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Embroidered Illustrations: Paratextuality and Book Design with Textile Arts

ABSTRACT

Handcrafted compositions make some editorial projects unique. One example considered here is that of embroidered illustrations on book covers. Book covers configure the threshold that inhabits the intermedial space between the physical materiality of the book and its content. The theoretical framework supporting this study is found in the concept of intermedial reference by Irina Rajewsky (2005). Likewise, the ideas of materiality and of the embroidered illustrations as a sensory media modality are based on the studies of Lars Elleström (2020). The notion of paratext, in turn, is supported by Gérard Genette (1997). In a few words, we seek to deepen the studies of intermediality by addressing textile materiality and its haptic capacity in editorial projects.

Keywords: intermediality, textile arts, paratext, embroidery-illustration.

1. Introduction

The visual poetics of embroidery reopens an aesthetics of revaluation of manual skills. This article aims to elaborate on issues of intermediality that underlie the use of textile materiality in embroidered illustrations that compose graphic editorial projects for books as an experimental alternative to more traditionally-printed texts. To that end, we use the *Penguin Threads* collection, published in 2011 in North America, in six volumes of classical youth literature, and the recent 2019 edition of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* by João Guimarães Rosa, published by Companhia das Letras, in Brazil. As the theoretical basis for our analysis, the concepts of media, intermediality, and intermedial reference by Irina Rajewsky (2005) will be of prime importance. Issues of materiality and sensoriality in embroidered illustrations are also present and articulated through the studies of Lars Elleström (2020), whereas subject matter concerning the idea of the paratext relies primarily on Gérard Genette (1997).

Illustrations composed of embroidery are a form of handicraft that has increasingly found more space in the interposition between written texts and pictural-

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ity regarding book editing. As ambivalent practices, according to Rozsika Parker (1984), embroidery and sewing have traditionally been a part of domestic activities; they freed women from financial dependence and became a technique applied to suffragette banners that questioned patriarchal values. Re-evaluated through the lens of 1960s feminism, textiles began to occupy artistic spaces of greater visibility.

Earlier in the century, textiles had also been an object of re-consideration through the experiments of Constructivism and the German school of Bauhaus. Through Anni Albers (1974), a disciple and teacher of the school, we have access to studies on the characterization of textiles. Her studies in *On Weaving* (1974, p. 65), have defined embroidery as a decorative, surface element, which makes the technique an alternative to illustration. Indeed, embroidery in the works of Tracey Emin, Judy Chicago, and Louise Bourgeois, among other textile artists, extrapolates the horizontal surface to which Albers refers, establishing itself as a medium characterized by a feminine *ethos*, all while transcending any gender-specific limitations, questioning them and emerging from them into its own aesthetic identity.

2. Embroidery or illustration?

Illustration is the result of an interpretation of signs, strategies, and techniques that enables a reader to decode a text in pictorial terms. In the cover arts that constitute the object of this study, we examine the case of textile art specifically, a form that can be understood as an artistic production that uses yarn or fabric or that uses techniques associated with weaving, including knitting, crochet, and embroidery. According to Clüver (2011), the textile dimension constitutes itself as a medium, as it supports the production and reception of artistic signs. For Elleström (2020), medium is a channel that depends on technical aspects, on qualifiers, and on the way it is performed.

Embroidery is conceived here as a medium of technical, material, and sensorial modalities, to borrow the terms of Lars Elleström (2020). It is a medium that physically manifests an object of sensory configurations and that requires practical skills. It employs tactile materialities, evoking senses that go beyond visual experiences. Furthermore, its material and sensorial modalities, again according to Elleström (2020, p. 46), configure important categories that qualify embroidery as a medium.

Book cover art is examined under intermedial concepts and categorizations because this field of study embraces not only literary research, but also its relationship with other arts and material culture (Rajewsky, 2005). However, it appears that a considerable number of studies contemplate the integration of literature with the fine arts, such as oil paintings, engravings, etching, and drawing, among other various academic techniques. Textile arts, on the other hand, are part of the general field that belongs to the “visual arts”, but they inhabit this field of “minor”

status in interart studies, in the Deleuzian sense of the term (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995, 2002). They have always been associated with interior design and crafts, especially if we consider the status of “annex” and “adjacency” given to the Louvre Museum for Decorative Arts and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, dedicated to the exhibition of tapestries, fabrics, linens, and everyday objects. Therefore, this work departs from the premise that textiles constitute an object of study of intermediality, because not all cultural products can be considered art, though they can be recognized as media (Diniz, 2018).

When evoked by photography, the reproduction of embroidery constitutes an intermedial reference, according to Irina Rajewsky (2005). In that category, a work can evoke or imitate the elements of a medium through specific means of another medium, which is the case of the photographs of embroidery that compose the cover designs of these volumes. Although the embroideries were made with fabric and thread, the books were reproduced on paper in such a way as to imitate, through photographic reproduction, the texture of thread on fabric. Embossing and texture thereby become a simulacrum of an embroidered illustration because one does not have effective access to an embroidered fabric, including the tactile qualities intrinsic to that medium. Therefore, mediation through photography becomes an important communication channel, as it allows people to access the textile’s volume and texture and its sensations through the haptic aspect it evokes. The concept of the haptic is used as equivalent to optics and acoustics, i.e., the quality of reaching the sensations and effects of touch that are triggered in the brain through the picture.

Book covers constitute privileged places of meaning in the sense that they are the element in closest contact with the reader. The current structure of the book is a result of a material evolution, with front and back cover, end sheet, flyleaf, spine, text block, dust jacket, flap, among other elements. The cover thus acts as a threshold between the text and the reader, and as a wrapping that involves and protects the content from the external world.

The constitutive elements of the book are often referred to as paratexts. The term paratext contains the Greek prefix “*para*”, which semantically designates a modification of the word “text”. That prefix suggests something that is placed *near, next to something else*, and it can be used to express the idea of something that happens in parallel to something else. The paratext, for Genette (1997, pp. 9–10), comes alongside the text, and is a way of making an introduction, or of “making it present, to guarantee its [the text] presence in the world, its reception, and its consumption, in the form, at least today, of a book” (p. 9). Therefore, the paratext is a border that becomes a permeable membrane between the inside and the outside, which lets the outside in, and the inside, out.

The professional in charge of a book project in its material dimension is typically the graphic designer. This modern figure serves as a sort of architect of the publication,

one whose function is to act in planning and decision-making for the editorial project, especially regarding the paratextual elements (Corrêa, Pinheiro, & Souza, 2019). He or she conceives of the book in its intrinsic materiality, considering not only the verbal text, but also the mental images it evokes. Its graphic design plays an important role in the constitution of the book-object. Its function is to insert the book in the market as a cultural product in such a way that it will be noticed and purchased.

Among the elements of design that visually capture the reader-consumer's attention is the cover. This part of the book intermedially combines written text and images, containing title, author's name, publisher, and cover art, characterizing it as a consumer good. Above all, the decision to adopt an embroidery as illustration for cover art is consciously and intentionally made. Consciously, because it applies an artisanal and ancestral practice usually carried out by women, invested with cultural heritage and affection. Intentionally, because the use of embroidery seeks to seduce a particular readership that values what is handcrafted. Therefore, handmade book covers are prestigious as they are analogous to the trendy *slow food* and *slow fashion* movements. The embroidered illustration, albeit a photographic simulacrum, provides what Walter Benjamin (1935)¹ calls an aural sensation of uniqueness, fetishizing the book-object.

A graphic design that uses embroidery as cover art implicates extra steps that would be unnecessary in digital illustration. First, it is crucial to hire a visual artist who masters the technique and who will also do the drawing, which will then be reproduced onto the fabric. The embroidery is executed with thread and needle over fabric, using diversified techniques and stitch styles – an enterprise that requires time and mastery. Subsequently, the visual work must be photographed in a suitable place with stage lighting, so that the photo can be used as an illustration. The image also receives appropriate graphic treatment through computer programs, so that the resolution image conveys the handmade aspect reliably. During printing, embossing effects are added in such a way that the texture of the embroidered image stands out.

3. A secret garden and a sertão: cover art with embroidery

Two publications, from the United States and Brazil, and published in 2011 and 2019, respectively, deserve an in-depth analysis of the aesthetic choices of their book designs. Both have received embroidered illustrations as cover art. One of them is *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, a volume of the American collection *Penguin Threads* by Penguin Publishing; the other is the new edition of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (2019), by Companhia das Letras.

¹ We refer here to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), and more specifically to Benjamin's contention that mechanical reproduction erodes the aura of the work of art as the plurality of copies substitutes its unique existence.

Commissioned by Penguin art director Paul Buckley, Jillian Tamaki² and Rachell Sumpter³ developed the base designs and embroidered the covers for *Black Beauty*, *Emma*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and *Little Women*. The first three volumes were under the responsibility of the visual artist Jillian Tamaki, while the last three were done by Rachell Sumpter.

The volumes, known as classics of youth literature, tell affective stories, cherished by readers. Because they are classics, works that have not finished saying what they had to say and that persist through the ages (see Calvino, 2009, p. 11), these volumes were planned to be a collector's special edition. The graphic design transformed these publications into consumer goods, fetishized books, more intended as gifts than as actual books to be read. The covers appear to have been carved, and the tactile aspect of the embroidery is somehow maintained through the embossed printing. The illustrations emphasize their texturized aspect, and the embroidery is quite evident. The choice of embroidery as a medium to illustrate demonstrates warmth and affection in such a way that the books become luxury editions.

It bears mentioning that each embroidered illustration in the collection showcases a different embroidery style. On the cover of *Black Beauty*, for example, there is an oriental influence in the use of black and red colours over a light background, and the use of *stumpwork*⁴ in the horse's mane conveys a sense of dynamism and vitality. In *Little Women*, on the other hand, the style is more reminiscent of a *sampler*⁵, a stitch display used to organize and memorize learned embroidery techniques, by practicing the sewing of letters, numbers, and pictures from everyday life and the landscape that surrounds the embroiderer. In *The Wind in the Willows*, the emphasis on movement is attributed to the technique called *needle painting*⁶.

² Canadian artist Jillian Tamaki (1980–), visual artist, illustrator, cartoonist, and comic author. View the artist's website and portfolio at: <https://www.jilliantamaki.com/> (retrieved on 29.3.2022).

³ Rachell Sumpter (1982–). View the artist's website and portfolio at: <http://rachellsumpter.com/> (retrieved on 29.3.2022).

⁴ Embroidery technique that provides three-dimensional effects and textures, such as embossing, to the worked design. Dating from the 17th century, the artist can use coloured beads and linen, felt, or satin for the embossing, as well as pointed needles of varying sizes.

⁵ Sampler, or stitch sample. The terms derive from the Old French “essample” and “essai”, and denote any work to be copied or imitated. The name is given to a fabric fragment wherein the main embroidery stitches, letters, numbers, and figures from the embroiderer's daily life are stitched as an exercise to learn the technique. It can be a practice of experienced embroiderers to test a fabric before embroidering the main piece. The name underwent evolution over time and the sampler, as an object, changed its shape and function: from a practical tool of the embroiderer to learn and memorize the stitches, it changed into a decorative canvas. See <https://www.dargentleiloes.net.br/peca.asp?ID=4857227> (retrieved on 10.4.2022).

⁶ Needle painting consists of simulating the act of painting by using thread. Realistically, it is possible to simulate drawings and textures, as the color gradation tends to be smoother. Such embroideries can sometimes be mistaken for paintings.

Because the series is a six-volume collection, my analysis will attempt to limit its scope by focusing mainly on the volume *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Regarding Jillian Tamaki's colour palette, it is balanced and mild, tending towards the harmonization of opposite hues, such as green and pink. The embroidery is performed with mastery, using the technique of needle painting in some elements of the composition with great refinement and stitch diversity. It is possible to identify the French knot in the illustration, in addition to the chain, satin, and stem stitch. The design is so meticulous in its reproduction of a handcrafted object that even the spine, with the author's name and publisher, are represented through texturized threads. The illustration covers the entire page to the edge of the flap. The intermedial reference to embroidery remains consistent throughout, such that the reverse side of the embroidery is reproduced on the *verso*, imitating an embroidered fabric with both sides, "right" and "reverse". The portrayal of the *verso* (endpaper) reveals the illustrative paths run by the embroiderer when colouring the images with her threads. It is interesting to note that the visual artist leaves room for the insertion of bureaucratic data, such as the registration number, bar code, and publication price.

To achieve her goal, Jillian Tamaki mentions, in an interview about her creative process for the collection⁷, that it took her two months to embroider the piece. The editor of the series, in turn, speaks proudly of the editorial project. According to him, the unique character of the publication is intended to attract and captivate readers, in addition to publicizing the publisher's work as a high-quality editorial house, with artful design targeting a niche of discriminating readers.

The colourful stitched garden evokes a fragment of a childlike and specifically a girl-like dream, and the lack of proportion in the elements of the visual layout suggests a surreal experience. The narrative of the novel is centred on an orphan child, Mary Lennox, who moves from India to the English countryside, where she will live with her widowed uncle in a house full of secrets. There, she discovers a locked garden surrounded by walls, where she befriends two other children, with whom she brings the garden back to life. The floral representation invades the space of the book cover and is integrated into the pre-textual elements. The typography of the title is organic and camouflaged amid the representation of the garden, as the organicity conferred to the composition assimilates the plants. The back cover features a quote that reads: "Where you tend a rose, a thistle cannot grow". The excerpt suggests the part of the book that inspired the artist. If good feelings are nurtured, good things will be harvested in the future.

The haptic aspect of the cover illustration stands out due to the visual quality of the photograph that accurately reproduces each element of the illustration,

⁷ Information obtained from a promotional video of the Penguin Threads series: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ygf52DXKZg> (retrieved on 14.4.2022).

emphasizing the expressive potential of artisanal representations. This aspect is enhanced with embossing, providing texture and volume to the cover art. The enchantment provided by the intermedial reference is exactly this: to feel the textures and to participate in visual and sensory stimuli, even though we are aware of its representational status. Therefore, Tamaki's secret garden is full of sensations and her illustration affectively involves the work of Frances Hodgson Burnett.

The 2019 edition of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, by Companhia das Letras, features cover art by Alceu Chiesorin Nunes⁸, who was inspired in the embroidery of the back of "the Presentation Mantle" by Arthur Bispo do Rosário. The embroidery was coordinated by Elisa Braga⁹ in a navy-blue thread on white fabric, in stem stitch, which took over 130 hours to complete. They reproduce the names of all the characters of the novel, and the author's name is represented by his initials, highlighted in red on the back cover. It also features a belly band in red fabric and silkscreen printing in white, featuring the title of the book, the author, and the publisher in emphasis. The flaps pay a simple tribute to Poty Lazzarotto¹⁰, the artist who conceived the cover of the first edition in 1956, by representing the maps of the places where the narrative takes place, as they appear in the second edition.

The design project, quite reliant on textiles, is articulated through at least two aspects: the influences Alceu Nunes received from previous editions, as well as from Arthur Bispo do Rosário. Among the covers that may have inspired Alceu Nunes¹¹, it is possible to mention the cover of the first edition by the publishing house José Olympio, from 1956, by Poty Lazzarotto, from Curitiba, Paraná. For this cover, the artist produces a collage with illustrations of the characters' faces, visually narrating part of the story, camouflaged by the leaves of a *buriti* – a plant

⁸ He is an art director and cover artist for Companhia das Letras.

⁹ Elisa Braga made the matrix embroidery that served as a model for the photograph that composes the printed cover and for the artisans of the Artisans Collective of the North Line [Coletivo de Artesãs da Linha Norte], who made the first twenty covers. She went to Rio de Janeiro, to the Museum Arthur Bispo do Rosário, to research how the artist embroidered the letters on the back of his mantle. She noticed that he did not use a specific stitch, and the letters were quite large, larger than the photos suggested. To produce the artisanal covers, each embroiderer from the Artisans Collective in the North Line was responsible for two pieces. In the end, the public was delighted with the project, and the number of embroideries increased. In order to complete the 63 pieces, it became necessary to employ a greater number of embroiderers, leading Alceu Nunes to call the Spider Web group that suggested the embroiderers from Cordisburgo, the birthplace of Guimarães Rosa, and the groups of embroiderers from Morro da Garça, a nearby town, as well as from Andrequicé, also in Minas Gerais (retrieved on 14.4.2022 from <https://www.blogdacompanhia.com.br/conteudos/visualizar/Editar-Grande-sertao-veredas-a-cap>).

¹⁰ Napoleon Potyguara Lazzarotto (1924–1998), engraver, designer, illustrator, muralist, and professor from Curitiba. See: <http://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/pessoa1567/poty-lazzarotto> (retrieved on 14.4.2022).

¹¹ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqZgKCvJZqQ&feature=emb_rel_end (retrieved on 14.4.2022)

native to the Brazilian *cerrado*, the grasslands of Minas Gerais. On the flaps, there are maps indicating the setting. This feature only appears in the second edition, but Lazzarotto's aesthetics would prevail in later editions also. Another edition was produced by Bia Lessa, in 2006, with an installation followed by performance held at the Portuguese Language Museum¹² in that same year, on its opening. This exhibition stirred much commentary regarding its use of textiles, including threads and fabrics that stimulated the senses. It was possible to interact with the work through the hanging panels, ribbons, and wires that hung from above, while listening to excerpts of Rosa's narrative, read aloud by the singer Maria Bethânia. On Bia Lessa's cover, the title appears embroidered in red, with lines hanging from the bottom of the letters, referring to the blood of the battles and the lines of strength from the narrative. A third work that figures among Nunes's influences is the graphic novel adaptation by Fernanda Ficher, whose cover features a red acrylic wrapper, serving as a dust jacket for the volume. The dust jacket creates an ambivalent message through its subtitle, as it covers or uncovers the volume. This cover art becomes, so to speak, a covering and a wrapping of signs. Therefore, in order to maintain a high standard result in 2019, the cover of *Grande Sertão* underwent an important trajectory of aesthetic influences, as Alceu Nunes describes on Companhia das Letras's¹³ blog his research path and his options to develop the cover of the new edition. He was enchanted by Rosa's research material, his notebooks with drawings and notes on the fauna and flora of the *cerrado*, his typed notes including corrections and observations. The option for literal illustrations, especially those representing fauna and flora, with scientific illustrations and drawings, were discarded as they have been largely explored before. Acting on a suggestion by Lilia Schwarcz, Nunes reports that he made an association with Bispo do Rosário's work¹⁴, more precisely his *Presentation Mantle*¹⁵. The choice

¹² See <https://cultura.estadao.com.br/noticias/teatro-e-danca,bia-lessa-estimula-os-sentidos-com-a-instalacaopeca-grande-sertao-veredas,70001975973> (retrieved on 14.4.2022).

¹³ See <https://www.blogdacompanhia.com.br/conteudos/visualizar/Editar-Grande-sertao-veredas-a-capa> (retrieved on 14.4.2022).

¹⁴ Arthur Bispo do Rosário was born in the countryside of Sergipe in 1909. He joined the navy in his youth, was a boxer, and laborer and, finally, a domestic worker in Rio de Janeiro. After waking up with hallucinations in 1938, he began his pilgrimage through several churches, seeing himself as an enlightened soul, sent from God. He was arrested by the police for loitering and taken to an asylum. During his hospitalization, he began to use discarded materials to record his daily life, transforming them into artistic objects with aesthetic sense and avant-garde concepts. The word was one of its most used elements, both as a linguistic sign and as an imagetic and aesthetic element. His best-known work is the *Presentation Mantle*. See <https://museubispodorosario.com/arthur-bispo-dor-sario/> (retrieved on 14.4.2022).

¹⁵ The best-known work of Bispo do Rosário that was stitched with threads from shredded uniforms and fragments of fabric of the intern uniforms from the shelters he inhabited. Elaborated throughout life for his arrival in heaven, he represented his references: on the outside, images,

for embroidery was due to its rustic simplicity and to its being a common craft among women from the Brazilian countryside. Alceu Nunes thus made the base drawing and forwarded it to Elisa Braga, who executed the embroidery.

This interrelation with Bispo do Rosário's production proves to be quite significant because it is not a reference to handmade work performed by women's hands. His work represents both the exclusion of a man of colour and of a person with a fragile mental health. According to Ana Maria Machado (2016, p. 120), his situation of exclusion is so absolute that it becomes eloquent, mainly due to his media choice to express himself in a way that it is more often associated with women. Thus, his instinctive sense of aesthetics attests his immense power over the word and over visual arts.

This 2019 edition has two versions: the first, more commercial, features a paperback cover with the photographic reproduction of the embroidery, with the red fabric as belly band¹⁶. The second version is a deluxe edition, a collector's item, the print run of which was limited to 63: a reference to the anniversary of the first edition. This special edition displays an actual embroidered hardcover¹⁷ which was assembled by a network of local artisans, in a *buriti*-fibre box. It also included a red belly band with button clasp¹⁸ and front endpaper made of handmade sugar cane paper. Such a degree of exclusivity raised the price of the special issue, causing a lot of buzz in the Brazilian publishing market, but it indelibly marked the place of that work in the history of Brazilian literary editions.

4. Final considerations

Cover arts that employ handmade textile materials and techniques such as embroidery are explored in an elaborate and creative way in the publications analysed here. The works provide two examples of recent editorial productions containing acts of resistance to digital resources, in a form of *slow publishing*. The visual poetics of artisanal media provides conversations with memories, cultures, and ancestral techniques, turning the published object into a poetic act, which fosters the construction of affective bonds with the issue. They articulate several artistic languages, such as a work's editorial history or the sensitive theme of the text that is about to be read. They captivate the reader by involving the text in a delicate way. Furthermore, they transform the book into a consumer good, an object of desire, as they are limited, special, and valued editions, but they also have an impact

and text from his private universe. Inside, the names of loved ones. See <http://www.bienal.org.br/post/351> (retrieved on 14.4.2022).

¹⁶ After this edition with the red fabric belly band sold out, it was replaced with new printings containing a red belly band made of paper.

¹⁷ This cover is in fact embroidered and "dresses" the book as an overcoat: <https://gsv.mystrikingly.com> (retrieved on 14.4.2022).

¹⁸ From Moinho Brasil.

on the dissemination of these works, expanding their readership.

The artisanal character in the form of an intermedial reference stimulates readers to raise new reading hypotheses and to handle the object by observing and touching its constituent parts, such as the front cover, flaps, dust cover, spine, and free endpaper, among others. The haptic and kinaesthetic aspects are doubly mobilized because, in addition to the visual sense promoted by the reading of verbal and visual texts, this type of publication also awakens touch, putting the reader in direct and material contact with the text.

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