

The Usefulness of Uselessness: Short Stories by José Eduardo Agualusa

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Abstract—*Estranhões & Bizarrocos: Stories for angels to sleep* is a children’s and young adult book authored in Portuguese by Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa. This paper posits that the book’s constituent short stories, initially intended for children, bear potential appeal to readers across all age brackets, situating themselves within the realm of ‘crossover fiction’. The book’s title resonates with the semantic sphere of the strange or peculiar. Within the narratives, ‘the stranger’ correlates with the child’s fantastical world, but also aligns with the ‘foreigner’ inherent within these short stories. To unpack the representations of this ‘bizarre’ Other depicted in the stories, we employ literary imagology. This approach reveals the role of images curated by the narrators in constructing the implicit theme shared across the book’s 10 short stories. Lastly, the work provokes readers to ponder the value of seemingly usefulness things and situations—a reflection that carries its own meta-literary significance.

Index Terms—*Estranhões & Bizarrocos*, José Eduardo Agualusa, literary imagology, crossover literature

I. INTRODUCTION

José Eduardo Agualusa (born 1960, Angola), an internationally acclaimed and awarded Angolan author of Portuguese and Brazilian descent, is one of the preeminent figures in African literature in the Portuguese language. His portfolio encompasses an array of genres, including novels, short stories, poems, chronicles, and theater pieces targeted at both children and adults. His literary contributions have been translated into 25 languages, marking his global footprint.

In the year 2000, he published *Estranhões & Bizarrocos: Estórias para adormecer anjos* (translated for the purpose of this paper as ‘Estranhões & Bizarrocos¹: Stories for angels to sleep’), a compilation of ten distinct short stories: “Estranhões, Bizarrocos e outros seres sem exemplo” [Estranhões, Bizarrocos, and other beings without example]; “Sábios como camelos” [Wise as camels]; “A menina de peluche” [The plush girl]; “O peixinho que descobriu o mar” [The little fish that discovered the sea]; “O primeiro pirilampo do mundo” [The first firefly in the world]; “O país dos contrários” [The land of contraries]; “O caçador de borboletas” [The butterfly catcher]; “O pai que se tornou mãe” [The father who became a mother]; “O sonhador” [The dreamer]; “A menina que queria ser maçã” [The girl who wanted to be an apple].

Featuring illustrations by Portuguese artist Henrique Cayatte (born 1957), this anthology was honored with the prestigious Gulbenkian Grand Prize for Literature for Children and Young Adults in 2002. Additionally, the book is endorsed by Portugal’s National Reading Plan (PNL)² for children between the ages of 6 and 8. It is worth mentioning that in the same year, the author also published two other works: *Um estranho em Goa* [A stranger in Goa], a novel set in former Portuguese colony in India, and *A substância do amor e outras crónicas* [The substance of love and other stories], a collection of short essays. According to Pinheiro (2021), it is the simultaneous appearance of these different works that confirms that José Eduardo Agualusa is a writer capable of traversing different literary paths.

Of significant note, the author demonstrated considerable literary versatility within the same year through the publication of two further works: *Um estranho em Goa* [A stranger in Goa], a novel with its narrative rooted in the historical Portuguese colony in India, and *A substância do amor e outras crónicas* [The substance of love and other stories], a compilation of brief yet impactful essays. Pinheiro (2021) underlines that the concurrent emergence of these distinct works affirms José Eduardo Agualusa’s capabilities as a writer who can adeptly navigate divergent literary paths.

¹ Also translated as: *Oddballs and oddities* (see: <https://mertinwitt-litag.de/portfolio-items/jose-eduardo-agualusa/>).

² The National Reading Plan (Plano Nacional de Leitura, abbreviated as PNL) is an initiative of Portugal, inaugurated in 2006, with the primary ambition of enhancing reading habits and augmenting literacy levels within the Portuguese populace. The initial decade-long phase of this program, spanning from 2006 to 2016, has been successfully concluded, with the subsequent phase (2017-2027) presently in progress. For more detailed information, refer to the program’s official website: <https://www.pnl2027.gov.pt/np4/home>.

Our discussion will pivot on the thematic unity embedded within ten short narratives of *Estranhões & Bizarrocos: Stories for angels to sleep*, as well as the relevance of applying imagology to a selection of these stories, as a case study.

II. LITERARY IMAGOLGY: AN APPROACH

The field of comparative literature has given birth to literary imagology, or “image studies”. As Dyserinck (2016) asserts, this approach primarily examines the depiction, origin, and function of images of the Other – the foreigner – in national literatures. Machado and Pageaux (2002) define the term “image” as “the representation of a foreign cultural reality, through which the individual or group producing/sharing/spreading it uncovers and translates the ideological space in which they are situated” (p. 51).

From our perspective, the term “foreign” should not be limited to those originating from another country, nation, or geographic region. Instead, it should extend to those who belong to another ethnic group, gender, age, social status, etc. (Leersen, 2016), and even to those identified as different, unfamiliar, and unknown. In relation to the imagological object proposed by Nora Moll, Simões (2011) argues that, in addition to seeking “relations between different cultural systems” (p. 24) and deconstructing representations of alterity and the Other outside the border, space should be created for studying the “stranger” from within, as long as this is felt or perceived as dissimilar. As Bauman (2017) contends, “strangers symbolize everything elusive, fragile, unstable, and unpredictable in life” (p. 61). Tomé (2013) investigates, for instance, the representation of overweight, gay, and physically or cognitively disabled Others in Portuguese juvenile literature in the new millennium. D’Alte (2019), through a “robotic imagology,” discusses the representations of artificial intelligence in narratives for children and young adults.

In essence, as a tool intending to examine auto- and hetero-images and the traits of their conflicts, ambiguities, and differences embodied in them (Simões, 2011), imagology can assist in interpreting the modes of representing the Self and the Other in literary works when differences or clashes arise.

Methodologically, O’Sullivan and Immel (2017) condense the steps of imagological study into four questions:

i) Who is observing? A central principle of imagology is that images reveal as much, if not more, about the observer as about the observed. The question of who the “spectator” is must be asked on two levels: the cultural and temporal context of text production and the narrative perspective.

ii) Who (or what) is being observed? The underlying objective of this question is to identify the reasons for selecting the observation object, that is, the “spectated”.

iii) How are the images portrayed? The focus of the analysis will be on the similarities or differences between depictions, along with the intertextuality of these characterizations across various texts.

iv) Why are such images portrayed in this way? The term “audience” of the literary work should be utilized and scrutinized to explain why the world of the “stranger” is crafted for potential readers.

The self and heteroimage of certain characters in this book by Agualusa are tied to a sense of unbelonging within their surrounding universe. We revisit here the concept of “insile” as introduced by Can (2020) in *O campo literário moçambicano* [The Mozambican literary field]. The researcher begins with Bernard Mouralis’ dual definition of exile in African literature, described as: “[i] an autobiographical account of an individual living in another country; [ii] the literary depiction of a hero compelled to leave his homeland and venture abroad” (Can, 2020, p. 28). Focusing on the Mozambican novel, Can (2020) suggests two novel categories, one pertaining to the institutional field, the other to the text’s nature, specifically, to the “novelistic heroes who, for various reasons, are acquainted with the reality of internal exile” (p. 28). Our interest lies in this latter category: characters who either feel exiled or are viewed as such within their confines. To portray this phenomenon, Can (2020) introduces the idea of “exile within the home, or insile, a term referring to the alienation experienced in one’s own country” (pp. 28-29).

In the anthology’s opening short story, “Strangers, Bizarrocos, and other beings without example,” Jácome is depicted as the “inventor of the impossible” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 11), perceived distinctively by adult and child observers. Adults find Jácome’s work bewildering and potentially frightening to children, whereas children, driven by curiosity, perceive his inventions as natural. The omniscient narrator juxtaposes these perspectives, underscoring the children’s embrace of novelty and the adults’ rigidity, viewing Jácome as an alien, an intramural outsider. Jácome, a hero whose identity is dismissed by adults, responds in silence. According to Can (2020), such cessation or absence of sounds is a defining characteristic of “insile”.

The representation of silence continues to appear in subsequent texts. The grand vizier’s fear in “Wise as camels” emanates from the muteness of history and memory, signified by the potential loss of his entire library transported by 400 camels. Similarly, “The plush girl” is punished for being unable to make a sound, when transformed into a stuffed doll: “She wanted to scream, but she was not able to, she wanted to move but her body did not obey her” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 21). This silence signifies her internal exile, being relocated to a world of stuffed animals, observed by the dolls in her room who felt vindicated. The omniscient narrator through Manuela’s thoughts communicates this self-perception: “it seemed to her that everyone was laughing at her condition” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 21). The spell breaks only upon her crying, symbolic of her remorse. Metaphorically, this story underlines the importance of otherness: “Manuela started to look differently at those stuffed animals. After all, for a few minutes, she had been just like them” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 24). The image of the Other metamorphoses through her own metamorphosis.

José Eduardo Agualusa employs objects and animals as conduits for transmitting values. In “The little fish that discovered the sea,” the protagonist, Cristóbal, experiences a sense of exile within his aquarium. It is this sensation of “insile” that compels him to search for a route to the sea, even at the risk of his own life: “Afflicted, unable to articulate the burgeoning desire for escape he felt within him, he was driven daily against the walls of his aquarium, straining to glimpse another world. Ultimately, he took a leap of faith” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 27). This activating curiosity permeates many of these short stories. It prompts a dialogue between the familiar and the audacious, challenging the character or observer to confront divergent and occasionally unconventional images, as seen in “The land of contraries.” Initially unusual associations, like those between the fly and butterfly in “The first firefly in the world” or the birthing seahorse in “The father who became a mother,” are normalized through a storyteller-narrator who contextualizes these anomalies within a reality that transcends fiction: “From that sunny morning onwards, a father giving birth became a part of our world” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 52).

Fiction and dreams, integral to children’s literature, intertwine with reality, leading characters to question their circumstances, as seen in “The butterfly catcher.” Upon realizing that his captive butterfly can speak, the young protagonist, Vladimir, exclaims: “My God! Am I dreaming?” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 45). More poignant is the butterfly’s retort: “That doesn’t matter” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 45). Their exchange subtly echoes, for instance, the dialogue between the Little Prince and the fox in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s 1943 work, revolving around the act of enchantment.

Consequently, in the realm of the possible, the boundary between reality and dreams becomes immaterial. This notion is echoed in “The dreamer,” where dreams and fictional reality are so intertwined that distinguishing between them becomes challenging. In conclusion, the bizarre comfortably occupies this realm of possibility, perceived differently by different observers. Through his work, Agualusa appears to extend an invitation to adults to dream, encouraging them to approach the Other with intellectual flexibility and tolerance.

III. THE “BIZARRE” OTHER: REFLECTION ON “USELESSNESS”

Fantasy, flexibility, and tolerance are needed to read “Estranhões, Bizarrocos, and other beings without example”. In this story, Jácome is shunned due to his futile inventions. One day, the peculiar creatures he crafted for company, “estranhões” and “bizarrocos,” disperse throughout the city, agitating the adult inhabitants. Consequently, Jácome is imprisoned. Despite initial resistance, children’s protests prompt their parents to liberate him. However, upon reaching his cell, they find that Jácome has vanished, having used his sole practical invention—a device for passing through walls—to escape.

The final short story in the book, “The girl who wanted to be an apple,” centers on Joaquina, a young girl who dreams of becoming a “green, bright, fragrant apple like a spring morning” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 59). This aspiration baffles her mother, teacher, and classmates, but remains steadfast in Joaquina’s heart. After dying, in Heaven, she laments for not realizing her dream. In response, God fulfills her wish: “You have to grow a lot to become an apple. You did. Now, indeed, you will be an apple” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 60).

Although neither story employs first-person narration, their protagonists unequivocally command attention. The short story about Jácome presents an adult (opponent)/child (adjuvant) dichotomy, with adults opposing his inventions and children admiring them. The adults, preferring pragmatic utility, regard Jácome as harmless but unhinged. The evaluation about the “inutensils” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 8) comes from the main character’s neighbors and friends: the adults defend the use of products with pragmatic functions and think that Jácome “doesn’t hurt anyone, but he’s a little crazy” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 8). From the parents’ point of view, “these things cannot exist. They scare our children” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 9). The narrator, aligning with the children’s perspective, counters that this “wasn’t true” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 9): the children relish novelty and divergence. Here, a conflict arises between two groups harboring disparate values. Jácome—the eccentric and “bizarre” Other—receives the approval and even the “filia” (Machado & Pageaux, 2002, p. 62), that is, the children’s empathy, while the adult public feels contempt and repugnance for such weirdness. While children remain untroubled by the unfamiliar, the characters representing sensible adults throughout the book exhibit a horror for anything deviating from normality, because “older people are afraid of anything that’s new” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 9).

A similar tension between the protagonist and their surrounding community surfaces in Joaquina’s narrative. Compared to practical ambitions such as becoming an “astronaut, Formula 1 driver, singer, footballer” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 58), aspiring to be a piece of fruit seems unusually whimsical. Just as with Jácome’s inventions, this oddity is deemed useless. Joaquina’s dream and Jácome’s inventions yield no apparent benefits in the eyes of the adults. Joaquina’s choice puzzles everyone around her: her mother “got scared: Apple? (...) Joaquina, my love, why an apple?” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 59), while her classmates ridicule her: “—Russet apple! Russet apple!” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 59). Direct speech underscores the contrast between the main and secondary characters, spotlighting Joaquina’s bizarre and unusual, i.e., different, nature.

This concept of the bizarre features prominently in several short stories in the collection, such as “Wise as camels,” where animals transform into ambulatory libraries and storytellers; “The plush girl,” in which the protagonist briefly becomes a stuffed toy; and “The land of contraries,” where all animals alter in size. The theme of metamorphosis—a shared element with Kafka’s eponymous short story—permeates other stories as well. “The father who became a mother,” as the title implies, is one such example.

Representations of the “bizarre” Other serve as a key interpretive lens for Agualusa’s stories. The term “bizarre” implies divergence, likening the subject to a foreigner navigating boundaries. In this book, the “foreigner” is depicted from the standpoint of abnormality and incomprehensibility. In “The land of contraries,” this notion is discussed in a conversation between the elephant and Felini, a cat as big as a bovine: “You seem like an inhabitant of the Land of Contraries, but you speak like a foreigner” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 41). Felini experiences alienation on two levels: seen as a “monster” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 41) in his hometown and as a foreigner in the Land of Contraries, where he wasn’t born. In the end, Felini, who harbors unrequited love for a cow back home, adjusts to bovine-size in the new land and falls for another cow that’s “so small that it didn’t even reach his hooves” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 42). This suggests that understanding the “stranger” is elusive. The irony permeating this story doesn’t create space for a constructive dialogue between the oddball and those who are socially accepted. Nevertheless, it is these bizarre elements that permit fantasy, which propels the narratives and appeals to the collection’s target readership.

People adhering to societal norms and “useful” deeds risk becoming subservient to mainstream thought, and these dominant viewpoints/standards/dictates can be detrimental to individuals whose internal standards deviate from mass culture (Morin, 2002). In this regard, these short stories challenge the stereotypical and even prejudiced values of the collective adult world, offering a counterpoint to the cliché of creating/becoming something “useful” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 8).

The narrator frequently engages in postmodern-style narrative interventions, employing explanatory or critical sentences that resume the Angolan storytelling tradition (Silva, 2006). This narrator-reader dynamic fosters a sense of complicity and intimacy (Albuquerque, 2003), whether the reader is a child, teenager, or adult. These stories exhibit an oscillation and diverse usage between heterodiegetic (in six of the stories) and homodiegetic narrators. Regardless of the form, the narrator expresses opinions, provides commentary, and/or directly addresses the reader-listener (in eight of the stories). Essentially, this is a storyteller-narrator steeped in oral tradition, which fits the nature of these narratives that rely on traditional storytelling and target young readers. The postmodern narrator consistently communicates with the reader-listener across various texts “This is the story I want to tell you” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 32) and “This is the story I want to tell you today” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 48), expressing doubts and empathy “poor thing, today she only eats vegetables” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 30, about the cat Veronica in “The little fish that discovered the sea”) or engaging in meta-reflection on the stories being told “there is always a day when an adult asks us this question” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 58), “Maybe earlier I was wrong. It seems to me now that this story has a happy ending” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 52).

In addition to the aforementioned colloquialism, the stories possess other traits of oral narratives, such as the indeterminate temporal phrases like “formerly” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 32), “many years ago,” and “one day” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 14; see also, for example, “Wise as camels,” “The father who became a mother,” “The dreamer,” and “The plush girl”). This temporal indeterminacy renders the time atemporal, caters to the reader’s imagination, and guides them into a dreamlike realm, hinted at in titles such as “The dreamer”.

Through the narrator’s words, the subversion and creation of a world that accepts “beings without example” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 8) is lauded throughout the stories. What “never served for anything” can be “very important” (Agualusa, 2013, p. 12). This final aphoristic statement from the first story acts as a mantra for all the other stories in the collection. It establishes an intertextual relationship with the lines “As coisas que não levam a nada/têm grande importância [Things that lead to nothing/are of great importance]” by Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros (2010, p. 145), who suggests valuing the uselessness of things in his poetry. Thematically, a connection can also be drawn between these stories and a certain Taoist parable:

Woodworker Shi was on his way to Qi. As he came to Quyuan he saw an oak planted as the village altar tree. It was so huge that a herd of several thousand cattle could have stood in its shade [...] the woodworker did not so much as glance at it and walked right past without stopping. His apprentice, however, stood and gazed his fill before running to catch up. “Master, [...] I have never seen lumber of such fine quality! Yet you were unwilling to look at it and walked right past without stopping. Why?”

“Enough!” said Woodworker Shi. “Say no more about it. It’s waste wood! Make a boat from it and it will sink; make a coffin from it and it will rot; make a utensil from it and it will break; make a gate from it and it will run sap; make a pillar from it and insects will infest it. You can’t make lumber from such a tree; it’s useless!”

After Woodworker Shi returned home, the altar oak appeared to him in a dream. “What were you comparing me to? Did you mean to compare me to those lovely trees [...]—fruit bearing trees that are ripped apart once their fruit ripens? [...] I have sought to be useless for a very long time, and though I came close to death I have now reached my goal—for me that is of great use indeed!” (Zhuangzi, 2019, pp. 35-36).

The parable by Zhuangzi, a fourth-century BC Chinese philosopher, demonstrates the relativity and mutual convertibility of usefulness and uselessness. The sage cautions against adhering to a conservative and shortsighted perspective when assessing the value of things, underscoring the significance of individual uniqueness. Consequently, this lesson aligns with the moral sense found in Agualusa’s stories. These short narratives broadly emphasize the challenge of accepting the Other, guiding the listener-reader toward accepting this difference. Values such as solidarity and truth are also reflected in stories like “Wise as camels,” “The little fish that discovered the sea,” “The first Firefly in the world,” “The land of contraries,” and “The girl who wanted to be an apple”.

These and other stories in the collection demonstrate the crucial role that anthropomorphized animals play within these narratives. Six of these stories feature animals as protagonists (camels; fish; fly and butterfly; cat; butterfly; seahorses), while the remaining four highlight a distinct object (mechanical inventions, stuffed toys, pumpkins, apple). The invocation of these non-human elements serves as a metaphor for the characters' responses of either revulsion or empathy, humanizing (through antithesis) the stories by accentuating the beauty and diversity of nature.

May (1995) highlights that many authors, particularly those focusing on children's literature, write with the intent to assist their readers in managing scenarios similar to those encountered by the characters. The scholar underscores that authors aspire for their readers to comprehend the challenges experienced by another individual or culture through their narratives. Exceptional writers aim for the narrative voice to resonate with readers sufficiently to elicit renewed interpretation or rereading of the queries presented by their literary work (May, 1995). Considering Agualusa's stories as literature intended for children between 6 and 8 years old, in line with the categorization by the National Reading Plan (PNL) of Portugal, it is straightforward to pinpoint a range of topics discussed, encompassing friendship, surpassing limitations, the fulfillment of dreams, and death. However, comprehending the theme of "usefulness of uselessness," emanating from the portrayal of the "bizarre" Other, may pose a challenge to younger children. This broad thematic scope prompts reconsideration of the categorization of the collection's ten stories and whether they are exclusively intended for children and young readers.

While investigating Agualusa's books targeted at children and young adults and attempting to categorize them as either "ambivalent text" or "crossover fiction," Pinheiro (2021) opts for the former one. In Pinheiro's perspective, Agualusa's writing approach anticipates catering to two distinct reader groups: children and adults. Consequently, Pinheiro (2021) argues that Agualusa's works do not qualify as crossover literature, which he defines as "texts that transcend boundaries post-publication, independent of the author's intent" (p. 96). However, this assessment is disputable, given the inherent challenges in retrospectively determining an author's cognitive stance during the writing process. Even though Agualusa's work exhibits a "dual address"—a communication mode where the author simultaneously targets both child and adult audiences (Shavit, 1986; Wall, 1991)—the problem remains. This viewpoint exclusively attributes the crossover trajectory to the author, neglecting the reader's proactive role (Harju, 2012).

Agualusa dedicates the collection "Estranhões & Bizarrocos: Stories for angels to sleep" to his son Carlos (Agualusa, 2013). He discloses in two interviews that "I began writing the stories of *Estranhões e Bizarrocos* for a magazine called *Pais & Filhos* [Parents & Children], as I had a young son and had started reading and writing for him" (Cunha, 2017, para. 19), and that "I have two children (...) I always keep them in mind when I write" (David & Caldeira, n.d., para. 20). Taking into account these considerations and the potential for multiple interpretations afforded by the texts, we advocate for classifying Agualusa's stories as crossover literature, potentially appealing to readers across all age groups.

IV. CROSSOVER STORIES: SHORT NARRATIVES FOR ALL AGES

The global acclaim of the Harry Potter series across readers of diverse age groups has aided in mainstreaming the term "crossover literature." This term pertains to texts initially targeted at children or adults, but are embraced by a diverse readership without any revisions or modifications (Grenby, 2008). Although this blurring of age-based boundaries can occur in either direction (adults perusing children's literature and children engrossed in adult literature), the most prominent trend of crossover, as per Falconer (2004), is currently from children's to adult audiences.

Crossover literature is not a recent phenomenon. Classic works like *The Little Prince* and *Alice's adventure in Wonderland*, appreciated universally, are typical examples of texts whose readership isn't rigid and which can be read literally by a child or interpreted at a more intricate level by an adult (Shavit, 1986). Nodelman (2008) posits that an ostensibly simple text embodies a more subtle and "complex repertoire that culminates into a second, concealed text," a notion he terms as a "shadow text." This text—both verbal and visual—permeates the main narrative and is discernible only to those who can decipher its code. The complexity of a story is inversely correlated with its implied meaning. The simpler a text, the more it demands of its reader to possess a deeper understanding of its content. Naturally, this demand isn't tailored to children, who are presumed to have limited capabilities (Nodelman, 2008).

The role of adults in children's and youth literature as covert and even active recipients has been acknowledged and explored. The concept underpinning crossover literature raises questions about justifying the existence of books that provide dual gratification to both child and adult readers, defying the roles traditionally assigned to them. Falconer (2009) credits the emergence and popularity of crossover literature to the evolving tastes and reading habits of contemporary readers, indicative of shifting perspectives about childhood, adulthood, and the ambiguous realm in between. Beckett (2009) associates this trend of co-reading with the dissolution of age boundaries, facilitated by print and digital advancements in the technological era. He further observes that publishers have recognized the commercial viability of works that are universally appealing across all age groups. Instead of allocating specific content to particular age groups, there is now an understanding that diverse audiences across various age brackets can enjoy the same work (Beckett, 2009).

In this regard, as Shi (2019) indicates, crossover literature is not a novel concept. Rather, it emerges from the cultural, economic, and technological transformations in society that necessitate a new term to encapsulate the phenomenon of diverse audiences engaging with literary works. Santos (2015) articulates that by facilitating an intergenerational dialogue, the term "crossover" assists in blurring the boundaries between adults and children. This

allows for the understanding that literature for children, despite retaining the preposition ‘for,’ is indeed universally accessible (p. 210).

From a cognitive literary studies standpoint, Shi (2019) underlines the variance in the interpretative abilities of readers of differing ages when engaging with texts that exhibit a range of mental modeling hierarchies. The capacity to accommodate child, youth, and adult readers who operate at different cognitive-affective levels is integral to crossover literature. In another article, wherein Shi (2016) contrasts the original and translated versions of the same picture book, the scholar demonstrates how differences in thematic representation, even when the theme remains consistent, can dramatically impact the crossover potential of the work. Shi concludes that it’s not the theme itself, but rather how the theme is portrayed, that influences a text’s crossover nature (Shi, 2016).

From this viewpoint, the ten stories and the anthology discussed in this paper possess a considerable crossover potential, given the fluidity of boundaries among the various levels of thematic representations. When engaging with the same text, readers of varying ages generate distinct interpretations. Certain inherent elements in Agualusa’s stories, such as the symbolic and metaphorical richness, the dialogical structure, the frequent aphorisms, among others, resonate with audiences of all ages in multiple ways. The appeal of these elements to the adult readership can transition them from solely acting as reading mediators between the child and the book, to genuine enthusiasts and regular consumers of these literary works.

It is worth underscoring that the paratextual material, particularly the titles and illustrations, also augment the crossover appeal of the book. In the subtitle, *Stories for angels to sleep*, “angels” symbolizes not only children but also those capable of dreaming (Xavier, 2021), while “sleep stories” can specifically captivate adult readers, triggering their childhood memories of listening to stories. Additionally, the dual illustrations accompanying each story can stir the imagination of diverse readers. These visual images engage with the text and supplement what the words do not explicitly convey: a steam bird, the components of a wall-crossing device (watch and spring), a shelf teeming with plush toys, an empty butterfly-catching bottle, a green apple, and so forth. These animals and objects take center stage in an expansive but uncluttered background. Static moments from the story are captured in detail, enticing an active response from the reader to observe and ponder.

The utilization of pure, flat, saturated, and bright colors and a two-dimensional graphic language evokes Matisse; the depiction of a sizeable green apple incites a hypertextual effect akin to Magritte’s pipe because, as Albuquerque (2003) asserts, “in this artistic world, fruits, animals, and people hold equal significance and are indistinguishable from one another” (p. 124). The “mini-cow” in “Land of contraries” is reminiscent of Sanyu’s “Elephant”; interestingly, these two artworks share analogous themes: loss, loneliness, and a search for one’s place. In this respect, Agualusa’s short stories collection attests that illustration can not only facilitate the transition from adult literature to children’s literature (Falconer, 2009) but also accomplish the reverse: the parallel visual images presented by illustrations in a book intended for children and young adults can incite adults’ reflections on artistic intertextuality.

Whether it’s the theme of the “usefulness of uselessness” manifested through the creation of the peculiar “Other,” or the verbal and visual elements that incite expansive intertextuality, it may challenge readers lacking in reading and life experiences. The comprehensive knowledge these narratives demand, the depth of reflection they impose, and the creativity and originality they display (Xavier, 2021, p. 439), could engage even adults in deciphering the covert ideas embedded within these short stories. Consequently, these narratives resist the conventional dichotomous categorization of adult/non-adult literature, and can be appreciated by audiences spanning various ages.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, as Lewis (2017) astutely observed, “a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story” (p. 44). Agualusa’s narratives in *Estranhões & Bizarros* are brimming with multi-layered meanings and invite varied levels of interpretation from readers of all ages.

The construction of the “bizarre” Other reveals the recurring and understated theme of the majority of the stories in this collection, which is “the usefulness of uselessness.” Through the tension between the protagonists (the “spectated”) and the secondary characters (the “spectant”), these narratives underscore the significance of expressing unique individuality within a community and stimulate the reader’s reflection on the value of perceived “useless” qualities. The manner in which the themes are conveyed, and the intertextuality created with other literary and artistic works, is more likely to be discerned by readers with a broad range of knowledge. This feature, which allows for multiple levels of creative interpretation, demonstrates their substantial potential as “crossover fiction”.

José Eduardo Agualusa’s stories could serve as an emblematic starting point for the exploration of “texts for all ages in African literatures in Portuguese language” (Xavier, 2021, p. 439). Short stories, like those examined in this discussion, transcend boundaries in more than one sense, not just age but also socio-cultural barriers. One of their multidimensional themes aligns with an ancient Eastern philosophical classic that might resonate with readers from diverse cultures. In this respect, compelling “crossover fiction” should be enduring and able to break down barriers between age, time, space, and culture.

Agualusa’s book is an homage to the conception of the impossible, a theme that is highlighted right from the opening story, which sets the tone for the entire collection. It also aims to deconstruct the notion that beauty, creativity, imagination, literature itself, and/or anything that seems devoid of inherent utility, is of vital importance.

To appreciate this usefulness, one must be open to empathizing with the Other, which could be the foreigner, inside or outside the wall, necessitating the questioning and deconstruction of their image as bizarre. This journey is the challenge that the studies of imagery and the relationship between Center and Periphery (it is noteworthy that Agualusa writes from the South, considered peripheral) seek to address.

Ordine (2016) posits that literature, along with other fields of humanistic and scientific knowledge lacking “an immediate utilitarian objective” (p. 15), can play a critical and significant role in pushing back against a consumerist society. As Lima (2015) also indicates, drawing from recent neuroscience research, “imagination, including the literary one, appears to be crucial for the advancement of scientific knowledge.” It creates, through contemplation, “places for breaks, spaces typically deemed useless,” but that are “useful” for the “fatigued, depressed, and emptied society in which we find ourselves” (p. 13).

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