen, Masha is a metaphor for contemporary childhood, or better, for the educational needs and necessities of contemporary childhood.

Masha is curious, free, exuberant, lively, irreverent, ironic, and funny; but she can also be tender, generous, and capable of outbursts of affection. She knows how to apologize; she tries to repair the

disasters that she has caused (at least she tries). She helps Bear and the other animals when they are in difficulties. Although she tends to be egocentric, like all children of her age, she is never self-referential. She seeks relationships with others, involves them in her adventures, participates in collective activities; or at least tries to do so, albeit in her own way.

Masha observes, listens, asks for explanations. But when she acts, she reinterprets the stimuli received in her own terms, and she often subverts the established rules. Sometimes the results are astounding: as happens in the episode titled *One Hit Wonder* (episode 3, season 2), in which Masha proposes to Bear, in love and miserable, a new way to make music and win the heart of the beautiful she-Bear. To do so, she constructs an electric guitar, inspired by Jimi Hendrix's legendary Fender, to replace the classical guitar played by Bear. Despite a not particularly impressive start, Masha becomes a rock star. Bear tries as well; but the temptation to return to the traditional ballads prevails, prompting Masha to exclaim: "You can't teach an old bear new music [...] Too bad!"

On other occasions, improvisation and the anxiety for protagonism do not have the same effect: as in *Hokus-Pokus* (episode 3, season 4) in which Masha, as an aspiring magician, only manages to cause disasters: with the wave of a magic wand her nose stretches like Pinocchio's; the broom, as in Disney's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, flies out of her control; Bear finds himself catapulted into the frozen elsewhere of an Eskimo "Masha".

Regardless of the results achieved, however, after Masha has passed, nothing can remain as before: the little girl offers those around her opportunities to rethink their attitudes, to question their certainties, to look at things and situations from other perspectives; not always the best, but which are certainly interesting, intelligent, and creative. In the episode *Tracks of Unknown Animals* (episode 4, season 1), Bear is worried because Masha seems unable to distinguish the footprints left in snow by a rabbit from those of a wolf. In fact, the child knows how to look at the world differently and perceives things that grown-ups, not even Bear, can imagine: having realized that the rabbit, in order to hide its tracks, is walking on stilts that leave wolf footprints, Masha is not deceived by appearances.

Masha's gaze on reality, therefore, is that of the protagonists of the best children's literature. In the course of the episodes, the author pays frequent homage to "Mowgli", "Pinocchio", "Alice", and "Pippi". Indeed, Pippi Longstocking appears to be the true imaginative referent for Masha. However, there are several, even substantial, differences. The first is temporal: Masha is smaller than Pippi and cannot take care of herself. Consequently, Bear accompanies Masha on her journey in discovery of the world. The second, much more significant, difference concerns the imaginative depiction of the two characters: Pippi is "superhuman", not in the Nietzschean sense of the word but in its literal one. Like Peter Pan, in fact, also Pippi breaches the rules of human existence: she does not want to grow up, and we can imagine her as constantly the same, even after hundreds of years. Masha, instead, within the narrative fiction, is a true child: we do not know when she will grow up, but we are sure that she will do so when her experience in the elsewhere has concluded.

Another important difference concerns the relationship with the world of "grown-ups": while Pippi refuses any contact with adults, Masha observes them with curiosity; perhaps in order to change them. Comparison between the episodes that recount the first day at school of Pippi and Masha is significant in this regard. Pippi does not want to learn the things that are taught in school; she has gone there only out of curiosity and to obtain the Christmas holidays; Masha, by contrast, wants to go to school because she feels that she has grown, and she asks Bear to build one for her. Here there occurs something of great interest from the point of view of educational institutions.

Also Masha – in *First Day at School* (episode 6, season 2) – like Pippi, is bored at Bear's school, but only as long as the teacher uses traditional methods and teaches uninteresting subjects. Then, as soon as Masha finds a way to express herself and encounters subjects that excite her, like reading, everything changes and the school becomes a place of discovery, fun, openness to the possible, and experimentation – also practical experimentation, since at the end of the episode, Masha becomes a skilled carpenter.

From the point of view of educational theory, Oleg Kuzovkov's work seems to share with that of Astrid Lindgren reference to the northern European model of education. Unlike in *Pippi Longstocking*, however, in *Masha and the Bear* that model is not deconstructed and pilloried, but, as we shall see later, exalted in its best prerogatives.

The “educational” elsewhere of Masha

In many respects, the crossmedia saga *Masha and the Bear* seems narratively to embody the ideal of outdoor education so dear to the Scandinavian countries, and which obviously has profound echoes in Russia and the former Soviet republics. This is a model solidly rooted in the history of Western pedagogy and educational institutions: “suffice it to call to mind education in the Graeco-Roman world, the innovative experience of Cà Giocosa of Vittorino da Feltre in the fifteenth century, and the reflections of John Locke in the late seventeenth century” (D’Ascenzo, 2014, p. 45), the intuitions of Rousseau transposed “into the didactic mediation of Pestalozzi [...], but especially of Fröbel” (D’Ascenzo, 2014, p. 46), the experiences of Baden Powell, Montessori, and Dewey. Yet outdoor education has gradually ceased to be a prime referent, with the exception of the Scandinavian countries and some other fortunate contexts. As early as the end of the 1970s, in fact, René Schérer and Guy Hocquenghem wrote that “the child outside is hard to think [...] At every hour of the day, or almost, he is entirely defined in a certain field whose structure is more or less elastic for him. But it is always imperative, spatially and temporally determined. He must be located somewhere [...], he is constantly asked where he is, what he is doing, and what he has done (Farné, 2014, p. 16).

The educational urgency of the rediscovery of nature grows ever more compelling. So much so that, on the one hand, Richard Louv (2005) – author of the bestseller *The Last Child in the Woods* – claims that a generation is growing up for which nature is no longer the “natural environment” of experimentation and growth, but something exotic and alien, hostile and dangerous. On the other, J. S. Russell emphasises that the elimination of risk from childhood experience is a principle which in itself is anti-educational (Russell, 2007). This sort of perceptive isolation in which the child is confined through educational practices performed mainly indoors is starting to show some timid signs of abating. Although educational regulations and practices lead, especially in Italy, to hypothesising and designing a child increasingly artificial and “tinned”, to paraphrase the title of a novel by Christine Nöstlinger (1975), something seems to be moving at the imaginative level.

Narrative imagery – often able to grasp before the institutions the changes taking place in society and to show paths alternative to those already beaten – seems to herald a change of educational paradigm; or at least it hopes that this may come about.

To gain better understanding of the profound changes in progress, it is necessary to return to the work of Louv (2005), and his description of the three frontiers that have characterized, in the United States, the relationship between man and nature. The first frontier, described by Frederick Jackson Turner as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Louv, Kindle edition, ch. 2, doc. 2), concerns the need to enter into contact with nature, discover it, know it, and in some way “tame” it. The second frontier is a kind of sublimation of the relationship with nature: “The second frontier was a time, too, of suburban manifest destiny, When boys still imagined themselves woodsmen and scouts, and girls still yearned to live in a little house on the prairie and sometimes built better forts than the boys” (Louv, Kindle edition, ch. 2, doc. 2). Louv then suggests an imaginative reading of the context that he is describing. He has in mind not only *Little House*, the series of novels written by Laura Ingalls Wilder between 1943 and 1945, but also the entire cinema tied to the narrative and experiential dimension epitomised by the Stanley Donen’s film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) and the television series based on the novels of Ingalls. Then, continuing his analysis, Louv notes that the relationship between man and nature has grown increasingly tenuous over time: “In the third frontier, heroes previously associated with the outdoors are irrelevant” (Louv, Kindle edition, ch. 2, doc. 3).

If it is true that the twentieth century tended to narrate childhood “within four walls” – of the home, school, college, etc. – the twenty-first, at narrative level, appears intent on recovering nature as a privileged domain of growth and learning. The most innovative components of contemporary children’s literature, in fact, envisage a fourth frontier to which the world of Western education – except, as we have seen, the Scandinavian countries, and a few others – gives scant consideration: the return to nature. Besides James Cameron’s film *Avatar* (2009), which has globalized the theme of rethinking society in ecological terms,

many stories, mostly dystopian, dedicated to children and young adults have been moving in the same direction for about a decade.

The successes of the sagas *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008; 2009; 2010), *Divergent* by Veronica Roth (2011; 2012; 2013) and *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner (2009; 2010; 2011; 2012), and the fine novel *Bambini nel bosco* by Beatrice Masini (2010), signal that the public, especially its younger part, considers recovery of the natural world to be a factor in the re-foundation, or at least a rethinking, of the human. Such a rethinking – as well highlighted by the cross-media phenomenon *Masha and the Bear* – can be concretely and effectively implemented only from early childhood onwards; an early childhood which needs to be freed from the cages, also imaginative, in which it has been confined for too long.

Also in this regard, *Masha and the Bear* immediately stands as a radical break with the mainstream narrative proposal of this new century: *Peppa Pig*.

The *Peppa Pig* episodes take place in a protected and reassuring version of the environments of which children have, or should have, direct experience. There are places of affection, like Peppa's family home and that of her grandparents; natural places, such as the garden, the park, the river, the lake, the sea; those of playful learning, like the kindergarten, the dance school, the swimming pool. And then there are the places that the children's literature signals as imaginative topoi: places full of mystery and fascination in which children experience their otherness and grow (Antoniazzi, 2015, p.48).

In *Peppa Pig*, however, all these places are depicted in stereotypical and banal manner: even when the protagonist and her friends are outside the "four walls", they experience the same characteristics of artificiality as the interiors. Even puddles – places of transgression, disorder, and dirt understood as total otherness with respect to the orderly and aseptic world of the domestic sphere – become "inauthentic" because they are "cleansed", and then neutralized, by adult action (Antoniazzi, 2015, p. 72). To extend the boundaries of the theme somewhat, the rubber boots that Peppa is forced to put on whenever she approaches a puddle can be considered a metaphor for the end of adventure as an essential dimension of growth.

Peppa, in fact, is hyper-protected. She lives in environments, both internal and external, which are hyper-controlled, stripped of any danger, purged of any "contamination", simplified beyond reason. Inside and outside almost merge together, so similar are they in experiential continuity, colours, and aesthetic features. Also the adults, perhaps distracted, are ever-present in *Peppa Pig*: often directly in the frame; at other times as "shadows" out of shot.

Masha and the Bear, as we have seen, depicts children from another perspective. There are no human adults – not even as extras – in the girl's adventures: everything that the stories describe happens in the "elsewhere", in a place separate from the here and now of domestic reality. Although we know nothing about Masha's parents – or, as in Afanasev, the grandparents – she knows that she lives in a house at the edge of the woods; a home to which she returns happily at the end of each adventure. Masha's, therefore, is not an escape from a hostile reality; rather, it is a need to find, within her own very young experience, a place and a time entirely for herself. On the other hand, the "elsewhere" described by folk traditions, and also those narrated by the best children's literature, are highly significant: the breaches of, and rebellions against, the *status quo* that occur entail constant changes of mind and stance; and they often trigger a growth process in those who undergo them.

In *Masha and the Bear* the importance of the home and of "interiors" is not denied. But the authors do not conceal a certain predilection for exteriors. In many episodes, they seem to emphasise that the most serious risks for Masha and Bear arise when the adventure takes place in the home, or when they engage outdoors in chores that concern the domestic sphere. The episode *Jam Day* (episode 6, season 1) is highly significant in this regard. Bear has prepared in the garden everything necessary to make jam with berries harvested in the woods. Stove, pots, glass jars, fruit, and sugar: everything is ready to start. Bear is alone and blissfully enjoying preparation of the jams as he anticipates future binges, when Masha literally bursts onto the scene. In her frenetic bouncing from side to side, driven by the overwhelming curiosity that distinguishes her, she is likely, in order: to fall into the boiling jam, to topple the piled glass jars on to her, to

get her head stuck in a jar. Yet despite the risks, Masha is never in danger because Bear is, despite appearances, attentive to what is happening and ready to intervene, but only if really necessary.

It should be emphasised at this point that, in particular in the ludic sphere, there is an erroneous tendency to superimpose the meanings of two distinct terms: ‘risk’ and ‘danger’. As Roberto Farné (2014) puts it well: “‘risk’ and ‘danger’ are not synonyms [...] in fact, a risk is confronted, while a danger is avoided if it is possible” (p.19). Hence, on closer consideration, although Masha moves on the boundary between the two dimensions, she is never in actual danger; not even when, as she walks through the woods, she meets wolves entirely similar to the one encountered by Little Red Riding Hood.

Unlike the jungle of Mowgli (Kipling, 1894), the forest of Tarzan (Burroughs, 1912), or the forests narrated by folk tales, the woods of Masha are not characterized by imminent danger which requires constant attention. Masha moves with cheerfulness – sometimes recklessness – through a natural landscape that does not frighten or overawe her, but on the contrary captivates her precisely because it allows her to explore, to learn new things, to move at ease without too many constraints. But perhaps it is precisely the presence of Bear which ensures Masha’s freedom of movement in that “elsewhere”, which provides the certainty that, whatever happens, she can find support and safe refuge in him.

Bear

But who is Bear? At first sight, he resembles a sort of guardian angel, a good-natured, but tenacious, protector of childhood. If this description may seem bizarre, or at least unusual, one must review the imaginative history of this large mammal in order to understand what deep-lying reason induced first Kipling with Baloo and then, through a plurality of imaginary creatures, Oleg Kuzovkov to portray a bear as the educational guide of the young protagonists of their stories. As noted by Michel Pastoureau (2008), “From time immemorial, the bear had been a particularly admired creature in the Germanic world [...]. Stronger than any other animal, it was the king of the forest and of all animals [...]; it was a being apart, an intermediate creature between the worlds of beasts and humans [...] a companion of man, a relative, an ancestor, a double, perhaps a god or a guardian angel” (pp. XV-XVI).

Also the bond between the bear and childhood is ancient: Greek mythology recounts that Atalanta, the only woman to participate in the expedition of the Argonauts, and Paris, the abductor of Helen, had been raised in the forest by a bear.

The Church’s hostility to the ancient king of the animals, considered a rival of Christ, led to a “war” which “lasted for nearly a millennium, throughout the High Middle Ages and the feudal period, and came to an end only in the thirteenth century, when the last traces of the ancient ursine cults disappeared” (Pastoreau, 2008, p. XVI). But the imaginative destiny of the bear in European affairs had not concluded: “stripped of all prestige, turned into a fairground or circus animal, often humiliated or ridiculed, the bear nevertheless continued to occupy a prominent place in human imagery. In this way, the bear gradually again became the subject of dreams and ghosts, and took its revenge in the twentieth century by turning into a true fetish: the teddy bear”. Consequently, although secularized, the bear has become the protector of contemporary childhood.

The passage from the teddy bear to Masha’s fellow adventurer is perhaps simple, but not at all obvious. Both are silent, unable to interact verbally with small humans, but equally careful and protective towards them: the teddy bear as the apotropaic symbol of an arcane union; Bear as a ‘living’ presence in Masha’s story.

Bear, however, has other features that are worth considering, primarily that of being an educator. Perhaps inspired by Mowgli’s Baloo (Kipling, 1894) in this pedagogical vocation, Bear leaves Masha a freedom of movement, action, and error impossible in *The Jungle Books*. Kipling (2015) wrote: “So Baloo, the Teacher of the Law, taught him the Wood and Water Laws [...] All this will show you how much Mowgli had to learn by heart, and he grew very tired of saying the same thing over a hundred times. But, as Baloo said to Bagheera, one day when Mowgli had Been cuffed and run off in a temper, “A man’s cub is a man’s cub, and he must learn all the Law of the Jungle” (p. 20). Baloo teaches Mowgli, directs his actions, wants

“the man’s cub” to abide by the Law, and learn to survive in the Jungle: a dangerous and extremely inhospitable world for the unwary.

The forest of *Masha and the Bear* is not as wild as the Jungle narrated by Kipling; rather, it is a pacified European forest suitable for children. In this context it is not necessary, in order to survive, for Masha learn the rules of adults in advance; nor for Bear to impose them on her with systematic determination. Indeed, Bear seems to have no particular vocation for teaching or discipline. Of a gentle and calm disposition, he loves comfort. His life is cadenced by an alarm clock that, instead of striking the hours, regulates his daily routine: “Rise and shine”, “time to fish”, “the fish are really biting!”, “fishing’s over” (*La Dolce Vita*, episode 7, season 5).

Masha’s arrival, or rather irruption, in Bear’s life disrupts his rhythms; it throws his habits into disarray. Yet Bear patiently – very, very patiently – adapts to the new situation. He constantly renegotiates his priorities with himself, knowing that childhood and its needs take priority over any adult desire; even that of being left alone to read a book or watch television. The temptation to isolate himself, not to see what is happening around him, to continue to cultivate his interests despite Masha’s presence, almost never gains the upper hand. Even when reading, playing chess, fishing – or trying to do so – he never loses contact with what is happening around him; both inside and outside the home. For Bear – and this, too, is an anomaly with respect to the educational models to which we are accustomed – there seems to be no difference between the perception of a safe “inside” and a dangerous “outside”. His whole world is characterized by openness to possibility, as opposed to prohibition and compulsion; possibility which also arises thanks to the presence in the animated cartoon series of *Masha and the Bear* of the “structured objects” on which Froebel and Montessori based their educational approach. Their inclusion in an “other” context – Bear’s world – enables the redesign and reinterpretation of their functions and uses. *Masha and the Bear*, in fact, proposes a syncretic model of education in which inside and outside, structure and freedom, safety and risk, coexist and are interwoven with each other. This is a model that reformulates outdoor education theories – psychoevolutionary theory (Neill, 2004), biophilia hypothesis (Kellert & Willson, 1995; Willson, 1984), nature-deficit disorder (Louv, 2005) – characterized by direct engagement with natural environments, and with adventurous activities within natural environments. Natural environments, in fact, impose natural consequences which are real and “engaging”. They allow teaching staff to step back from traditional positions of authority, thus fostering “natural learning” (Neill, 2008, p. 16).

From these premises it is evident that Bear is, in spite of himself, a true “outdoor educator” who only apparently leaves what happens within the educational setting to chance; in reality, he is well aware of present and future situations. As pointed out by Michela Schenetti (2014), “The educator who accepts his/her role and knows how to stimulate outdoor experiences is not irresponsible or superficial [...] S/he is a meticulous and painstaking director, who intervenes without anxiety and without fear before an action may become dangerous, but does not inhibit it; rather, s/he modifies, re-directs it (p. 64).

When Bear realizes that Masha is about to make a mistake, he does not prevent her from doing so, but waits until the action has concluded before suggesting a possible remedy, of which Masha herself is the protagonist. In the episode *Recipe For Disaster* (no. 3, season 3), for example, Masha, imitating what happens in *The Magic Porridge Pot* fairytale by the Brothers Grimm, prepares a quantity of sweets sufficient to feed all the inhabitants of the wood and beyond. At the end of the adventure, after cleaning the house and realizing the mess she has made, under the seraphic gaze of Bear, Masha exclaims: “Oh, I’ve made such a cruel gruel!”.

That Bear’s behaviour is exceptional even in Masha’s elsewhere – and that the role of “outdoor-educator” is not improvised but learned and constructed through practice – clearly emerges in the episode *Home-grown Ninjas* (episode 3, season 7). Bear is exasperated by Masha’s exuberance, and of Panda who is playing with her, and asks another bear – stout, imposing and seemingly authoritative – to supervise the children. The big bear is constantly tested by the small rebels. But because his authoritarian and coercive approach ill-suited to their needs, he is unable to establish contact with them and takes to his heels as soon as Bear returns home.

Therefore, also *Masha and the Bear* actively enters the debate on the forms and modes of education today. And it does so by openly siding not only with children but also with those educational models that make active participation within and, above all, outside the schoolroom their mission. Once again, after the

adventures of Tom Sawyer, Pinocchio, Mowgli, the protagonists of *La Guerra dei bottoni* by Bibi, and Pippi Longstocking, it is “a man’s cub” that proposes an imaginative reading of an alternative to contemporary education. The latter takes place almost exclusively in “enclosed, controlled, safe spaces (in the sense of restricting the exploratory autonomy of children as much as possible) centred on specific and therefore ‘directive’ activities” (Farné, 2014, p. 9). Like the outdoor education theories, and like the educational experiments related to them, *Masha and the Bear* also actively participates in the endeavour of educational renewal now in progress. And it does so on the basis of a privileged context: narrative imagery.

Educating – *Masha and the Bear* suggests – does not mean having children accept established ideas and concepts passively, but instead indicating paths and providing means so that they can choose independently. Starting from childhood; from Masha, of course.

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