

**MULTIMODAL NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY
BRAZILIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

**NARRATIVAS MULTIMODAIS NA LITERATURA INFANTIL
BRASILEIRA CONTEMPORÂNEA**

Diana Navas

Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

Although it is not a contemporary creation, there is evidence in our context of the growth of multimodal narratives addressed primarily to Brazilian child readers. This is the offer of narratives that, based on different strategies, are built not only through the literary text but also through its dialogue with other languages, among which we highlight illustration and graphic design here. Among such works, we propose the reading of *Pra lá*, by Luiz Tatit, Dante Ozzetti and Edith Derdyk (2012); *Era uma vez outra vez*, by Edith Chacon and Priscilla Ballarin (2022); and *O que é que isso é?*, by Alexandre Rampazo (2020). We aim to highlight the need for simultaneous reading of the different languages that make up the book object to reach different reading layers. We also aim to discuss how the reading of multimodal works demands a different kind of reading and reader.

Keywords: multimodality; graphic design; illustrations; interactivity; reader

Resumo

Embora não seja uma criação contemporânea, há evidências, em nosso contexto, do aumento da edição de narrativas multimodais dirigidas, principalmente, ao público infantil brasileiro. Trata-se da oferta de narrativas que, a partir de diferentes estratégias, constroem-se, não só através do texto literário, mas também do seu diálogo com outras linguagens, das quais destacamos aqui a ilustração e o *design* gráfico. Dentre tais obras, propomos a leitura de *Pra lá*, de Luiz Tatit, Dante Onzzetti e Edith Derdyk (2012); *Era uma vez outra vez*, de Edith Chacon e Priscilla Ballarin (2022); e *O que é que isso é?*, de Alexandre Rampazo (2020). Procuramos destacar a necessidade de uma leitura sinérgica das diferentes linguagens que compõem o objeto livro para que diferentes camadas de

leitura possam ser alcançadas. Também pretendemos discutir como a leitura de obras multimodais exige um tipo diferente de leitura e leitor.

Palavras-chave: multimodalidade; design gráfico; ilustrações; interatividade; leitor

Introduction

Although it does not constitute a contemporary creation, in our context, a significant growth of multimodal narratives can be observed, primarily addressed to children. In line with a scenario in which we are immersed in different languages, especially due to technological advances, as well as an important development in the graphic industry, we find ourselves encountering literary works that move from the mono-modality of the printed page to a multimodal construction.

Understanding the concept of multimodality from Gibbons' considerations, for whom "multimodality refers to the multiplicity of semiotic resources within a particular artefact or event" (2012, p. 5), contemporary literary production designed to be addressed to children and young people, is constructed from a multiplicity of languages, of which we highlight illustration and graphic design.

When we think of a literary work, traditionally, what comes to mind is just a well-crafted set of words and phrases, linearly organised, in order to represent characters, actions, spaces, times, thoughts and feelings, regardless of the presence or not of illustrations, as well as typography, colours, layout or the type and weight of the paper used in its construction. However, we are faced today with a different scenario, in which we are invited to read, in addition to the words, also the page itself, in its material aspect, as Baldry & Thibault explain:

What was essentially a linguistic unit 100 years ago has now become primarily a visual unit. The page is no longer, as it was predominantly in the 19th century, simply a convenient division for the purposes of printing. In Western culture, it is increasingly looked upon as a textual unit in its own right. (Baldry & Thibault, 2005 p. 58)

The illustrations and graphic design are assumed as narrative components, narrating together with the literary text. The verbal text has its meanings expanded in close dialogue with the images and design elements – such as typography, colours, paper type and weight, a layout which only becomes possible from a synergistic reading of the different compositional languages of the work.

Therefore, we are faced with works that "require practical capacities for understanding and producing each one of the [languages] (multiliteracies) to give it meaning" (Rojo, 2016, p. 19). In other words, as Hallet explains, "being multimodally literate would therefore be defined as the ability to decipher, decode and 'read' various semiotic modes and their combination in a single act of representation or communication" (Hallet, 2018, p. 4). We are dealing with a type of production that implies

not only changes in how a given story is constructed, but also in how it should be read and interpreted, bringing new demands to the reader and, consequently, new skills. That is why Hallet underlines when referring to the reading process of multimodal novels – which we can extend to other types of multimodal narratives – the need for “a more systematic comprehension and analysis of the modes involved in multimodal novelistic narration and of the textual meaning that the interplay of different semiotic modes in the novel evokes and constitutes” (Hallet, 2018, p. 25).

It is important to observe how it is up to the reader not only to identify the constitutive languages of the work but to interrelate them in their interpretation process and understand how such compositional choices – whether in imagery or graphic terms – contribute to the construction of the diegesis, expanding the meanings raised by the literary text. In this way, faced with such demand, readers have expanded their literary repertoire in not only the act of reading but also their repertoire concerning illustration and graphic design. This aspect is of great relevance for developing more critical and conscious readers in a scenario in which they are immersed in different languages.

Assuming the role of co-author – since they are responsible for combining languages and the (re)construction of meanings – readers of multimodal texts, as we will demonstrate below, undertake a performative reading, which involves different meanings which actively act in front of the narratives.

These narratives constitute a challenge in bringing such demands; they have grown in Brazilian literature and aroused the attention of children's readers. This study aims to discuss these examples of contemporary Brazilian multimodal narratives. To this end, we selected three works – *Pra Lá*, by Luiz Tatit, Dante Onzzetti and Edith Derdyk (2012); *Era uma vez outra vez*, by Edith Chacon and Priscilla Ballarin (2022); and *O que é que isso é?*, by Alexandre Rampazo (2020). From the reading of these works, we intend to highlight the need for a synergistic reading of the different languages that make up the object book so that different reading layers can be reached. In addition, we will highlight how the reading of multimodal works requires a different type of reader and a reading that goes beyond the intellectual level, requiring the presence of different senses and the physical interaction of the reader.

Contemporary Brazilian multimodal narratives: possible readings

The work *Pra lá* was born from a Brazilian song created in 2006 by Luiz Tatit and Dante Ozzetti, two artists with an extensive production of contemporary Brazilian popular music and who, in addition to being friends for over forty years, have a musical partnership that is over twenty-five years old. The song, which is part of the album “Achau”, invites us, through rhyming verses, to think about what lies beyond what we immediately see: “Pra lá do bamba tem a fera/Pra lá da banda tem batera/Pra lá do inverno, primavera/Tem animal onde a gente nem vê /Tem mais país muito além da TV” [Beyond the chaos, there's the beast/Beyond the band, there's drums/Beyond winter, spring/There are animals where we don't even see/There's more country far beyond TV]. The song became a book in 2012 by the publisher Hedra, and its meanings were expanded

upon receiving illustrations and graphic design by Edith Derdyk, a renowned Brazilian plastic artist with extensive experience in graphic works such as book covers, record covers and illustrations. In addition, Derdyk is also the author and illustrator of three children's books: *Estória Sem Fimmm* (Summus Editorial, 1980), *O Colecionador de Palavras* and *A Sombra da Sandra Assanhada* (both published by Editora Salesianas, in 1986 and 1987 respectively).

The complete lyrics of the song are in the book. In it, the rupture of the borders between languages can be observed, right at the beginning of the reading, on the back cover, which warns us of the approximations between literature and music that we will encounter: "PRA LÁ is a song by Luiz Tatit and Dante Ozzetti. It's music, but now it's also a book. Illustrated with sensitivity by the artist Edith Derdyk, it shows us a world always moving forward, over there". These two languages, however, are joined by two others: illustration and graphic design.

Initially, attention is drawn to the horizontal format of the book (26 x 13 cm), which is closely in line with the title "Pra lá". This expression, which suggests a space far from the speaker, the idea of moving forward, gains materiality through the book's format, which, unlike traditional works, expands horizontally. Furthermore, the typography adopted in writing the title contributes to this idea of expansion and movement, as it expands in a concretely way due to the spacing between the letters (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Cover of the book *Pra lá*.

In the book, the lyrics of the song are distributed over a set of double pages, sometimes appearing in a single line, sometimes in two lines, thus disabling the reader's gaze who, in the latter case, must read the sentences not in a linear continuity – as is done when verses are present in a single line – but by the blocks in which they are organised on each of the pages (Figure 2). In verbal terms, we notice the playing with the alternating rhymes, promoting the sonority and the establishment of a rhythm in the reading that can contribute to the approximation and interest of the child reader.

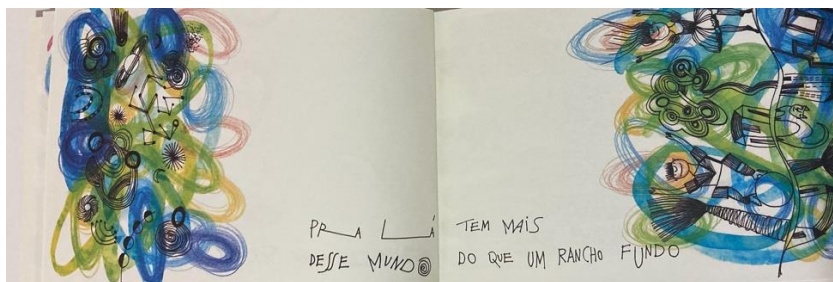


Figure 2. Distributed verses on the double-page set.

The content of the song points us towards the unknown. It invites us to think about what exists beyond what we see: “Tem carnaval muito além do cordão/Pra lá desse mundo, tem mais do que um rancho fundo/Tem mais fazer em saber porque faz/Tem mais querer em querer por demais” [There is carnival far beyond the rope/Beyond this world, there is more than a deep ranch/There is more to do in knowing why you do it/There is more to want in wanting too much] (Tati, Ozzetti & Derdyk, 2012 n.p). This suggestion of vagueness is in dialogue with the colour illustrations, which also show features that are not clearly defined. They merge, as seen in Figure 2, species of circles, and coloured spirals, which can point to the idea of turning movement. At times, the phrases themselves, overwritten, assume the function of illustration (Figure 3), suggesting that letters can act as images and that images can also be constructed by letters, thus breaking the limits between verbal language and visual.



Figure 3. Illustrations constructed from overlapping phrases.

The illegibility itself – a result of overlapping sentences – contributes to materialising the idea of chaos, doubt, and lack of definition beyond what we see, beyond the established order, thus evidencing the strict dialogue between the content expressed by the verbal text and its materialisation through imagery and graphic language.

It is also interesting to observe the exploration of the page's space through the layout. All double-page present feature verses, illustrations and blank spaces, spaces that assume narrative potential, given that the reader can fill them in based on their triadic reading of the verbal text, the illustration and the graphic design. In other words, the page is explored in its material aspect, similar to what concrete artists did in order to

make it possible for what happens in the literary text according to the aesthetics of reception (Jauss, 1994); the gaps are filled by the reader in the act of reading so that meanings can be (re)constructed, occurring “materially” in the pages of this work.

In dialogue with the verbal text and with the illustration is the typography. Written in capital letters, as is common in narratives primarily addressed to children, the phrases are expressed through a typography that, despite ensuring clear legibility, also incorporates the playful concept. As can be seen, the lyrics assume different proportions and are not presented linearly, pointing, as do the illustrations, to the idea of imprecision, unpredictability and movement suggested by the content of the song's lyrics. Let us observe, for example, how the spacing between the letters in the expression “Pra lá” – in the title and all its appearances throughout the work – through the “stretching” of the letters “r” and “l” makes the expression itself seem literally “on the move”, indicating a direction in which the text “walks”; the letter “o”, in turn, gains the connotation of a spiral and, therefore, of a certain continuity, in dialogue with what is suggested by the thematic plan of the work. In addition, the letters themselves take on movements as they are distributed on the page or even seek to materialise the direction to which they point, as is the case of the word “fera” [beast] (Figure 4), which gains tremulous contours as if it materialises the fear provoked by this creature.

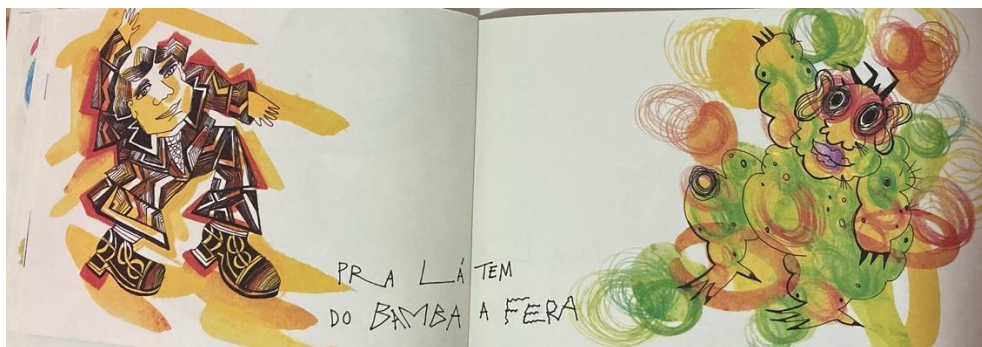


Figure 4. Typographic with an expansion of the expression “Pra lá” and the word “fera” [beast] simulating the tremors provoked by the beast in its interlocutor.

It is worth emphasising that the font size and even the spacing between the letters change according to the meaning conveyed by the verbal text to be “concretised” on the visual level. It can be seen, for example, that in “Tem futebol muito além do placar” [“There is football far beyond the scoreboard”, the word “futebol” [football] expands on the page, while the spacing in the word “placar” [scoreboard] is reduced, making it more compact in the space of the page. This game points, at the thematic level, to the relevance of the game itself and not to its result or the score achieved.

The variation of characters that parade in the pages of *Pra lá* also deserves attention. As the pages turn, we find different characters that make up the same story, de-automating the gaze of the reader – who traditionally expects to find the same characters in the course of the work – thus inviting him to also think about diversity, about the “over there” that exists beyond us.

Thus, there is a consonance between the content expressed by the literary text and the form it assumes, whether in verbal, imagery or graphic terms, so that compositional choices in terms of format, layout, typography, as well as strokes and colours present in the illustration, far from being mere adornments of the verbal text, assume a narrative potential in close dialogue with it, demanding that the reader concatenate the different languages to reach different layers of meaning.

Here again is another example of a multimodal narrative, published in 2022 by Edições Barbatanas, an independent Brazilian publisher that produced works that value the book's materiality. The work features verbal text by Edith Chacon, and illustrations and graphic design by Priscilla Ballarin was constructed collaboratively. The partnership between them extends to other productions, as is the case of *Na casa deles* [At their house] (independent edition, 2020) and *(Des)apontado* [(Dis)appointed] (Ameli, 2020).

While in *Era Uma Vez Outra Vez* [Once upon a time again], the title suggests a repetition of traditional stories, this conception is immediately challenged when we consider the book's materiality. The work is a kind of game book, which presents an illustrated poem, offered across five sheets, printed on offset paper (180 g/m²), and wrapped in a sleeve (Figure 5). Its pages are loose and folded in an accordion format, each side of the leaf corresponding to a stanza of the poem.



Figure 5. Glove and pages that makeup *Era uma vez outra vez*.

The verbal text is constructed from short, rhyming verses: “Era uma vez.../Um micoleão-dourado/Que vivia despenteado”; “Era uma vez.../Uma galinha-d’Angola/Que jogava conversa fora”; “Era uma vez.../Um elefante muito elegante/Que se equilibrava em um barbante” [“Once upon a time.../There was a golden lion tamarin/ Whose hair was always messed up”; “Once upon a time.../There was a guinea fowl/Who made small talk”; “Once upon a time.../There was a very elegant elephant/That balanced on a string”], whose sound attracts the attention of the child reader, inviting them, at the same time, to de-automatise their gaze through the unusual senses that are suggested from the verses presented. Furthermore, due to the repetition of the syntactic structure throughout the poem, the reader is also encouraged to interact, provoking them to construct other verses based on the suggested model.

In dialogue with the verses, which use simple words in their construction and refer to animals, are the illustrations. In colour, they all take on traits that refer to the universe of children, as if children had created them, an aspect that brings their prime readers closer to the illustrations while simultaneously stimulating the imagination – due to the suggestion and non-referentiality of the images. In the set of all the illustrations, one can see a common character: a bird, present from the sleeve, and which acts as a kind of speaker of the verses – since it is always close to the statement “Once upon a time”, and which, in this respect, can be understood as a kind of figuration of the reader in the work.

The folding of the sheets in an accordion format, in turn, contributes to establishing an atmosphere of expectation since the verses are offered gradually as the pages are unfolded. All of them start with the first page with the phrase “Era uma vez...” [“Once upon a time...”] – accompanied by the illustration of the bird – which, either through the recovery of a well-known expression in the world of storytelling or through the presence of ellipses, incites the child's reading imagination. Only in the final verses – and, therefore, in the last fold – does the reader's horizon of expectations break down – since there is a rupture with what was enunciated regarding the character – and, with it, the establishment of humour of the playful concept. With verses printed on both sides of the paper, the reader is required not only to unfold the page but the very movement of inverting the sheets so that the back of the paper can be (un)folded and read. It is also interesting to observe that, in some sheets, the unfolding of the pages must be done horizontally and, in others, vertically, which, again, collaborates with the rupture of the traditional turning of pages (Figure 6) and invites the reader to a different movement in the act of reading.



Figure 6. Unfolding pages horizontally and vertically.

The book does not have a beginning or end in the traditional sense, as the pages can be read in any order. However, in one of the sheets, which can be considered as a possible “ending”, we are faced with: “Era uma vez... uma centopeia/que se espalhou feito

geleia no prato de trigo do tigre/que não era xadrez/e enganou todos vocês./Não gostou? Então, invente/ era uma vez outra vez...” [“Once upon a time... There was a centipede/That spread like jelly on the tiger's plate of wheat/That was not chess/And deceived you all./Didn't you like it?]. So, invent/once upon another time...”, which breaks with the structure on the other sheets, in addition to clearly highlighting the role of co-author assigned to the reader, a role that can be exercised at different levels. Regarding the verbal text, for example, it is possible for the reader to construct new rhymes for the same animals or to create new verses for other animals, following the same syntactic structure offered throughout the work. Due to its graphic design, in turn, it is still possible for the reader to manipulate the book as an object, as well as reorganising the pages, which promotes a new reading of the poem.

As can be seen, the triad – verbal text, illustration and graphic design – maintains close consonance, constituting the work as a playful whole, built from the simultaneous contribution of each compositional language. Therefore, *Era uma vez outra vez* presents itself as a multimodal work that playfully contributes to the reader's repertoire not only in verbal terms, but also in imagery and graphics.

O que é que isso é? [*What is that?*], by Alexandre Rampazo, published by Ciranda Cultural in 2020, is also a significant example of a multimodal narrative. Born in São Paulo, Alexandre Rampazo graduated in design and is an author of illustrated books and a graphic artist. With a widely awarded work – his production received, among others, the distinction IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Honour List 2022 and the Jabuti award (one of the most important Brazilian awards) three times, in addition to having works selected for the IBBY catalogue at the Bologna Fair. The works of the author, who is today one of the main authors in contemporary Brazilian literature – with *Se eu abrir esta porta agora* (Sesi, 2018), *Pinóquio – o livro das pequenas verdades* (Boitatá, 2019), *Este é o lobo* (Pequena Zahar, 2020), *Eustáquio – o mágico magnífico* (Gato Leitor, 2022) being some examples of his work – reveal careful work with the triad of verbal text, illustration and graphic design.

In *O que é que isso é?* [*What is that?*], Alexandre Rampazo starts from a typical children's question, which children continually repeat in their desire to know the universe around them. The sentence, as well as the answers given to it, is printed in clearly legible capital letters, reinforcing the idea that it is intended primarily for a child reader. The set of double pages assumes a schematic construction that is repeated throughout the entire work: on the left page, there is an illustration with a child and a certain object – constructed with well-defined lines and in black and white – associated with the question: “What is that?”; on the right page, in turn, we find another illustration, which seems to repeat the object from the left page, but now starting from a new position. A sentence is associated with it, which, however, denies that the image is about the object that we are apparently seeing. So, for example, in the first set of double pages, we have: “O que é que isso é?”, “Uma caixa é que não é!” [“What is that?”, “It's not a box!”] (Figure 7), which generates inquietude, as we are literally looking at a box.



Figure 7. Set of double pages with the structure repeated throughout the work.

However, our attention is drawn to a red acetate sheet between the two pages, which is present on the cover. This material element is responsible for the game established in the narrative, guaranteeing its playful character. This is because, when we visualise the page on the right superimposed with the acetate, there seems to be a contradiction concerning the verbal text (Figure 8). If the verbal text states: “What is that?/It’s not an armchair”, it is precisely the image of an armchair that we come across when we look at the page superimposed by the acetate sheet.

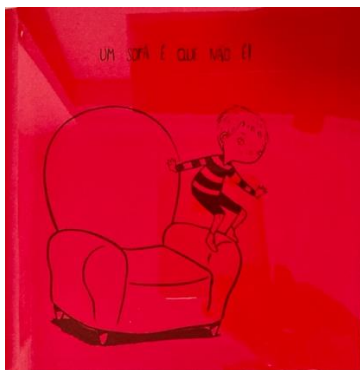


Figure 8. Illustration visualised when superimposed on the acetate sheet.

However, the surprise comes when the reader turns the acetate page, which reveals a new illustration that, in fact, contradicts the one we had previously seen (Figure 9). In it, we are faced with a completely different object from what we had initially conceived.



Figure 9. Unveiled image after turning the acetate page.

More than a game, the presence of this material element guarantees the book the possibility of expressing the purpose of the work: to highlight the imaginative potential of the child in front of objects that the adult's eyes, automated as they are, are incapable of imagining or conceiving at first. The book invites us to look at things beyond their appearance, bringing out the so latent fantasy and creativity in the child's gaze.

A closer reading of *O que é que isso é?* may even suggest a metalinguistic bias. At the end, in the last set of double pages, we have: "What is that?", followed by a phrase that breaks the established syntactic pattern: "What is it? What is it? What is it?" The object we now see is a book, which remains even when the acetate page is turned and appears accompanied by the illustrations that permeate the entire work (Figure 10), thus suggesting the space of the book as being open to fantasy and imagination, the space that makes it possible to create and break with the automation of our gaze faced with everyday elements.

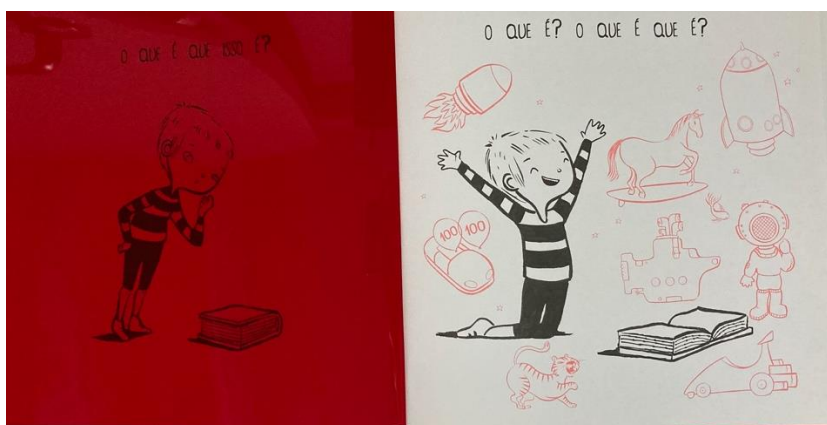


Figure 10. The final set of double pages with the representation of the book.

At this point, we can read a metaphor for constructing the literary text. Although the construction of the literary text makes use of words that are used in our daily lives

and, therefore, immediately understood in their referential sense due to our automated look, the literary text has the potential to break with this crystallised vision, opening possibilities for the same word to assume different meanings due to the game that is established there. It is exactly this idea that materialises in the reading of the work. Associating the automated gaze with the figure of the adult here, Rampazo warns us of the poeticism that, in contrast, permeates the childish gaze; like the literary gaze, it is the gaze of discovery, imagination and rupture, and makes it possible to look beyond appearances, beyond what is immediately present.

Thanks to an element that constitutes part of the book's graphic design – the acetate sheet – the whole game and the ludic character of the narrative can be established. Once again highlights the narrative role that the book's materiality can assume; together with the illustrations, it has the potential to broaden the meanings raised by the literary text and showing how literary reading in the contemporary context cannot be limited to deciphering and interpreting the verbal code.

Conclusion

In *A história da leitura*, Alberto Manguel, an important researcher on the act of reading, tells us:

When coming into contact with the book, the reader establishes an intimate, physical relationship in which all the senses participate: the eyes picking up the words on the page, the ears echoing the sounds that are being read, the nose inhaling the familiar smell of paper, glue, ink, cardboard or leather, the touch caressing the rough or smooth page, the soft or hard binding, sometimes even the palate, when the reader's fingers are moistened on the tongue (Manguel, 1997 p. 277).

This observation becomes even more pertinent when we consider books primarily addressed to children and young people in contemporary times. Due to their multimodal construction, such works demand a reading that involves the different senses and the body in its entirety: reading goes beyond the use of vision and the brain to decode codes; reading implies seeing, touching, feeling, thinking, interpreting, that is, reading with the whole body.

As we can see from the reading of *Pra lá, Era uma vez outra vez* and *O que é que isto é?*, which are examples of contemporary Brazilian multimodal works aimed primarily at children, we are dealing with productions composed of multiple languages – verbal text, illustration and graphic design – without any of them, however, standing out or being able to be read independently without the (re)construction of meanings being damaged.

As the readings suggest, it is a type of production that demands a new type of reading and, consequently, a new type of reader. It is a new type of reading because it involves different senses and an active role on the part of the reader: a reader who is not limited to reading words but who is required to read text synergistically, images and graphic design; a reader whose role is not simply to identify the compositional languages

of the book but to interpret and correlate them so that other meanings can be reached and (re)constructed; a reader who is continually challenged to explore different layers of reading, beyond the verbal text, according to their repertoire and reading experience.

More than providing the acquisition of a literary repertoire, contemporary multimodal narratives invite the reader – of these and many other contemporary works – to expand their imagery and graphic repertoire. They will become capable of understanding the different languages that make up not merely the book, but also the context in which it is inserted, which is constituted of multiple languages that demand recognition and interpretation. More than literary works, multimodal narratives thus contribute to forming more critical and aware world readers, which are much needed in the current Brazilian – and global – scenario.

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Bionote

Diana Navas has a degree in literature, a master's in literature and literary criticism from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil (PUC-SP), and a PhD in literature from the University of São Paulo, Brazil, having completed a post-doctoral internship at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. She works as a professor and coordinator

Navas, D. (2023). Multimodal narratives in contemporary Brazilian children's literature. *Child Studies*, (2), 55-68.
<https://doi.org/10.21814/childstudies.4526>

of the Postgraduate Studies Program in Literature and Criticism at the PUC-SP, and is a researcher at CNPQ (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development).

Email: dnavas@pucsp.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4516-5832>

Received: February 2023

Published: April 2023