Inventing literary photobooks

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue of the journal *MATLIT* on "literary photo-books". As we know, the concept of photobook mixes up with many other concepts – artist's book, book art, bookwork, art book, book object, illustrated book, conceptual book, photographic book, photographic album – from several fields of research – intermediality and multimodality studies, comparative literature, photography theory, general semiotics, art theory, history of art. In this issue the reader will find several attempts to describe and analyze photobooks, and a discussion of how best to define and classify them, according to different theoretical perspectives and backgrounds.

KEYWORDS

photobook; literary photobook; intermediality; photography and text.

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta uma edição especial da revista *MATLIT* dedicada a "foto-livros de literatura". Como sabemos, o conceito de fotolivro mistura-se com muitos outros conceitos – livro de artista, arte do livro, *bookwork*, livro de arte, livro objeto, livro ilustrado, livro concetual, livro fotográfico, álbum fotográfico – de diversos campos de pesquisa – estudos de intermedialidade e multimodalidade, literatura comparada, teoria da fotografia, semiótica geral, teoria da arte, história da arte. O leitor encontrará neste número várias tentativas de descrever e analisar fotolivros, e uma discussão sobre a melhor forma de defini-los e classificá-los, segundo diferentes perspetivas teóricas e contextos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

fotolivro; fotolivro de literatura; intermedialidade; fotografia e texto.

This special issue regards literary photobooks. But, what are literary photobooks? There are many different ways to answer this question. We can, still without knowing how to define it, have no doubts when coming across one of them. Charles S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, calls this type of belief the first "grade of clearness" of a concept. A playful view of this grade tells us that "if it walks like a duck and it talks like a duck it's a duck" (definition of "artist's book", by Lawrence Weiner, 1989). But this grade should not prevent us from calling something that is not a photobook a photobook. As claimed by Atkin (2016: 33), "a simple lack of hesitancy in applying a concept does not mean we have a full understanding of it". But in that case we would be able to recognize something as *similar* to a photobook. As the pragmatists suggest, many of our conceptions do not extend beyond this level of clarification. But we should improve our conception. According to a second grade of clearness, we provide an abstract (verbal, 'nominal') definition of a concept, and also, with some luck, necessary and sufficient conditions for its application – which conditions we must satisfy to distinguish a literary photobook from any other type of book (artist's book, book art, art book, bookwork, book object, illustrated book, conceptual book). More effectively, this abstract criterion is imposed on analysis from external sources. We can improve our understanding even more. According to the third grade of clearness, Peirce recommends that we apply the Pragmatic Maxim – "consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (Peirce CP 5.402). The third grade represents our capacity to understand the consequences of holding some concept to be true. It transforms the concept into a series of *hypothetical conditionals*, pertaining to an interpreter's own agency and experience (*if* x is a literary photobook *then* ... the practical and conceivable consequences are y and z).

Designed and produced since the beginning of photography – "almost since the birth of photography in 1839, the photobook was invented more or less as a publishing medium, and Victorian pioneers, such as Anna Atkins

and William Henry Fox Talbot, were starting to stick photographs into albums and books around 1843" (Badger, 2015)[1] – this kind of intermedial, multimodal, or intersemiotic experiment attracted, in following decades, writers, photographers and designers from several literary and artistic fields. According to Nott (2018: 2), the word "photopoem"[2] occurs for the first time in *Photopoems: A Group of Interpretations through Photographs* (1936). But the phenomenon is historically much earlier – "Pairings of poems and photographs in book form had existed for almost a century prior to *Photopoems*, though [Constance] Phillips's anthology is important for its suggestion that the form deserved to be recognised and given a distinct name" (Nott, 2018: 2). Literary photobooks can be apprehended as a subset of intermediality phenomena (or intermedial arts), broadly defined as a theoretical term "able to address any phenomenon involving more than one media" (Wolf, 1999: 40-41), a concept that "comprehends all types of interrelationship and interaction between media" (Clüver, 2007: 9). From a semiological/semiotic perspective, in literary photobooks at least two sign systems (verbal and photography) "transgress" (Ljungberg, 2010: 82) their borders for *inventing* a new ontology. Verbal system is linked to the photographic image in a dense interaction, involving mutually modulatory (and interpretative) constraints connecting word and photography. They create a coupled system that can be defined as a new phenomenon – a new media (or intermedia) (Clüver, 2007), a new form of intermedial collaboration (Nott, 2018), a new form of art (Badger, 2015), a new literary genre, a new affordance (a new set of creative opportunities), a new representational (or semiotic) niche.

   Much discussion has taken place to define the most accurate theoretical framework (methods, theoretical terms and entities, models, technical vocabulary), and the most significant historical examples, to investigate this phenomenon. This discussion is especially interested in defining several forms of relationship between photography and verbal text, and how these forms should be more adequately exemplified, described, and named. A naming, attribution of type, class, or genre seems to be at the origin of many problems, which tend often to be treated as a trivial terminological dispute. But, as we know, assigning a type doesn't result only in naming a class of things or processes. A name is not just a tag. It reveals a collection of properties, rules and norms governing a work, a family or a system of works, and a landscape (or "horizon") of expectations – we expect to find certain (and

1 Excerpt from the article "Why Photobooks are Important", by Gerry Badger, December 31, 2015 in *Zum Magazine* n. 8. Available at: https://revistazum.com.br/en/revista-zum-8/fotolivros/
2 According to another version, Nicole Boulestreau, in her article on Facile (1935), proposed the term photopoème to define the volume combining Éluard's poems and Man Ray's photographs.

not other) things, structures, dynamics, depending on the genre that we face – "[...] the story that can be told about a given work depends on what theorists call the reader's 'horizon of expectations'" (Culler, 1997: 63). A "terminological dispute" reflects a dispute for the best "historical ontological" (Hacking, 2004) region of the observed phenomena. An ontological history also constitutes the reader through observation and analysis of artifacts, which have historical trajectories, and which we call conceptual spaces, theories and models. The literary photobook does not exist as an "observable phenomenon", as a stable and distinct pattern of observable activity, before having a well-established toolbox of theoretical analysis and observation artifacts.

As we know, the concept of photobook mixes up with many other concepts[3] – artist's book, book art, bookwork, art book, book object, illustrated book, conceptual book, photographic book, photographic album – from several fields of research – intermediality and multimodality studies, comparative literature, photography theory, general semiotics, art theory, history of art. The reader will find here several attempts to describe and analyze photobooks, and a discussion of how best to define and classify them, according to different theoretical perspectives and backgrounds.

The article opening this special issue, "A fotografia e a palavra no livro de artista" ["The photography and the word in the artist's book"], discusses the appropriate classifications for approaching text-image intermedia relations in works of "intersection zones" (photobook – artist's book). The second paper, "O livro de fotografia e a biblioteca: um estudo de caso" ["The photobook and the library: a case study"], analyzes the photobook in the context of Librarianship, providing "a survey of the particular characteristics of this type of material and the means through which this object can be demanded by users of a specialized library".

Starting with the third article, we will find several case studies. The first one, "Assinaturas de olhares: uma análise da fotobiografia de José Cardoso Pires" ["Signatures of gazes: an analysis of the photobiography of José Cardoso Pires"], elaborates different hypotheses for reading and understanding a photobook based on the photobiography of José Cardoso Pires written by Inês Pedrosa. The next article, "Os Sertões de Euclides da Cunha: a 'intervenção de uma tecnografia' intermidiática e multimodal" ["Os Sertões by Euclides da Cunha: the intervention of an intermedial and multimodal technography"], concentrates on the macrostructure of this work, and proposes Os Sertões as a photobook experiment. "Miguel Rio Branco and the Curse of Cities (Maldicidade 2014)" focuses on the composition of the book as

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3 See Clive Phillpot (2013, 1982).

a dialogue between text and image, and on the use of the avant-garde tech-
niques of montage and collage. "Intellectual montage in *Journey into the Fan-
tastic*" uses Eisenstein's theory of montage to describe "how combinatorial
patterns can be observed acting as meaning-making processes" in Boris Kos-
soy's *Journey into the Fantastic*. "Entre texto e imagem: a morte como tema
fotoliterário em *Nadja* de André Breton" ["Between text and image: the
death as a photoliterary theme in *Nadja* by André Breton"] analyzes the use
of photographs in Breton's work and the relationship between photography
and literature. More specifically, this article analyzes "the photoliterary
construction of the topic of death" in *Nadja*. "On the narrative potential of
photobooks: an analysis of Alec Soth's *Niagara's* book" analyzes the narrative
construction in the *Niagara* photobook (2006), produced by photographer
Alec Soth, based on the concepts of storyworld and worldmaking from the
field of Narrative Studies. "As fotografias compulsivas de Leila Danziger: re-
flexões sobre o encontro entre poesia e fotografia em 'Robert Smithson'"
["Leila Danziger's compulsive photographs: reflections on the encounter be-
tween poetry and photography in 'Robert Smithson'"], analyzes the poem
"Robert Smithson", from the book *Three essays of speech* (2012) by Leila Dan-
ziger. The authors reflect "on the poem as a meeting place between different
artistic practices" and on the "link between Danziger's poetic-visual produc-
tions and Smithson's photographs and installations". "Os 'álbuns des-
penteados' em *Esse cabelo* de Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida" analyzes the
relationship between text and photography in Almeida's book *Esse cabelo*
[*That hair*], the search for identity of the narrator and protagonist's voice,
and a representation procedure that resorts to photography.

At the end, we have two interviews and a handwritten collage. The first
interview ("Photobook Phenomenon: an interview with Moritz Neumüller")
was conducted by João Queiroz and Ana Luiza Fernandes, on several topics,
from recent and increasing interest in photobooks, in the academy and in
the book market, to the distinction between photographic catalogs, albums,
and photobooks, and relevant conceptual differences for distinguishing cat-
egories. In the second interview ("Duarte Belo e a génese do arquivo" ["Du-
arte Belo and the genesis of the archive"], by Manaíra Aires Athayde), we
encounter a detailed view on the photographer's methods of work, his many
photographic albums and literary photobooks, and an account about his sys-
tem for organizing an encyclopedic body of work on the Portuguese human
and natural landscape. This special issue closes with "Caligrafia também é
corpo: entrevista-*collage* com Miguel de Carvalho sobre seus fotolivros de lit-
eratura" ["Caligraphy is also a body: a *collage*-interview with Miguel de Car-
valho about his literary photobooks"], published in the "Mediarama"
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