

The Brazilian Postmodern Picturebook: The Visual Construction of Metafiction in Ziraldo's *The Panel Boy*

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Abstract This article conducts a semiotics analysis of the postmodern features of the Brazilian picturebook *The Panel Boy* (*O Menino Quadrado*), by Ziraldo. It tells the story of a boy who lives inside a comic book until is forced to move into a world of prose, where the images, colours and sounds of comics must be left behind and the boy must learn to live in a new form of narrative. The story blends the narrative forms of the picturebook, the comic book and of prose with ambiguous representations that generate uncertainty and indeterminacy in the narrative. Self-reflexive and metafictional, in *The Panel Boy*, the protagonist reflects upon and comments on the nature of these different forms of fiction. Finally, several intertextual and intervisual allusions position the narrative in relation to both fine and commercial art, implicitly discussing the relationship between them and bringing awareness to the fact that the meanings of signs are attributed by the reader in relation to other texts and the context. It concludes with a reflection as to whether the limitations generated by the power imbalance between the child reader and the adults author and mediator within the spectrum of children's literature allow for a truly postmodern picturebook.

Key Words postmodern picturebook; *The Panel Boy*; metafiction; intertextuality; indeterminacy; genre hybridity

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Introduction

Ziraldo is one of the most acclaimed and influential children's literature creators in Brazil, having published more than 100 books for children, many translated into English, Spanish, French, Italian and Basque. This paper aims to place the work of Ziraldo in the context of postmodernity by analysing his book *O Menino Quadrado* (*The Panel Boy*), published in 1989. *The Panel Boy* tells the story of a boy who lives inside a comic book, where he lives adventures with super-heroes and other characters from children's literature, but also plays with the formal features of comic books, such as colours, speech bubbles and sound effects, until one day the heroes and panels and bubbles are gone and he has to face pure written text, in which he has to learn to appreciate the pleasures of this different kind of narrative. By close-reading *The Panel Boy*, I aim to deconstruct the elements of postmodernity present in this narrative and elucidate how they operate in the visual text to generate an original and creative metafictional narrative.

The Postmodern Picturebook

Postmodernism is “the cultural and intellectual phenomena ... that have blossomed since the 1960s in the form of buildings, paintings, works of literature and other cultural forms and artefacts. ... Particularly for artists and cultural critics, is thus a reaction to or transcendence of modernism in the arts, or both (Lewis 88). The use of the notion of postmodernism to reflect on contemporary art and culture seems to be losing importance in general scholarship and new notions like Hypermodernism (Lipovetsky, 2005), Digimodernism (Kirby, 2009) and Metamodernism (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010) have been suggested to discuss the 21st Century aesthetic production. In the field of children's literature, nevertheless, the analysis of the so-called postmodern picturebook has been extensive in the past decades, with studies considering both the features that characterize this group of works (e.g., Allan, 2012; Lewis, 2001; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008, Pantaleo, 2010; 2014), and how children respond to these texts (e.g. Pantaleo, 2009; 2014; Flores-Koulish & Smith-D'Arezzo, 2016).

The permanence of the notion of postmodernism in picturebook theory might derive from the fact that postmodern picturebooks “rarely unhook themselves totally from mainstream literary norms and none possesses the apocalyptic, endgame quality ... that is found in much postmodern art” (Lewis 99). Lewis enumerates the characteristics of postmodernity as: indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, irony, hybridization, and performance and participation, and yet

believes that most features traditionally associated with postmodernism are actually explorations of the playful characteristic of picturebooks and on the fact that most of these narratives are built upon the metafiction, which proceeds postmodernism but is significantly more frequent in postmodern literature.

Goldstone (2004), however, has a firmer belief on the postmodern aspects of many contemporary picturebooks, claiming they should be considered a sub-genre. The scholar claims that, in contrast with the characteristics of traditional picturebooks — plot based on a problem and its solution, linearity, complementarity of images and texts, author and illustrator as authorities, and a certain set of communication codes established to permit the interpretation of the images — the subgenre of postmodern picturebooks has three motifs that unify them as a group: nonlinearity of plot and voices, irony, and metafiction and co-authoring.

Sipe and Pantaleo (2008), although also reflecting on the difficulties of defining the postmodern picturebook, consider they usually present six groups of characteristics: 1. unclear boundaries between pop and high culture, among literary genres, and among author, narrator and reader; 2. subversion of literary traditions and conventions, and of the distinction between fiction and reality; 3. explicit intertextuality, including pastiche and layering of texts from various origins; 4. multiple meanings, ambiguity and open-endedness; 5. playfulness; 6. self-referentiality and metafiction.

Postmodern Features of the *The Panel Boy*

Considering the different features different scholars use to define the postmodern picturebook, *The Panel Boy* can be considered a quintessential example of the genre. While the postmodern picturebook flourished in the 1990s and 2000s, this early example anticipates some of the ground breaking features and literary devices present in many of the most acclaimed picturebooks, usually from the English language tradition, such as *Stinky Cheese Man* (1992) and *The Three Pigs* (2001). The narrative has two clear parts: in the first part, a boy is inside a comic and introduces to the reader several of the conventions of comics, both in terms of form (speech bubbles, sound effects, panels) and content (referring to different literary genres such as science fiction or superhero). There are two transition spreads, where this comic structure fades out, giving place to a prose narrative where the verbal language (including the use of typography) is responsible for conveying the story. The book is firmly structured having the double spread as a unit, especially in the first part, and Ziraldo consciously explores the movement of turning the pages, each spread having its own set of characteristics and working almost as an

independent module, or subchapters of the story. In the close reading of *The Panel Boy*, I will navigate linearly through the narrative, identifying along the way the features of postmodernism most salient in some spreads of the first part, and more generally in the second part, where the visual features become less prominent, being circumscribed to the use of typography.

Genre Hybridity

One of the most salient postmodern features of *The Panel Boy* is the blurring of boundaries amongst genres. The discussion of genre is crucial because genres generate expectations in readers, therefore affect the way they interpret the works, limiting a narrative's meaning potential according to the knowledge and experiences that readers have with that genre.

The very definition of genre in children's literature is controversial, and in different contexts "genre" can be used to group works according to its "formal, thematic, or material [characteristics] — or, mostly likely, a combination of those three in relative proportions" (Westman 464-465). In picturebook scholarship, however, most commonly "the picturebook is [considered] a form that incorporates, or insights, genres, forms of language, and forms of illustration, then accommodates itself to what it has swallowed, taking on something of the character of the ingested matter, but always inflected through the interanimation of the words and pictures" (Lewis 65). Therefore, the term is used to classify works according to their content or theme (thus, the genres of fairy tales, adventure, fantasy, etc.), while the categories of "picturebooks" or "comics" are generally considered artforms (Bader, 1976; Lewis, 2001; McCloud, 1994; Nodelman, 1988; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001).

Some scholars, however, in considering genre in a broader sense as "a set of similar characteristics shared by a group of literary works that acts as a mediating framework between texts, authors/illustrators, and the audience" (Goldstone 198), consider that categories like picturebook, comic book or graphic novel can be considered genres. According to this definition, the picturebook is considered a genre and the postmodern picturebook a subgenre, as it has its own set of shared characteristics and structures. It is not the purpose of this work to discuss which definition is more appropriate and why. For the purposes of this analysis, both definitions of genres are considered, with the former being called "literary genres" and picturebooks, comics and graphic novels termed as "book genres."

In *The Panel Boy*, both concepts of genre are present, discussed, challenged and hybridized. Just by going through the pages and considering its most obvious visual features, it is noticeable that the story has a shift from the comic book to

the prose genre as it starts as a multimodal narrative comprised of writing and images, organized in a comic-like panel structure, and ends in a purely written narrative. Looking at the cover, the visual representation follows the conventions of the comic book genre, with all writing — title, author and publisher’s name — represented inside speech bubbles, while the title of the book makes use of a comic-style typography. The material features of the book, however, are typical of picturebooks: the format is 20.5 cm x 25.5 cm, while most comic books in Brazil, especially at the time of publication, had the reduced format of 13 cm x 21 cm; it has 32 pages, standard length of picturebooks; the paper, both for the cover and for the internal pages, is thicker and of better quality, rarely used in comics in the late 1980s in Brazil; finally, the title is part of the series “Mundo Colorido” (Colorful World), whose other titles are all picturebooks.

On the first page of the story, the images are presented in panels, as a comic, but the story starts with “Once upon a time...”¹, said on the first panel by a bird passing far in the sky. While fairy tales are in the literary genre level and comics in the book genre, typically fairy tales are presented in picturebook form, therefore a fairy tale comic book breaks reader’s expectations, generating unfamiliarity and a subtle suggestion for readers to reflect on the nature of the narrative. The images, however, don’t show typical fairy-tale elements, except perhaps for the fact they invoke childhood; a kite, a dog, a soccer ball, a skate and dirty sneakers suggest the universe of a child, most probably a boy (in Brazil, kites, skates, and soccer balls are usually considered boys’ toys). The elements are very concrete and don’t make any reference to a magic or fantastic world, except, perhaps, for the presence of a talking bird as narrator.



Figure 1: *The Panel Boy*, pages 4-5.

The verbal narrative continues on the next spread (pp.4-5) and these presumptions are confirmed: [Once upon a time...] “there was a boy!”, says another

little bird. In this scene, the protagonist is introduced and his relationship with the reader starts to be forged. The image portrays a boy, seated on the grass, surrounded by nature (flowers, trees, a lake in the background), his body covering most of the spread. The comics' panel structure continues, but instead of each image portraying a scene of the story, they all form the pieces of a mosaic that constitutes the portrait of the boy, merging the comic book format with the full-page illustration typical of picturebooks. McCloud (1994), building on the terminology by Eisner (1985), defines comics for the sequential nature of its images. While the presence of several panels in one spread reinforces the characterization of this text as a comic, the lack of temporal relationship between the panels challenge it. According to McCallum (2008), "the white space is the liminal space between fiction and reality" (190), so the gutter constitutes a barrier between the world of the reader and that of the character. The boy is imprisoned by the white "bars" and forced to stay in the universe of fiction.



Figure 2: Detail of Edouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass)

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) claim, in accordance with the ideas of Halliday (1978), every text presents, amongst other meaning functions, an interpersonal metafunction, which positions the participants depicted in the text, and those reading/viewing it, in relation to each other. Interpersonal meanings are visually constructed through the exploration of different kinds of "(eye) contact," "social distance" and "attitude." In a parodic reference to classic outdoor paintings in the history of art, possibly to Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (see figure 2) the boy is posing (although dressed and alone), reclining on the grass and surrounded by nature. In terms of "contact," or how the characters visually address the viewer through their gaze ("demand") or lack of gaze ("contact") (Kress & van Leeuwen,

2006), this picture is extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, the boy's body position suggests an offer type of relationship: he is posing and wants to be seen by the reader (meaning that is more explicit in Manet's painting by the fact that the woman is also naked). On the other hand, this representation could be considered of "demand," as the boy is facing the viewer and smiles, inviting them to engage; the boy is somewhat acknowledging the reader on the other side of the page, but the key element in Kress and van Leeuwen's theory that defines an image as demand or offer, the eye contact, is ambiguous as the eyes are covered by a dark shadow, so there is no real eye contact. Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2014) have applied and expanded Kress and van Leeuwen's framework with regards to picturebooks' visual text and problematize the direct attribution of demand and offer meanings simply by eye contact. They suggest the meanings of "contact" instead of "demand" and "observe" instead of "offer." In this case, therefore, since the connection between character and reader is not fully established, it constitutes only a partial offer, pending towards a "observe" meaning, which confirms the meaning suggested by the presence of the panels: reader and character, real and fictional worlds, are clearly defined. This ambiguity regarding the lack of a real gaze from the character contributes to creating a feeling of unfamiliarity towards the story.

"Social distance" refers to the levels of relationship between characters and reader, as realized through close-up (personal/intimate distance), medium (social distance), and long shots (impersonal relationship) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In this scene, Although his whole body is depicted, which usually characterizes a medium shot, the image represents a quite close shot. The fact that the top of his head and the limit of his knees are cut by the limits of the panels gives the reader a sense of proximity, of being able to touch or hug the character. Finally, with regards to "Attitude" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), which refers to the involvement or detachment between reader and character and the power relations between them, the image shows a relationship of involvement (frontal angle) and equity (eye level angle) between viewer and character. Nevertheless the fact that the portrait is framed and crossed by the gutter's white bars, implies, at the same time, a sense of detachment and objectivity.

Accordingly, this image creates a dubious relationship between the character and the reader. The character is close to the reader, it feels as if he could be reached by extending one's arms; he is also equal to the reader, the boy mirroring the reader to a certain extent. On the other hand, he is unreachable, separated by the panels; the bars mark the limits between the world of the reader and that of the boy; he looks at the reader but his eyes cannot be seen, the reader cannot address him or be

addressed by him directly.

A final detail cannot go unnoticed in this image: at the panel positioned at the boy's chest, there is a visual and sound effect: the word "ZAP" appears over a spiky and colourful bubble. These effects seem to suggest the appearance of the boy in the story, as if a magic or special introduction. The positioning of this effect is again dubious, it could be an illustration in the boy's shirt, which can indicate his appreciation for comics, or it can be a narrative feature enhancing his entrance in the story, therefore creating ambiguity between what is represented and how it is represented, or the story and the discourse.



Figure 3: *The Panel Boy*, pages 6-7.

On the following spread (pp.6-7) the multi-panel structure remains, with one big image covering the whole spread but limited and restrained by the gutter spaces; the image shows ruins of a castle with cave like entrances and the skeleton of a huge animal at the bottom of the right-hand side. The boy is at the far end, deep within the castle, with his back to the reader and looking through a window to a bright blue sky. In contrast the previous scene, the "long shot" suggests an impersonal relationship with the reader ("social distance" relations) and a detached "attitude" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006); the boy is distant and unreachable. The environment seems to be hostile and subjugating the boy. He, however, seems relaxed looking through a window. The text on this page, continuing the sentence started in the first page, says: "[Once upon a time... there was a boy] who lived inside / a comic. / Everybody said he was stuck. / That's why he was called The Panel Boy" (6-7, / indicates a different speech bubble).

While the sequence of panels does not represent the passage of time in relation to the visual text, it does so in relation to the verbal text, which are

disposed in various bubbles following this sequence. The bubbles come from different participants hidden inside different caves, or possibly from the cave itself, except from the last bubble is enunciated by a tiny ladybug. There is, therefore, an ambivalence created by the image text relationship as to who is the narrator, whether there are multiple narrators, as suggested by the positioning of the bubbles in the visual text, or one omnipresent narrator.

The Construction of Metafiction

According to Hutcheon (2013), metafiction is “fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1). Hutcheon classifies metafiction into *diegetic*, when metafiction manifests through the narrative structure, or *linguistic*, when it manifests through language—which here will contemplate not only verbal language, but also visual, including typography. On the spread presented above (pp.6-7), the metafictional and self-referential aspects of this story become more explicit: the story is about a boy who lives inside a story, statement that reinforces that the boundaries between real and fictional worlds are not permeable. On the next spread (pp.8-9), however, the narrator/narrators is/are silenced and the boy takes control of his own narrative, which is now in the first person: “Stuck? / How stuck? / If here, I am the one / who paints the colours of the rainbow. / I know all the drops of blue from these seas... / all the drops of light... / all the drops! / I live inside here / as blue and red / live inside purple.” Pantaleo (2014) has described a series of narrative devices that constitute the metafictional nature of postmodern picturebooks and several of them refer to the relationship between reader, characters and narrator (326). Here, the boy replies with a question, which by the sequence of the narrative would indicate a response to the narrators’ comments. Nevertheless, the direct gaze of the child towards the reader, suggests a direct communication between them, and perhaps a slight softening of the fiction reality boundaries. By assuming his own voice in the story, the boy is questioning the narrator’s authority and asking for autonomy. He is the one to talk about his own experiences in the fictional world, and his opinion diverges from the narrator: he is not only enjoying being “stuck” in this universe, but he is an expert in it. From this spread on, until the narrative changes from comic into prose, the narrative will reflect on the nature of the comic book form with each spread dedicated to a different aspect of it, therefore manifesting a diegetic type of metafiction. On pp. 8-9, colour and the process of reproducing coloured images on paper is the focus. The reflection on the printing process occurs both on the diegetic level, with the boy claiming to be responsible for the colours on the pages,

and on the linguistic level, as the representation of Ben-Dey dots, exhibiting the micro drops of ink as much bigger dotted patterns that superpose, make the printing process explicit.



Figure 4: *The Panel Boy*, pages 8-9.

The boy, on the one hand, mirrors the implied child reader, with its love for and understanding of the comic universe but, on the other hand, his knowledge excels that of the typical child reader, and therefore the reflection on the printing process become a didactic device that aims at enhancing the child reader's understanding of the book production. The last sequence of panels, however, is contradictory because the boy claims to know that purple is made from the combination of blue and red, basic colour mixing theory that is familiar to most children, while in the printing process, purple is created from the combination of magenta and yellow. Apparently, this level of knowledge was considered above what the implied child reader would possess.

The next spread (pp.10-11) brings awareness to the representation of sound typical of the comic book form: sound effects are represented with the playful use of typography, visual effects and colour. Again, the boy declares, "From comics, I know all the surprises, all the sounds" (10). This text comes in a trembling bubble, which matches the sound effect of the panel. Again, if on the one hand, this spread teaches readers some of conventions of the comic books, then on the other hand, it expects the reader to possess at least a certain level of knowledge of these conventions to make sense of it. In this spread, the ambiguity of the relationships between character, narrator and reader are further explored, as there is an (ambivalent) direct address: "Did you (plural) think I was in trouble?". "You" could refer to the multiple narrators from the previous scenes but, in the context of the spread, "you" most likely refers to the readers, in a playful interactive relationship around the sound representation devices. Therefore, there can be a suggestion of

a further softening of the boundaries between fiction and reader, but the reader is, here, left to decide.



Figure 5: *The Panel Boy*, pages 10-11.

Indeterminacy

Indeterminacy is another device commonly considered characteristic of the postmodern picturebook. According to Lewis (2001), “the more we know about other societies and cultures, the more we become attuned to difference and the less confident we become in our judgments of what constitutes normal behaviour. Literature has responded to such developments by placing an increased emphasis upon undecidable outcomes and irresolvable dilemmas” (89). The ambiguity of the representations in this story, as discussed in previous scenes, permeate the story throughout and introduces a slight level of indeterminacy to *The Panel Boy*. At the end of the spread discussed above (pp.10-11), however, one panel creates a more explicit sense of indeterminacy: after the boy has played with the sounds, the scene ends with a last sound effect, “zzzz,” which emanates from the boy as he lies on the bed; by his side, on the floor, lays a colourful comic book. The colours in this panel are much less bright and saturated than the previous panels, except for the comic, just colourful as those previous panels. The scene suggests a momentary closure to the narrative: is the boy just dreaming about being inside a comic? But on the the following pages the story continues and nothing is mentioned about this image, again readers are left to their own conclusions.

Intertextuality and Intervisuality

“*Intertextuality* refers to elements of another text (e.g., a book, film, movie, etc.) that incorporate references to or imitation of a preexisting content in another

context, often in subtle ways” (Desang 42). When these allusions refer to a visual text, such as a piece of visual art or the visual aspect of a multimodal text, the term intervisuality is often used (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Serafini, 2016).



Figure 6: *The Panel Boy*, pages 12-13.

As the story continues, intertextual and intervisual allusions multiply and some of them contribute to the portrayal of the comic genre, moving from the discussion of its formal features to references to some of comics’ most famous protagonists. Pages 12-13 present several “friends” of The Panel Boy: Superman, Batman, the Spirit, the whole crew from *Turma do Pererê*, (a comic book series by Ziraldo himself), Horacio (a character from the most famous Brazilian cartoonist, Mauricio de Souza), Captain America, Tarzan, Mickey Mouse and Spider Man. Through these references, The Panel Boy is defining himself as a character in relation to other heroes, at the same time that his relationship with them work as a metaphor for the affective relationship developed between the readers and their favorited fictional characters. Globalization is a socio-economic-political characteristic of postmodernity, and it is represented here by the presence of many North American characters in a Brazilian story. In addition, the boy claims, again, to be an expert, asserting that he knows who those characters are, although at first he does not say any names. It is not possible to see the face of many of the characters, and in the last panels a game is established between the reader and the boy, who questions whether readers can recognize them.

Intervisuality, however, was already being played in a much subtler form in previous images. On the very cover, the boy’s face is not flat coloured as the rest of the image, but white filled with a screentone of light pink dots. This “stylization,” or the reproduction of a certain artistic style without the reference to a specific work of art (Serafini, 2016), alludes to the the work of the American pop-artist Roy Lichtenstein. Lichtenstein and the pop-art movement is considered one of the first postmodern manifestations in the arts and their influence is believed by some

to have outlined many of the features of postmodernism that are still in vogue nowadays (Doris, 2014). Lichtenstein questioned the relationship between fine and commercial arts by bringing images from comics to the walls of art galleries. By expanding small frames into large-size paintings, he explored the Ben-Dey dots, typical of the printing process of comics, on the faces of comics' sexy nymphs. Ziraldo contributes to this conversation by doing the inverse movement, and bringing the aesthetics now attributed to this of fine art movement back to the comic book.



Figure 11: *The Panel Boy*, pages 16-17.

As already mentioned, there seems to be an allusion to Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* on pages 4-5, this time more in the shape of what Serafini (2016) called 'transfiguration', or when "a single work of fine art is identifiable but the picturebook artist has transformed the image to fit the context and purpose of a particular picturebook narrative and design" (445). In fact, in almost every spread there seems to be some intertextual or intervisual reference, and perhaps some have not been identified by the author because they are not part of her repertoire or simply because they are references to texts that were popular a long time ago. For instance, the cave image on the third spread could be inspired by the fantastic worlds created by the French comic artist Moebius, for instance Arzach (2011, originally published in 1975); on page 8, the first panel shows the boy's represented in the style of the American graphic designer Milton Glaser, most known for his psychedelic illustrations for music artists like Bob Dylan and The Beatles. The profusion of intertextual references continues on pages 16-17, which makes reference the universe of children's literature (e.g., *Lord of the Flies*, *Tintin*, *Pinocchio*, *O Menino Maluquinho* — Ziraldo's best seller book) but also includes some possible references to fine arts (e.g., the modernist painting *Moleques Pulando Cela [Boys playing]*, by the Brazilian artist Candido Portinari). Ziraldo brings to the same pot comic narratives, classics of children's literature and fine arts, this way again questioning the notions of high and popular culture in *The*

Panel Boy's postmodern exploration.

Intertextuality makes the reader a co-creator of the story as it “presupposes the reader’s active participation in the decoding process” (Nikolajeva & Scott 228). In addition, it reflects upon and makes explicit the fact that the meaning of every sign, such as a word or an image, depends on its relationships with other signs and with the context of production and consumption of the text. However, an “allusion only makes sense if the reader is familiar with the hypotext (the text alluded to)” (Nikolajeva & Scott 228), and several of the cases transfiguration and stylization in this book are hardly identifiable. This raises the question: Who is the implied reader of this narrative? This question will be resumed at the end of this paper (see below).

From Comic to Prose



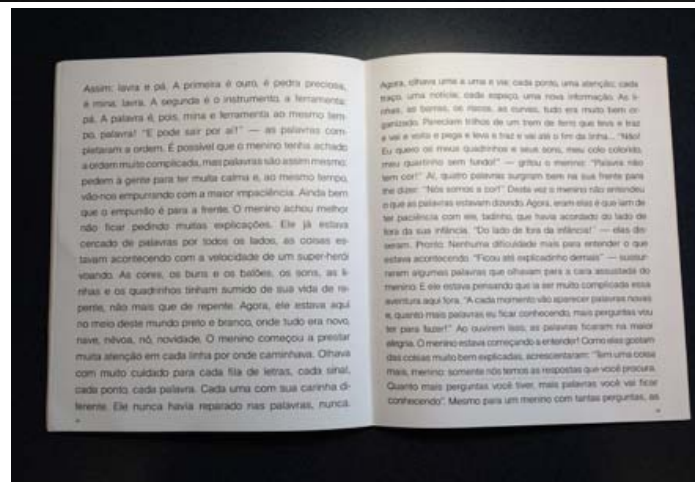
Figure 12: *The Panel Boy*, pages 18-19.



Figure 13: *The Panel Boy*, pages 20-21.

The introduction of intertextual references of works of children’s literature where the verbal narrative is dominant starts a process of transition from the comic universe to the prose universe. This process will be represented visually by the shrinking of the panels and the increase of the gutter space (18-19). On the next spread, there is almost nothing left of the comic world and the verbal

text takes over, first with big, fat typefaces, reminiscent of the comic universe, but that continues transitioning, becoming smaller and smaller at each spread, until reaching a size of around 10pt in the last page of the book. The text not only changes from a multimodal — visual and writing — narrative to a verbal narrative, but also assumes stylistic changes characteristic of prose. For instance, the use of formal address (*tu* instead of *você*) — and the text is grammatically precise, which significantly contrasts to the informality of spoken Brazilian Portuguese showed in the dialogs in the first part of the book.



Figures 14, 15 and 16: *The Panel Boy*, pages 20-21, 24-25 and 30-31 show the changes in typography during the second part of the story.

The boy is forced to live the comic world but he does not do it without resistance: “I don’t want to live with you [the words]. I can just make sense of colours and sounds, panels, images and speech bubbles” (23). The words then start to present to him the richness and beauty of their universe in various ways. The prose narrative mirrors the comic narrative in some aspects and repeats some of the postmodern strategies. The metafiction is transferred from one world to the other and continues to be a central element to the story. Just as the boy explores the construction of the comic universe with the use of images, colour and sound effects, in the second part, with the help of the words themselves, the boy navigates through the construction of prose, investigating the construction and meaning of words through comparisons and metaphors with his own experience and existence. The nature of the written text as a semiotic code is exposed; words are signs, things can be represented by words and yet words are not these things. The intertextual references are also extensive, including, for instance, quotations from biblical passages, from Brazilian poetry and references from characters of children’s literature (e.g., Peter Pan). There is also some retrospective fictional self-reflection regarding the transition from comic into prose, making explicit that the gutter space represents the passage of time, therefore this transition brought the boy “to the other side of his childhood” (25). The prose text is a continuum that goes through 10 pages, without any separation of paragraphs or subtitles; the linearity of language is used as device to represent the linearity of life and the impossibility of stopping or going back in time. Life and fiction are interwoven with the space/time movement from one scene to the other also meaning the boy growing up. Adulthood is presented as a black and white universe, but one that still provides him a great deal of new and significant meanings. It is a new world to be discovered and explored.

Finally understanding the functioning of this new world, the boy again becomes master of his own story, which he tells from the very beginning, or a Sunday when he decided to buy a comic book. After a long time immersed in that universe, one day he realizes that time has passed, and “he moved and moved, until he got here, *where* this story ends. Or begins” (30). The end of the narrative brings back the indeterminacy previously suggested by the image of the boy sleeping beside the comic. Was he dreaming? Has this story ever happened? Is this question even relevant? On the one hand, it can be said that the devices that promote interactivity between reader and protagonist are limited and in *The Panel Boy* there is no overt breaking of the boundaries between fiction and reality. On the other hand, the interconnectedness between the boy’s life and the narrative in itself and the idea that the boy stands for the developing reader, as suggested by dos Santos

Feres (2006), or the implied child reader, makes this relationship between fiction and reality much more complex and confused. Also, as story ends in a circle, with the end meaning a new beginning for the boy, his future in the universe of prose/in adulthood remains open for readers to reflect and imagine.

The Impossibility of the Postmodern Picturebook

Interestingly, the book ends with some an afterword of the author directly addressing the adult implied reader: “Now that you got here, reader, I am certain you will say: ‘Wait a minute, this is not a book for children.’ And I will answer: ‘No, it is not. This book is like life. For children just in the beginning’” (30). Therefore, the afterword reinforces the explanation that the book is a metaphor for life itself. This overt explanation of what the book is about, however, becomes problematic in relation to the postmodern nature of the story. If on the one hand *The Panel Boy* questions the relationships between high and low culture with its multiple intertextual and intervisual references, it does not question the typical simplistic view that visual texts are easier, fun, and therefore are for children, while prose is a higher form of literature, one to which readers must “evolve” to as they develop. While the narrative so far had empowered the child reader, even when it meant challenging the reader with complex intertextual references that many children may not grasp, this statement completely disempowers the child reader and deems them incapable of understanding complex narrative prose. While generally the book could be considered a crossover narrative, in the sense that it addresses both child and adult implied readers (Becket, 2012), in this last statement it addresses the adult reader in detriment of the child reader, which is considered not up to understanding the story as whole and its deep and philosophical questioning. In this sense, the narrative seems to be falling into what Allan (2012) called the “(im)possibility of postmodern fiction for children”, in the sense that in the power relations between the adult author and the child reader stay in way of a full realization of its postmodern potential.

Notes

1. All quotes from the book were translated by the author of this paper. Text inside the brackets are from the previous pages, but reproduced one again to facilitate comprehension.
2. All images from *O Menino Quadrado* by Ziraldo Alves Pinto, with permission from Editora Melhoramentos Ltda.

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