

Children's Literature, Picturebooks and Intersemiotic Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

It is now agreed that a children's book must be a work of art. It should coexist, intersecting in a balanced and harmonious way, the verbal text and the iconic text, both holding aesthetic qualities that expand the imaginative and hermeneutical capacity of the (pre) reader and that stimulate their artistic sensitivity as early as possible. In reality, the aesthetic-literary formation of the child reader will inevitably depend on the quality of the text and the illustrations that illuminate and complement it, but, above all, on the deep internal cohesion that the inter-semiotic dialogue enhances. Thus, and based on the comparative analysis between two picturebooks - Elmer, by David Mckee, and *The Different Elephant*, by Manuela Castro Neves. This article aims to demonstrate that, in children's books, the dialogical relationship and the intersemiotic fusion between the verbal and iconic languages enhances the establishment of a poetic atmosphere of true meaningful pregnancies that is essential in the aesthetic-literary formation of the child reader.

KEYWORDS: *Children's Literature, picturebooks and intersemiotic dialogue*

INTRODUCTION

Illustration is particularly important in children's books because it stimulates the sensitivity, imagination, imagery and understanding of young (pre) readers. Long before the child knows how to read, he proceeds, in a natural, spontaneous and intuitive way, even without the intervention of an adult mediator, to explore the images of a book that is specially intended for him. In a fascinating process of continuous discovery, the child is affectionately appropriating the object in his possession, leafing through the pages and building a very personal imaginative path, based on the illustrations and compositional elements that configure the visual narrative.

The development of his imaginative ability will, therefore, depend on the quality of the text and illustrations, but, above all, on the deep internal cohesion, that intermodal and intersemiotic fusion provides. The more artistic, suggestive and plurisignificant the images are, the greater the child's hermeneutic dynamism and the more senses the child will be able to extract from the plastic composition and symbolic iconography on which the visual code is based. In the same way, the richer, more fruitful and polysemic the verbal text is, the greater possibilities it will have to broaden and deepen its narrative competence, filling in the blanks and embarking on an enunciative adventure of intense interpretive cooperation, which involves the unveiling of the senses implicit and implied in the act of reading.

But the perception of the book as a true aesthetic object will inevitably and ultimately depend on this relationship of complementarity and significant correspondence between the

two discourses that coexist, and intersect, in the children's book. This interaction allows not only the reader's affective adhesion to the book as an aesthetic object, but simultaneously favours the interpretive mobility of the potential child receiver due to the plurisignificant character of these two artistic languages - verbal and graphic-plastic.

Autonomously or guided by the hand of the adult-mediator, the child stops at times in the verbal text and in the pictorial, trying to build, with his particular way of seeing and feeling, the manifest or latent senses that both words as the images explicitly convey (or just suggest and imply).

That is why we argue that children's books must be a work of art. In it, the iconic text and the verbal text should harmonize, harmoniously complementing each other, both imbued with aesthetic qualities that broaden the interpretive competence of the (pre) reader and allow him to educate his sensitivity as early as possible.

Now, the books here under analysis - Elmer, written and illustrated by David Mckee, and *The Different Elephant* by

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Manuela Castro Neves and illustrated by Madalena Matoso - are works that we consider to be of just great aesthetic and literary quality, so we will trace, then, an interpretive path analyzing, in these two picturebooks the verbal and visual components and trying to show the play of meanings that results from the deep complementary relationship between both.

From words to illustrations: a reading of Elmer and The Different Elephant (which amazed everyone)

The selected books have in common an undeniable ideothematic proximity, which, in a more or less evident way, is immediately announced in place of the paratext. The covers of these magnificent books plastically represent elephants that the reader, activating his interpretive competence and his knowledge of the empirical and factual world, perceives to be different from all of their kind.

If in the case of Elmer, the verbal discourse omits, in the title, the fact that it is different, the illustration leaves no room for doubt, presenting the elephant through a checkered and coloured pattern, which indicates that it is an animal with a happy and fun "personality". On the contrary, on the cover of *The Different Elephant*, verbal and pictorial discourse harmoniously combine to underline this differentiating particularity, either through the attribute that, in the title, juxtaposes itself with the common name "elephant" - "different" - either through colour. The illustrator adds, through her artistic and interpretative feel, that differentiating detail, giving the elephant the colour red, a fact that does not appear in the title of the picturebook (nor in its body, as will be seen below).

Such pictorial and verbal options act as strategies for anticipating reading, seducing the potential child receiver and causing him a natural desire to enter the text and confirm, or not, his initial expectations. In an educational context, this pre-reading phase is decisive in the formation of the competent and critical reader, so the adult-mediator should insist on the exploration of paratextual elements to stimulate the child's curiosity and imaginative capacity, and, of course, his appetite for reading.

Precisely in this sense, the guards in this last book also help children to activate their interpretive mobility and make predictions about the text, working as strategies for anticipating reading. By dwelling on them, the child can give free rein to his imagination and come up with speculative hypotheses about the text itself, hypotheses that will later be confirmed or denied during the act of reading.

Most likely, by this time the child will be wondering about the reasons that make different elephant the protagonists of these two books. Most likely, the child reader will also realize, intuitively or by the adult-mediator, that this difference goes far beyond the colour attributed to them. It is the first step in terms of reading comprehension: understanding that what you see, on the surface of the written text or the image, has other meanings, that is to say, something else, although you do not yet know exactly what.

The full reading of the works under analysis here will help, so we believe, the child to conclude, to decipher the implicit and implicit messages in the texts and illustrations that are offered to him/her, to fill discursive voids and to make inferences. He/she will understand, thus, intuitively, that both books have in common the valorization of difference and identity, making, implicitly, an appeal to tolerance.

Effectively, the work written and illustrated by David Mckee, stars an elephant unlike any other, an elephant "checked", "yellow and orange and red and purple and blue and green and black and white", an elephant "who kept [other] elephants happy", but who, nonetheless, dissatisfied with his condition (and his skin colour), seeks to transform himself into a common elephant, beginning, literally and symbolically, a journey of transformation that will nevertheless prove frustrating, given that the reaction of other animals to this change is one of indifference, not being recognized or greeted effusively as happened before the metamorphosis.

The natural (and predictable) outcome of this narrative is, therefore, the acceptance of yourself and your identity (and implicitly also of your species). The rain, a symbol of purification and renewal, that falls on the protagonist of this magnificent album for children when it is covered with the juice of "elephant-coloured fruits", gives it back, real and metaphorically, its true colours, a fact that it will be confirmed intratextual by one of the elephants in the herd: "Oh Elmer (...). It didn't take you long to show your true colours". The young (pre) reader easily perceives, as we believe, the scope of such words, entering the deep structure of the text and transposing between the linguistic and the symbolic code.

In discursive and technical-literary terms, the picturebook plays with the humorous register, present in several moments of the narrative, subtly passing values through a language, simultaneously poetic and metaphorical, that the child will have no difficulty deciphering. The use of various discursive and rhetorical-stylistic procedures gives the verbal text a poetic and melodic cadence that contribute to its literary quality.

Among these procedures, we highlight the use of a) alliteration ("The more I looked at the serious, silent, quiet, sullen elephants, the more I wanted to laugh"); b) anaphoric construction ("rubbed (...) until there are no signs of yellow, nor orange, nor red, nor pink, nor purple, nor blue, nor green, neither black nor white"); c) elision, asyndeton and polysyndeton ("Once upon a time there was a herd of elephants. Young elephants, old elephants, tall or thin or fat elephants. Elephants like that, roasted elephants, all different but all happy and all the same colour"), which exemplify the versatility of the literary language in this particular book.

As for the illustrations that accompany and interpret the text, also signed by David Mckee, "they accentuate the specificity of the character and propose a game of disguises among the elephants, amusing the reader, who is implicitly called to discover Elmer amid an unusual herd" (Ramos, 2020). Playing with the chromatic contrast between grey (of the other elephants) and the abundance

of colour (in Elmer), with symmetries and disjunctions, the author/illustrator builds a pictorial universe that, expanding the meanings suggested by the verbal text, and guided by humour, it stimulates the artistic sensibility and the imaginative capacity of the (pre) reader.

In this way, in this particular book, the articulation between text and image enhances the establishment of a playful and poetic atmosphere of great communicative efficiency that contributes to the aesthetic and literary formation of the young (pre) reader. We can consider that, in this case, it is a relation of complementarity between both codes - linguistic and visual -, in the wake, moreover, of the one proposed by Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000, which defined several dimensions in terms of text-image interaction, namely of symmetry, complementarity and contradiction.

In the case of complementarity, which can be seen in the picturebook under analysis and many others, the authors state: "In enhancing interaction, pictures amplify more fully the meaning of the words, or the words expand the picture so that different information in the two modes of communication produces a more complex dynamic. When enhancing interaction becomes very significant, the dynamic becomes truly complementary." (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 225). In the case of Elmer, as in most picture books, the images go further than the text: they add illustrative details not explained in the verbal text and a whole symbolic iconography that challenges the reader's hermeneutical dynamism, actively involving him in the process of reading. For this reason, the reader is, to some extent, a co-author of the work, a giver of meanings.

Concerning the message that David Mckee's picturebook subtly conveys to the young reader - the appeal to tolerance and acceptance of differences, individual but also, implicitly, cultural and ethnic -, it seems to us to be a book that, in addition to establish itself as a high-quality aesthetic object, is a resource not to be overlooked in an educational context.

On another level, *The Different Elephant*, written by Manuela Castro Neves and illustrated by the award-winning illustrator Madalena Matoso, is also a book that addresses, playfully and humorously, the issue of difference, albeit from another perspective. It is a versified narrative that tells the story of an elephant whose trunk, because it is very long, irreverent, "sassy" and "very smart," as it refers intratextually, takes on a life of its own, becoming autonomous from the subject and anticipating him in his actions.

Like the picturebook written and illustrated by David Mckee, the text addresses the issue of difference and acceptance of oneself, but explores, for example, as pointed out by Ana Margarida Ramos, "curious suggestions related to the treatment of the figure of the double, since the trunk, when it appears with a personality different from that of its owner, it gains individuality and autonomy, escaping its control" (Ramos, 2010). It is a question of highlighting the two sides of the personality of this dilemmatic and divided individual and of emphasizing the difficulty in reconciling opposites in matters of identity construction.

In terms of discursive and textual architecture, the book presents a tripartite structure: at first, the elephant is presented through the typical incipit of tales affiliated with the traditional matrix: "Once upon a time there was a different elephant." This inaugural statement is later unfolded in the speech, explaining the reason for this difference: "He had a trunk so long / it amazed everyone. / When he went anywhere, the tip of his trunk / went far, far ahead".

From then on, the *sui generis* elephant's trunk is given prominence, through the succession of six quintiles, of which five are initiated by the conditional subordinate conjunction "if", showing the (salutary) irreverence and the boldness of the trunk - presented through linguistic expressions marked by a judicative tone ("very smart", "armed in thin", "very daring", "crazy", "naughty" and "trickster"). This first moment, marked by the use of structural and anaphoric parallelism, ends with the disappearance of the trunk, deconstructing, in this final part, the repetitive scheme hitherto dominant.

In the second moment of this versified narrative, the elephant requests the (symbolic) intervention of a dove to look for the irreverent trunk. In discursive terms, the verse narrative then recovers the anaphoric procedure to account for the dove's wanderings in search of the missing trunk: "He saw horses galloping (...) / He saw ducklings gliding (...) / He saw poppies splashing (...) / He saw a boy playing". This second part ends with the indication that the dove's effort was in vain and that, despite having seen everything he saw, "What he didn't see was the trunk".

Taking into account the dismay of the elephant, poor thing, who became very discouraged, sitting on the sofa, the text then acquires a slower narrative rhythm. In reality, this slowing down of the narrative rhythm arises, at a formal level, from the very stanza's dimension (with seven verses) and non-compliance with the preceding parallel structure. The discourse seems to translate and mirror the dysphoric feeling of profound discouragement and sadness that affects the subject, but quickly everything changes with the (re) entry into the scene of the trunk.

This change in the register and narrative rhythm marked discursively by the presence of the adversary "but" in the initial sentence/verse position and by the preference for shorter stanzas from then on - two blocks and a quintile -, seems to follow the state euphoric of the elephant when he finds his trunk (and, symbolically, making one that was dispersed and separated in one way).

The comicalness of the speech, which results from the absurdity of the situation and the language explored to the point of exhaustion, combined with the narrative rhythm that the strategies of versification enhance, facilitates the child's adherence to reading the text, although it is not, as it seems to us, so linear entry into its deep structure, since, most likely, the potential child receiver will limit itself to freely enjoying the text read without venturing into the paths of the ineffable.

It is necessary, therefore, the intervention of the adult-mediator, in the post-reading phase, to help the child to develop his inferential capacity and to realize that this

different elephant, as the title implies, scared and amazed everybody, but that, even so, he could not live without his irreverent trunk, as is proved intratextually at the moment when, after his disappearance, “the poor elephant became very discouraged”, unaware of his trumpet. After a series of unsuccessful attempts to find it, the trunk finally returns, from a Carnival ball, leaving the elephant “hopping, very happy”, a fact that signals the recovery of identity in this happy reunion between the self and his double. This shows the child, sensitively and intelligently, that it is necessary to live peacefully with the different parts of our body, even with those that provoke incomprehensible reactions of strangeness and even rejection in others.

Madalena Matoso's illustrations “explore chromatic games resulting from the combined and articulated use of colours and shapes, while adding details to the text, underlining its playful dimension” (Ramos, 2010). The proliferation of colour, in very appealing warm tones, in contrast to the white background of the double page, the preference for geometric shapes and the inclusion of illustrative details not explained by the verbal discourse give the illustration an evident expressiveness and communicative effectiveness.

In addition to these graphic-plastic strategies, the presence of visual hyperbole that the pictorial component insistently explores still stands out. Helping the child to focus his gaze and progress in the pictorial-verbal narrative, the iconic representation of a trunk that winds through the pages of the book helps the young (pre) reader to traverse the spaces represented at times in a labyrinthine way, as is the case guards of this work, and to dwell on illustrative details. By reading these details, the child will be able to build other possible and alternative fictional worlds, a fact that seems essential in the development of his imaginative and efabulatory capacity. It should also be noted that the illustration, exercising its interpretive function, plastically presents the elephant through the red colour, a fact that is simply eliminated in the verbal discourse. Such an option, in addition to witnessing the creative and hermeneutic freedom of the artist, challenges the reader to attribute meanings to the visual surface and to move freely along the paths of interpretation.

In conclusion, it can be said that, in a playful but simultaneously poetic way, the picturebooks present here an axial theme in contemporary societies, marked by an enormous diversity and social and cultural heterogeneity. This multiculturalism that nowadays characterizes the world in which we live, however, often generates situations of discrimination, of disrespect and

intolerance for the Other. Now, in *Elmer*, the theme is approached subtly and poetically, making implicitly and without false moralisms, the call for tolerance and the appreciation of difference.

But the current era is also marked by the exaggerated and obsessive image cult. Being different means, at this level, not adjusting to conventional beauty standards, so the child can easily be stigmatized and ridiculed, leading to this situation with various psychological and emotional problems that inevitably pass through the rejection of his body image. In a playful and fun way, *The Different Elephant* approaches the difference very naturally, demystifying the drama of the unacceptance of oneself that affects many children and young people in today's society.

In addition to these aspects, the expressive and poetic richness of the texts and illustrations that illuminate and complement them, and in particular the relationship of deep intersemiotic coherence between the two artistic languages that coexist harmoniously in these two books for children, make these two works objects high-quality aesthetics.

Now, precisely, the child should be allowed to contact with quality literary texts, that is, “texts that, allowing him to experience the rich flow of the possibilities of the imaginary, also enable him to enjoy a word intensified in his pluri- isotopic” (Azevedo, 2005, p. 169) and, simultaneously, with artistic and plurisignificant illustrations, which develop and perfect their aesthetic sensibility and their imaginative capacity.

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