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Picturebook Format: Beyond the Relationship between Words and Pictures

An Overview of the Portuguese Editorial Panorama¹

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The purpose of this paper is to present picturebooks as a special format instead of a literary genre, due to the growing relevance of book design and peritextual elements in defining the characteristics of this art form. The creative investment in the peritexts has implications in the construction of the message and in the reading process, creating an original artefact. The paper also describes different types of picturebooks and explores the influence of the picturebook format on other genres, underlining its importance in contemporary Portuguese publishing.

Keywords: book design, illustration, peritexts, picturebook, Portuguese publishing

The picturebook genre is mainly characterised by the close relationship between text and pictures and by the fact that it engages readers through different levels of interaction. Despite all the research that has been dedicated to this specific form of art, it still struggles to differentiate itself from other genres, such as the graphic novel, comics or other illustrated books. The centrality of images in picturebooks, once used to distinguish them from other art forms, is now common in the publication of traditional folk tales, poetry collections and YA fiction, and even in non-fictional formats such as Alphabets, Imageries and Activity Books. The hybridity of some of these publications also helps to explain a certain level of fluidity in the use of the term “picturebook”.

In the case of the Portuguese theoretical approach to picturebooks, an adequate translation of the term is still under discussion, since we use the French designation (and ambiguous word) “album”. As there was no solid tradition of publishing

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picturebooks until the end of the 20th century in Portugal, the contemporary publication of picturebooks illustrates the relevance of book design and peritextual elements in defining the characteristics of this art form. Our aim is to present picturebooks as a format instead of a literary genre, due to the creative investment in peritexts, the attention to the material aspects of the book as an object, and the participation in the creation process of the graphic designer. The relevance of book design in the definition of picturebooks seems as important now as the relationship between the texts and pictures, and the construction process of a picturebook includes special attention to all its details and elements. This includes not only the main features, such as front covers, back covers and endpapers, but also other features, such the dust jackets, credits and title page, barcodes, types of paper, lettering, size, format and shape, as well as forms of binding. Therefore, in the same way that the relationship between book design and the content of the book seems crucial to the definition of the picturebook format, so is the role of the book designer, responsible for the creation of the support/media to convey the verbal and visual information, who is being increasingly perceived as an author due to his/her participation in the creative process.

Picturebook format: the Portuguese context

Due to the late introduction and recognition of picturebooks in Portugal, there were no specific studies dedicated to this type of publication before the 21st century and the concept of a picturebook “genre” has never been consolidated among Portuguese academics and critics. The traditional dominance of text over pictures, as well as the relevance of the educational and pedagogical dimension of children’s literature, especially during the dictatorial political regime, help to explain how the presence of abundant illustration was understood as a lack of literary quality and not “real” literature. The amount of pictures in a children’s book was also considered inversely proportional to its quality and impact in literary terms.

Nevertheless, several of the most relevant Portuguese artists, especially painters and architects, collaborated assiduously in the creation of beautiful children’s books throughout the 20th century. The creation of illustrated children’s books by a single author, very common in Europe and North America since the 1950s and 1960s, is rare and sparse in Portugal and is associated with only a couple of examples until the late 1990s. Thus, despite isolated experiments in the 1960s in the work of Leonor Praça, Portuguese picturebooks only began to appear in the late 1980s and early 1990s, associated with the creations of the Portuguese artist Manuela Bacelar, who studied in Prague and won the Bratislava award in 1989 (Rodrigues 2013). She was the person mainly responsible for the publication of the first high-quality picturebooks in Portugal where text and image established a synergic relationship in order to tell a story. As the single author of several picturebooks, also a novelty in the Portuguese panorama, she has sometimes been underappreciated as a creator and her pioneering work was also not validated by experts for several years. The lack of value given to the playful dimension of

children's books, as well as to the illustrator as an author, helps to explain the absence of translations of international picturebooks, including classics, until recent years.

It took over a decade to see the emergence of a generation of illustrators who were responsible for the creation of picturebooks characterised by their aesthetic quality, recognised by scholars, critics and the public in general. These “classic” illustrators, born in the 1960s, started illustrating in the 1990s and they have training in the visual arts, painting, and sculpture, and include artists such as Teresa Lima, Danuta Wojciechowska, João Vaz de Carvalho and João Caetano, among others.

José António Gomes was the first to underline consistently the relevance of picturebooks and to define their specific trends and characteristics in 2003, after briefly mentioning some Portuguese authors in 1998. Natércia Rocha (2001) also includes references to picturebooks in her historiographical study, but she limits their audience to young children who take advantage of the relevance of the visual component. Bastos (1999) establishes a distinction between narrative picturebooks and “list” picturebooks,² where there is no plot or sequential action.

Gomes, on the other hand, underlines the relevance of materiality in the definition of picturebooks, by identifying a collection of elements that are consistently used: hardcover, high-quality paper, a limited number of pages and little text, lots of illustrations and plenty of colour. He also stresses that the target audience of these books is mainly formed of young readers between the age of two and eight and considers the relevance of a narrative structure in the definition of a picturebook. As main challenges regarding the theoretical and critical approach to picturebooks, Gomes defines the complexity of analysing the text, illustrations and graphic design of picturebooks from a global perspective. The research which followed (Silva 2010; Silva 2011; Ramos 2007; Ramos 2010) continues to stress the relevance of the close relationship between text and illustrations in the definition of the picturebook, but also the importance of book design, underlining the double-spread composition and all peritextual elements, such as covers and endpapers.

At the beginning of the 21st century, new and specialised publishing houses started to pay special attention to illustration and book design, particularly regarding the publication of picturebooks by Portuguese as well as foreign creators, increasing the relevance of this type of book. The translation of classic works and recent bestsellers in this segment increased interest in picturebooks, even in universities, where the illustrations are now considered as objects of research and study. In recent years, the quality and diversity of Portuguese illustration has been internationally recognised and distinguished with several important awards; indeed, new illustrators, as well as canonical ones, are being distinguished for their singularity, presenting new, challenging, increasingly elaborate and complex visual proposals which challenge the traditional relationship with text. I call them “generation X” illustrators, as they were born in the 1970s, they started illustrating in the early 2000s and they are trained in graphic

² We prefer the term *portfolio* or *catalogue* in order to distinguish them from narrative ones.

design, visual design, and communication design, aspects that, in my view, can explain the attention given to the creation of elements of picturebooks, considered as artefacts. More recently, a new generation has already started to emerge, “the Newcomers”. They were born in the 1980s, started illustrating in the last couple of years, and are trained in illustration, including specialisation and master’s degrees in this specific field. The academic specialisation of creators of picturebooks, as well as contact with international and global trends in the area, can help explain the exponential growth of Portuguese children’s illustration around the world. The main trends of the creation of picturebooks include: the introduction of elements that promote surprise, humour, challenges and reflection; the increasing size of the illustration inside the picturebook, occupying entire pages, as well as its displacement into other parts of the book (back cover, title page, endpapers...); investment in playfulness via the introduction of visual games, the promotion of intertextual readings, and parody, in addition to the construction of visual narratives and parallel ones; the creation of a personal style that is original and easily identifiable (a kind of visual signature), and the relevance of book design, by creating special art reading objects. Internationally awarded and distinguished creators such as Bernardo Carvalho or Catarina Sobral have developed personal and inventive ways to tell stories through pictures, text and graphic design.

These characteristics rapidly influenced other publications and were (also) transferred to contemporary Portuguese children’s literature, becoming present in poetry books, theatre plays, informative books and even YA fiction. The evolution of picturebooks, with the creation of different types and literary proposals, including non-fictional ones, did not allow the establishment of common and definitive characteristics of a formal “genre”, since this type of publication rapidly spread to all kinds of production for children. This also explains the option of defining the picturebook as a format, since it can include narrative or lyrical text, or it can simply dispense with the textual component. For David Lewis, “The picturebook is not a genre (...). What we find in the picturebook is a form of language that incorporates, or ingests, genres, forms of language and forms of illustration” (Lewis 2001: 65). Therefore, it seems that peritextual features, including the materiality of the books, are the main factors that ensure unity and specificity to this segment of publication.

Characteristics of the picturebook format: the relevance of book design and the peritexts

The physical materiality of picturebooks, as a result of book design, seems to be the most relevant element in the definition of this format, creating artefacts or reading objects with artistic significance.³ All elements of a picturebook are considered in the creative process, and the intervention of several authors (writer, illustrator, graphic

³ The relationship between picturebooks and artists’ books as artefacts has been presented and developed by Sandra Beckett (2012) and Carole Scott (2014). The picturebook is also considered by Smiljana Narančić Kovač (2018), among others, as a separate kind of art due to its specific format and its unique semantic structure.

designer, paper engineer, art director, publisher) is becoming increasingly common. In certain cases, picturebook authorship can be attributed to an entire design office/studio, indicating the importance of the artistic project, as happened with “L’Atelier SAJE”, where Ariane Grenet and Emma Giuliani work together, as a result of global cooperation in the creation of specific picturebooks such as *Quatre saisons au Japon* (2014), *Les Robes de la Reine* (Vavoute and L’Atelier SAJE 2016) or *Oncle Teddy* (L’Atelier Saje 2017a) and *Oncle Teddy: cache-cache* (L’Atelier Saje 2017b). In Brazil, a similar case can also be found in *L de Livro*, an alphabet book signed by Estúdio Lógos (Companhia das Letrinhas, 2017).

Peritextual elements (Genette 1987) are crucial to the definition of the picturebook format, and artistic investment in the book as object is considered an important step in the creative process since all features of the artefact (Higonnet 1990; Díaz Armas 2003; Díaz Armas 2006; Linden 2007; Linden 2013; Ramos 2010) should interact in order to multiply the reading possibilities.

In recent years, several studies have analysed the relevance of specific peritexts, such as covers (Sipe 2001; Martinez, Stier & Falcon 2016) and back covers (Mattos, Ribeiro & Vianna 2016), endpapers (Ramos 2006; Sipe & McGuire 2006; Duran & Bosch 2011; Consejo Pano 2011), title pages (Mayor 2016), dust jackets (Ramos & Mattos 2018) and book straps (Mattos 2016), by establishing typologies and relationships between them and the content of the book. These elements are often used to convey relevant information, clearly exceeding and challenging their more traditional and technical functionality, functioning as part of the story, as a comment or even a parody, highlighting the metafictionality of the picturebook. Our purpose is to underline not only the individual contribution of each book feature, but the book elements all together, including format and size, type of paper and binding, gutter, barcode (Ramos 2017a), the publisher’s logo, lettering and the double-spread composition.

In the last couple of years, we have analysed several aspects of picturebook architecture in order to study the impact of peritexts in the meaning-making process, namely through an analysis of endpapers, barcodes and specific types of picturebooks, such as wordless ones. The following examples, all published in Portugal in recent years, illustrate the relevance of specific peritextual features in the construction of the picturebook message, which, by including some particular creative investment, become important elements in the reading process.

For instance, the type of binding and the orientation of the book provide clear instructions about the reading process, demanding specific interaction from the reader. Specific binding used in accordion-books (Ramos 2017b) or mix-and-match books (Ramos 2016) may increase the potential of the message, underlining the fluidity of the narrative in the first case (Desconcertina Collection⁴ by André Letria), or expressing social equality in terms of gender, age or racial background in the second case, e.g. *Todos fazemos tudo* by Madalena Matoso (2011). The changes introduced in the traditional

⁴ The collection includes four small-size, wordless accordion books (Letria 2011a, 2011b, 2015a, 2015b).

codex also reinforce the materiality aspect through its architecture and structure, demanding specific ways of reading, including the physical manipulation of the object and the pages.

Peritexts perceived as irrelevant, such as the barcode or even the publisher's logo, can also be used to highlight the meaning of the picturebook, by establishing a semantic relationship with the book. In the case of the barcodes and logos, they are also used, in the case of two Portuguese publishers (Planeta Tangerina and Pato Lógico, respectively), as identifiers, since the changes introduced in these mandatory elements of the books are immediately associated with the publisher and/or to a specific collection, as in "Imagens que contam", a series of wordless picturebooks. Analysed in another essay (Ramos & Rodrigues 2018), this collection distinguishes itself by the fact that all texts (title and all books credits) are written using the creator's calligraphy, which customises and personalises all books. Associated with efforts towards the customisation of the picturebook, these strategies, common in creators such as Oliver Jeffers or Sara Fanelli, for instance, not only erase the distinction between content and form, but also the difference between text and illustration, creating true iconotexts.

Covers and back covers can easily be used to establish an intertextual dialogue with other art forms, such as the cinema, as occurs with *O meu avô* (2014) by Catarina Sobral, where the references to Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* (Fig. 1) and *Modern Times* by Charles Chaplin are evident. In this specific picturebook, whose illustrations won an award in the Bologna Illustration Prize in 2014, intertextual references play a crucial role in the narrative, alluding to artists such as Andy Warhol, Almada Negreiros or Édouard Manet (Fig. 2). Even the illustration technique is inspired by the graphic design work of the 1950s and 1960s, using a restrained colour palette and a specific type of print.



Fig. 1. The front cover of *O meu avô*
Sl. 1. Prednja strana korica slikovnice
O meu avô



Fig. 2. An example of a page from
O meu avô
Sl. 2. Primjer stranice iz slikovnice
O meu avô

In the case of the collection “Cantos Redondos” [Round Corners],⁵ from Planeta Tangerina, several peritextual elements, such as the covers, endpapers, or even the gutter, become part of the narratives. Picturebooks such as *Daqui ninguém passa* by Isabel Minhós Martins and Bernardo Carvalho (2014), *Livro Clap* by Madalena Matoso (2014), or *A bola amarela* by Daniel Fehr and Bernardo Carvalho (2017) are very ingenious in their use of such elements, challenging readers to discover and question the metafictional references. The expansion or amplification of the meaning and content of picturebooks in other places of the artefact, such as the peritexts, reinforces the idea of understanding this particular object as a special format, an entire medium used to tell a story with all the elements: text, illustrations and object.

Types of picturebooks and hybridity and their spread to the picturebook format

Even if the majority of picturebooks present a narrative, with or without a text, the existence of lyrical or poetic picturebooks (Neira Piñeiro 2018; Silva & Selfa 2017) and picturebooks that do not include a narrative sequence (portfolio or catalogue picturebooks) is also relevant. Poetic picturebooks are characterised by the absence of a clear narrative, as they express, in a lyrical way, feelings, emotions, moods or personal and subjective visions of the world or part of it. In some cases, the picturebook contains a single poem distributed throughout its pages, as happens with *Pê de Pai* (Fig. 3), by Isabel Minhós Martins and Bernardo Carvalho (2006), or it provides a subjective reflection on life as in *Com o Tempo* by Isabel Minhós Martins and Madalena Matoso (2014) (Fig. 4). Some poetic picturebooks can also explore the universe of children’s



Fig. 3. The front cover of *Pê de Pai*
Sl. 3. Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Pê de Pai*

⁵ The name of the collection also underlines a peritextual feature related to the format and shape of the books.



Fig. 4. The front cover of *Com o Tempo*
 Sl. 4. Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Com o Tempo*

rhymes, recovering and recreating texts such as tongue twisters and other traditional lyrical forms. In this case, the creation of a poetic suggestion, dominated by brevity, contention, fragmentation and discontinuity, can result from the combination of text and illustrations.

The portfolio picturebook is a result of a non-sequential (but coherent) and descriptive collection of pages, since the organisation of the book is not based on a narrative structure but rather on the enumeration (in the sense of addition) of information. The text, more or less isolated, does not function with sequential logic, but rather in a process of the accumulation of information. In this sense, it would theoretically be possible to add more information and more pages, subtract some or change their place in the book without the volume as a whole suffering a significant loss. This category may include both very easy-to-read picturebooks, such as alphabets, for example, or other books of images with or without captions, or more complex works, from the point of view of construction and reading requirements, where the creator escapes the traditional narrative structure, preferring to share the responsibility of constructing a message that is not fully explained with the reader. See, in this category, *Um livro para todos os dias* (2004) (Fig. 5) or *O mundo num segundo* (2008) (Fig. 6), both by Isabel Minhós Martins and Bernardo Carvalho.

Nevertheless, the hybrid and mutant aspect of these picturebooks, mixing genres, languages and arts, makes it difficult to achieve a rigid and definitive classification of the format. It also underlines the presence of different “genres” inside the picturebook format, reinforcing the idea of a larger and wider category.

The main characteristics of the picturebook format have influenced other children’s (and even adults’) books, and are now present in non-fiction books, such as the scientific or historical (*Lá fora; Atlas das viagens e dos exploradores*), but also in activity books such



Fig. 5. The front cover of *Um livro para todos os dias*
Sl. 5. Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Um livro para todos os dias*



Fig. 6. The front cover of *O mundo num segundo*
Sl. 6. Prednja strana korica slikovnice *O mundo num segundo*

as *Montanhas* (2015) and *Não é nada difícil* (2015), both by Madalena Matoso, creating several new subcategories. For instance, Alphabets such as *ABZZZZ...* by Yara Kono (2014) and *Hoje sinto-me* by Madalena Moniz (2014) also explore narrative and iconic (Sanjuán 2015) and peritextual features combined with the traditional alphabetical structure. Folktales and traditional narratives can also be reinterpreted via the picturebook format, proposing new literary and visual approaches to very well-known stories. Examples such as *Corre, corre, cabacinha* by Eva Mejuto and André Letria (2006)

or recently *A rainha do norte* by Joana Estrela (2017) confirm the relevance of illustrations in adding new meanings to traditional folktales, through the inclusion of contemporary references to modern fashion and to psychological depression, respectively, perceived in small visual details. Poetry books are also including more and more illustrations and even double-spread compositions as a unifying element of the books, creating a visual parallel narrative that functions as a complement to or a commentary on the texts. The collection of poetry books about “things” by João Pedro Mésseder and Rachel Caiano (*Pequeno livro das coisas*, 2012; *De umas coisas nascem outras*, 2015; *Tudo é sempre outra coisa*, 2014; *Olhos tropeçando em nuvens e outras coisas*, 2017) is a fine example of the articulation and interaction between texts, illustrations and peritexts in the creation of original poetry artefacts that are published in a series of volumes.

Even in other literary genres, where illustration does not play a crucial role, such as YA novels, for instance, the increasing importance of illustration and design has created subgenres such as the “hybrid novel” (Tandoi 2012; Ramos & Navas 2015). In Portugal, several YA novels explore the possibilities of the illustration and graphic design in the narrative, such as in *Mary John* by Ana Pessoa and Bernardo Carvalho (2016) or *Irmão Lobo* by Carla Maia de Almeida and António Jorge Gonçalves (2013). In these examples, even if the text is coherent and functions in a manner isolated from visual and graphic aspects, illustrations can add new meanings and they even help the reader to understand some narrative procedures, such as alternative narration, analeptic procedures or interior monologue.

Final remarks

Picturebooks combine several artistic languages, such as literature, illustration and design and their analysis should also be interdisciplinary, mingling different perspectives, from literary studies to design studies, valuing a more global approach to the picturebook format, taking into account its complexity and sophistication, but also its playfulness.

Therefore, besides the study of the relationship between text and image, and the contribution of illustration to the meaning-making process, the relevance of peritexts and the architecture of the picturebook should also be considered to define this format.

Nevertheless, a definition of picturebooks and children’s literature exclusively by means of material aspects and the presence of illustration carries some risks, underlined, for instance, by the publication of *The Book with No Pictures* (2014) by B. J. Novak, an ironic proposal on the limits of the relationship between text and images. Another aspect that needs reflection is the volatility of picturebook subtypes, as critics tend to organise and characterise books based on their specificities, but also the trend to define every single book with lots of illustrations as a picturebook, regardless of the total number of pages of the book or even their relevance in terms of the construction of meaning.

The increased relevance of peritextual features in contemporary children's literature, especially in picturebooks, perceived as an original⁶ and specific format in this segment, constitutes a trend that has also influenced other forms, including books for adults (Ommundsen 2014). Picturebook creation is becoming increasingly experimental, challenging the limits of books and discovering new ways and forms/formats to tell stories through text, images and support, but also promoting new reflections on the picturebook format itself, using metafictional devices, and combining other forms of art and other literary genres.

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⁶ Peter Hunt (2001) considers the picturebook as the most original and important contribution from children's literature to canonical literature.

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Slikovnica: s onu stranu odnosa riječi i slike

Pregled portugalske nakladničke scene

Zbog sve veće važnosti knjiškoga dizajna i peritekstnih sastavnica u isticanju osobina slikovnice kao umjetničke forme, u radu se ona predstavlja kao poseban format, a ne kao književni žanr. Kreativni ulog u različite oblike periteksta utječe na tvorbu poruke i na stvaranje izvornoga artefakta u procesu čitanja slikovnice. Također se opisuju različiti tipovi slikovnica i istražuje utjecaj slikovničkoga formata na druge žanrove, pri čem se ističe i njegova važnost za suvremeno portugalsko izdavaštvo.

Ključne riječi: dizajn knjiga, ilustracija, peritekst, slikovnica, portugalsko nakladništvo