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**Clear enigma:  
Brazilian crime fiction and urban violence**

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**Clear enigma: Brazilian crime fiction and urban violence.**

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## Clear enigma: Brazilian crime fiction and urban violence.

*Is there a single nook in our cities  
that is not a crime spot?  
Isn't every pedestrian a criminal?  
Shouldn't the photographer, successor of the  
Augurs and of the haruspices unveil the blame in its images and  
denounce the culprit?*  
(W. Benjamin. *Short history of photography*)

*Fear, with its physics,  
produces so much: prison guards, buildings, writers,  
this poem; other lives.\**  
(C.D. Andrade. *Fear*)

### Abstract

The article examines the way in which the development of crime fiction in Brazilian literature has translated specific social, historical and cultural issues, among which we can mention the history of crime itself. To do so, it analyses three successful contemporary crime novels, Patricia Melo's *O matador* [The killer], Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza's *Uma janela em Copacabana* [A window in Copacabana] and Jô Soares's *O Xangô de Baker Street* [The Xangô of Baker Street], focusing on them as three different stylistic solutions, which exemplify the successful adaptation of a transplanted European genre, coming at a critical time in the development of crime in Brazil. In this sense, they have a specific place and role in today's life and ideology.

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\* Translated by Jane Godwin Cury; the citations in this text are freely translated from Portuguese.

## **Resumo**

O artigo investiga de que maneira a evolução do romance policial na literatura brasileira traduz questões sociais, históricas e culturais específicas, dentre as quais se pode citar a própria história do crime. O artigo analisa três romances policiais contemporâneos de grande sucesso – *O matador*, de Patricia Melo; *Uma janela em Copacabana*, de Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza, e *O Xangô de Baker Street*, de Jô Soares –, considerando-os como três soluções estilísticas diversas, que exemplificam o êxito da adaptação de um gênero europeu transplantado no Brasil, num momento crítico da evolução do crime no país. Nesse sentido, desempenham um papel específico e ocupam um lugar determinado na ideologia e nos dias de hoje.

### Some hypotheses

Those who venture into Brazilian bookshops today – the new megastores in shopping centres that are gradually supplanting small, specialised bookshops in the centres of big cities, will come across a considerable variety of crime narratives which are genuinely national. This is noteworthy, since it there has been a consensus among readers and scholars that this kind of fiction is a minor genre, not belonging to the literary tradition of Brazil and restricted to only one or two authors worth mentioning, who wouldn't bring any prestige to the critic who dealt with them.

However, the increasing popularity of the genre is a fact, indicating the significant changes which have occurred on the cultural and literary scenes in Brazil (mainly since the eighties). This is intriguing and leads us to hazard some explanatory hypotheses. The first and most obvious one is linked to the rise in crime and violence, as literary texts (despite the competition from the visual arts) continue to be a powerful means of constructing symbolic representations and cultural images.

Another hypothesis is related to the fact that these texts are originally linked to popular culture created for the masses and have always been considered by the critics as low art. Therefore, only now that notions of “high” and “low” art have been set aside, are these works worthy of writers' interest. Related to this, the third hypothesis supposes that in Brazil, for different historic and cultural reasons, there had never been a “mass” of readers who were able to consume this kind of literature, as well as other genres. Finally, we are presupposing the definite establishment of the Brazilian cultural industry: the production of goods for entertainment, with specific characteristics which entail the elimination of “high” and “low” categories. These characteristics, found in contemporary crime narratives, are part of a global<sup>1</sup> trend, incorporating the visual techniques of cinema and television, mainly the American ones.

Thus, we have brought together explanations of a social, economic and cultural nature, which are sufficient to constitute a challenging enigma, whose interpretation involves risks. Aware of these risks, this article examines the following works, considered as “crime” novels: *Uma Janela em Copacabana* (2001) [A Window in Copacabana] by Luiz-Alfredo García-Roza, *O Matador* (1995) [The Killer] by Patrícia Melo and *O Xangô de Baker Street* [The Xangô of Baker Street] (1995) by

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of this growing trend we can mention the “Série Policial”, published by Editora Companhia das Letras, with 85 international titles, and “Coleção Negra”, published by Record, which has launched more than 70 titles since 1997. Machado, Cassiano Elek. “O mapa do crime”, Folha de S. Paulo, 05/03/05.

Jô Soares, attempting to find elements in them that confirm or reject these hypotheses.

### **First clues**

In order to decipher any enigma, one should look for clues: in this case, the first take us to the European origins of crime fiction and its transplantation to Brazil. We know that the crime genre is inextricably linked to urban development, and that its emergence harks back to the rapid process of expansion and change in European cities in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. This created great and problematic contrasts between wealth and poverty in the same space; a new complexity of physical and psychological relations, expressed in the geography of streets and alleys, now full of tenement houses, filthy basements and dangerous slums where factory workers, who were mostly from the countryside, dwelled. Raymond Williams, writing about nineteenth century London, notes, however, that this view has in itself a contradictory reality: of vice and protest, of crime and victimisation, of despair and independence. The contrasts between wealth and poverty were not qualitatively different from existing ones in rural society, but just more intense, more generalized and more clearly problematic, due to their concentration in the city, which was growing incredibly fast.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of landscape, with variables, is common in the history of European urban development, as was also to be the case later in Brazil. What changes at this moment is exactly the “industrial” aspect, the appearance of “businesses” on a much bigger scale, establishing new connections in the context of urban society and the human network that embodies it. This is the ideal *locus* for the rise in crime, related not only to the person, but to property, with increasing violence and cruelty, stimulating a literary representation of a new kind.: Characters were not “good bandits” or “outlaws”, linked to the contestation of feudal structures, which the moral order of agrarian communities and peasants idealised as people who defied the powerful and defended the poor, such as Robin Hood or others, who would fill the French feuilletons; nor were the characters petty criminals, almost harmless con men who refused to work honestly within an honest community, without the need for heroic policemen or sagacious detectives to solve their minor offences.

Throughout the 19th century, the failing sense of security in big cities, which passed from the working to the upper classes, happened as the growth in crime in

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<sup>2</sup> See Williams, Raymond. O campo e a cidade na história e na literatura [The country and the city]. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989, p. 203.

the streets made people alarmed, leading to speculations about the relationship between the emergence of professional criminals and the rise of capitalism, with the appearance of many unemployed people in the streets. This feeling of insecurity, as well as the awareness of social injustice and development of socialist ideas, increased concern in relation to crime, which is evident in the works of other writers of the time, such as Victor Hugo, Dickens and Dostoevski.<sup>3</sup>

These specific conditions, in general terms, led to the need for the development of police forces. Until the mid 19th century in France, policemen were recruited among ex-convicts, as it was believed that, since they had inside knowledge of the criminal underworld, they would be well-placed to defend society, whose laws they had infringed.<sup>4</sup> These policemen were helped by an obscure crowd of informers and relied more on delation than on deduction. Formed more by spies than policemen, this corporation started to become part of city life, defending “law and order”, or in fact, property. The subsequent development of police apparatus towards greater specialisation, including identification methods such as photography (which appeared in 1839), made the police force more professional and technical, eliminating the subtle divide between crime and the police, which caused uneasiness and distrust among the unstable middle classes. A new tradition was gradually being born, in which the policeman managed to “deserve respect”, which also yielded results in literature.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, disappearing among the helpless and the rootless, the criminal is definitely on this “other side”, and must be discovered and punished. The increasing need to enforce order and defend the State also transforms the “good bandits” (present in earlier narratives) into cruel criminals; a simple offence and a minor offence are transformed into serious and qualified crimes, if not pathological, whose punishment is essential in the defence of private property, i.e., of the current social order, both in reality and in fiction.

As a consequence of migration movements to the cities, at that time, mainly in England and France, there was a growth of newspapers and periodicals, which helped to form a readership with a taste for mass-produced feuilletons which reflected their hopes and wishes. The relationships between literature and the daily

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<sup>3</sup> See Mandel, Ernest. *Delícias do crime* [Delightful Murder – A history of the crime story] . São Paulo: Busca Vida, 1988, p. 16-21.

<sup>4</sup> Reimão, Sandra Lúcia. *O que é romance policial*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Many are the characters, from feuilletons or not, whose creation was based on the development of the police. It would not be appropriate to list them here but, for further information, see: Meyer, Marlyse. *Folhetim – Uma história*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996.

press had “an effect as revolutionary as the steam engine in industry; the nature of literature production changes. From now on everyone would find newspaper articles that were to their taste and interest; periodicals would become each person’s private library and encyclopaedia.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, popular literature was gradually created, in which crime narratives, as we understand them today, could be included. The first among them was Edgar Allan Poe’s The Murders in the Rue Morgue, published in 1841 in Philadelphia. With it, a literary archetype emerged, the amateur detective, and a new genre, the mystery novel, in which logical deduction led to the discovery of the criminal.

The attraction which arose from this kind of narrative seems to stem from the following elements: the challenge of the mystery itself together with a certain morbid pleasure in relation to others’ misfortunes; the feeling of violated justice that requires reparation; and an interest which legal practice had traditionally inspired, told through the fictionalization of “famous court cases”. As Gramsci<sup>7</sup> affirms, the law has always been of interest; the public’s feelings and attitudes regarding the legal system (always discredited, hence the success of the private or amateur detective) and in relation to criminals have changed considerably, or, at least have acquired a different dimension.

Maybe the strange and primeval human attraction for mystery, violence and cruelty – already explored by Sade -, present in many texts, or the taste for the deductive spirit needed to solve the plot; perhaps the adventure and fictitious drama in contrast with the monotony of life and a certain degree of nagging anxiety at the depths of the soul, provoked by life under capitalism, are all plausible attempts (suggested by many scholars) to explain the many eager readers that the genre has reached from the beginning. However, it is important to highlight (agreeing with Marlyse Meyer) that crime acted as an attraction for reading all kinds of feuilletons. “It’s the time in which melodrama, fait divers and the feuilleton are interwoven in a “democratization” of crime and criminals. The good and the bad, victims and aggressors, the raped and the rapist, assassins and the assassinated, the virtuous and cruel parents are found in equal measure. Crime is committed in castles and luxurious clubs as well as in slums; in the great halls of noble palaces and in the bedroom; in factories or in banker’s offices; in the capital and in the provinces; in orphanages and in lunatic asylums.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hauser, Arnold. História social da literatura e da arte. São Paulo: Mestre Jou, 1982. Vol.2, p. 893.

<sup>7</sup> Gramsci, Antônio. Literatura e vida nacional. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1988, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 264.

This “democratization” of crime, however, operates in a specific way in the crime genre, which from the beginning evolves according to its internal logic. At first, the character of detective Auguste Dupin, created by Poe, combines fiction with reasoning; a method for logical-analytic detection is created, in which intuition and chance are substituted by precision and logical rigour. These characteristics have attracted followers and, although with slight changes, still remain. The great successor of Dupin is Sherlock Holmes, a character created by Conan Doyle, who takes the deductive method to the extreme. Along with him comes the fascinating atmosphere of Victorian London, which perpetuates as another archetype, found in crime fiction even today, and even in cinema. Thus, Poe and Doyle set the foundations for this kind of fiction: the crime as enigma, the psychological structure of the criminal and the detective’s astuteness.

Since then, English, French and American authors in particular have given rise to a healthy literary tradition that sets aside the classic model of the mystery novel, introducing elements drawn from adventure narratives, thrillers, spy novels etc. This has led to the creation of various types of detectives, involved in different types of crime, diverse situations, always corresponding to the ever-changing social, economic and political aspects of each country. To sum up, “the evolution of the crime novel reflects the history of crime itself.”<sup>9</sup>

### **A peculiar dynamics**

All these questions have to be seen under a new light when considered within the context of Brazil. Here, the crime narrative developed differently and at a different time. This is in line with the history of Brazilian literature as a whole, which developed against the background of Brazil’s gradual overcoming of its colonial status, and which involved a peculiar dynamic of transplantation of European models that exists to this day, but which now has incorporated another context: globalized culture. Therefore, one can claim that only from the 1960s did crime fiction become consolidated, especially thanks to the author Rubem Fonseca, who gave it a definite form and an undoubtedly national flavour. He attracted many readers and critics, becoming a sort of model for contemporary authors, who have tried, consciously or unconsciously, to follow in his footsteps.

The transplantation dynamic, in this case, had several aspects that needed to be taken into account, which were included in the hypotheses put forward above. One of them seems to be directly linked to reading ability. The whole process of

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<sup>9</sup> Mandel, *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

popular literature and feuilletons emerging and spreading in Europe was based on the steady increase in literacy rates, despite the dominant classes' great unease regarding this process, given that reading was seen as a pernicious habit, as it could distract workers from their original tasks. Ian Watt, referring to the rise of a reading public for the English novel, considers that "the fact that 18th century literature is meant for a wider public may have diminished the relative importance of those educated readers who had enough spare time to be interested in classical and modern literature. On the other hand, it must have encouraged those who wanted a more accessible form of literary entertainment, even though this was seen as less prestigious among intellectuals."<sup>10</sup> A clear difference between "high" and "popular" literature slowly emerged, creating a hierarchy among the genres.

In Brazil, where the feuilleton developed almost at the same time as in Europe<sup>11</sup>, this difference didn't exist, basically due to the physical difficulties in producing newspapers and books, caused, among other factors, by the late introduction of the press. The Brazilian feuilleton was called this, owing to the media which published it, the newspaper, and not due to its specific form and structure, which to a degree reflected the already business-like operations of the European press. In addition, with few white, educated people and many illiterate slaves (almost 80% of the population were not educated), reading remained an elite occupation in Brazil. According to Lajolo and Zilberman, only around 1840 in Rio de Janeiro, the seat of the monarchy, did some necessary changes start to take place which would create and strengthen the existence of a reading public: the basic requirements for the production and circulation of literature were present, such as typographies, book shops and libraries. Schooling was precarious, however a campaign aiming at the improvement of the system was started. Capitalism was beginning mainly thanks to the expansion of coffee production and to British economic interests."<sup>12</sup>

On a national level, the creation of a reading public was still very far from being achieved. However in Rio, a "potential readership" of around 400,000 people was slowly emerging. Among their favourite reading was the so-called "sensation novels", which had exciting dramatic plots, violent deaths, hideous crimes and unpredictable happenings, as well as "novels for men", i.e., brochures full of

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<sup>10</sup> Watt, Ian. A ascensão do romance [The rise of the novel]. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> The first feuilleton published in Brazil, O capitão Paulo, by Alexandre Dumas, translated from French, appeared in the "Jornal do Comércio" newspaper, in Rio de Janeiro, in 31/10/1838. Cf. Meyer. Op. cit., p. 32. In 1843 the novel A moreninha, by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, is published in chapters in the Rio de Janeiro press.

<sup>12</sup> See Lajolo, M. and Zilberman, R. A formação da leitura no Brasil. São Paulo: Atica, 1998 e A leitura rarefeita. São Paulo: Ática, 2002.

obscenities which had topics related to sex, adultery, prostitution etc.<sup>13</sup> The interest in feuilleton literature was, therefore, increasing, even though, initially conceived as having popular appeal, it was actually read by the elite of the country. The slow process of making the Brazilian population literate, which still nowadays is incomplete, made the feuilleton be absorbed in this way, as one more element of European erudite culture, and which was never really popular. It did not last long and, at the beginning of the 20th century, there were few feuilletons available. Books were predominant, despite the difficulties of editing.

There is another relevant aspect to be considered: as crime is a social fact that is representative of industrialized urban centres, it seems logical that in small Brazilian cities of the 19th century (growing almost at the same pace as the seasons concerning their agrarian, pre-capitalist and slave-based economy), there was no room for crimes against property or even against people which could find their way into Brazilian crime narratives. There were crooks and scoundrels, malandros [predecessors of today's "crooks"] who committed petty crimes, but hardly ever murders, or serious crimes which would justify creating crime detective heroes. In Brazil, there were no "good thieves", bandits who were humanized, who would take the law into their own hands, the condemned becoming police officers. Moreover, the demographic and social conditions which could help create bloodthirsty murderers and fierce killers, who started appearing in our fiction with Rubem Fonseca, still did not exist.<sup>14</sup>

The progress of industrialization in Brazil and its process of conservative modernization, which left out a significant part of the population since its beginning in the 1920s, determined the access to culture and education because the educational and/or cultural projects have always been (and continue to be) fragile. One possible reason for this is that these projects have always been considered as simple expenses and not as an investment in the state budget meant for these areas. Another is perhaps the fear of the oligarchies in relation to the "rise of the masses", which is still an issue today.

Nevertheless, later, when the Brazilian cultural industry was definitely established (from the 60s onwards) with incentives from the military dictatorship, a specific type of public began to emerge. Before even learning to read and write, this public became familiar with TV images, skipping the reading and writing phase, which could guide them to adopt a more reflective and critical approach in their

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<sup>13</sup> See El Far, Alessandra. Páginas de sensação. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> See Pellegrini, Tânia. A imagem e a letra – aspectos da ficção brasileira contemporânea. São Paulo/Campinas: Fapesp/Mercado de Letras, 1999.

passage from the world of the spoken word to that of images, which nowadays cannot be avoided. Thus, a sparse reading public was formed: one which easily chooses TV over reading and often prefers it as the only type of entertainment. Therefore one can say that several factors hindered the formation of an educated popular public who would enjoy the crime novel, which has also recently found (relying on another type of readers and industrial ways to reach them) concrete raw material needed for it to flourish, i.e., the terrible increase in crime, created by the development of Capitalism in Brazil. The hypotheses mentioned at the beginning come together here and seem to be confirmed.

The first Brazilian crime novel appeared seventy-nine years after Poe published The Murders in the Rue Morgue and thirty-three years after the arrival of Sherlock Holmes. O Mistério [The Mystery] was published as a feuilleton in 1920 in the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *A Folha* by various authors who alternated the writing of the chapters. These were Coelho Neto, Afrânio Peixoto, Medeiros de Albuquerque and Viriato Correia.<sup>15</sup> Within the tradition of the above mentioned “sensation novels”, finally crime began to be seen in a different way: the approach was more scientific and positivist, less melodramatic, more “civilised”, corresponding to the admiration that the Brazilian public shows towards any European cultural “fashion”. The use of English pseudonyms by most of the few authors who started to write crime fiction proves this point.<sup>16</sup>

It was in the 30s that the Livraria Globo Editora [the Globo Publishing House] in Porto Alegre launched the most important and well-known collection of translated crime stories: A Coleção Amarela [The Yellow Collection], which from 1931 to 1934 published 158 volumes – none of them by Brazilian authors<sup>17</sup>. Another collective experience which should be mentioned occurred in 1962, from the cooperation of Lúcio Callado, Rachel de Queiroz, Dinah Silveira de Queiroz and José Condé: O Mistério dos MMM [The MMM Mystery]. They lent their aura of “serious authors” to this genre that started to become popular and seemed to encourage the market. Authors such as Luiz Lopes Coelho, Jerônimo Monteiro, Aníbal Costa, Vítor Giudice,

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<sup>15</sup> Albuquerque, Paulo Medeiros e. O mundo emocionante do romance policial. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1979.

<sup>16</sup> Ronnie Wells (Jerônimo Monteiro), King Shelter (Patrícia Galvão) and others, as well as the other detectives created by them. Only later will detectives with Brazilian names appear: Roberto Ricardo (by Aníbal Costa, in the 40's), Doutor Leite (by Luiz Lopes Coelho, in the 50's) Cid Espigão (by Tabajara Ruas, in the 80's), Espinosa (by Garcia-Roza, in the 90's), the exception being Sherlock Holmes, transplanted to Brazil by Jô Soares.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to mention that, in the 1930's and 40's, radio had an important role in the dissemination of the crime genre, with adaptations for this media of translated texts or national ones. The main radios were Rádio Mayrink Veiga, Guanabara, Difusora and Tupi. Casé, Rafael. Programa Casé. O rádio começou aqui. Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 1995, p. 77-82.

Marcos Rey and finally Rubem Fonseca all appeared in the following decades. Nowadays, we already have the “Brazilian classics”, and other younger writers, who operated within the genre, which now has a faithful readership responding to the thrilling stimulus of all kinds of crimes and plots and which has helped to oil the publishing machine.<sup>18</sup>

### **Current life and ideology**

As we have seen, the history of crime fiction is a social fact as well as a literary one, including transplantations, transformations and adaptations that follow its development in different countries and cultures. What in Europe was known as a “detective story”, with Sherlock Holmes, no longer exists. Equally, in Brazil, Jô Soares’ Sherlock Holmes has only a few similarities with the criminals created by Medeiros de Albuquerque and Viriato Correia.

According to Bakhtin, contrary to the epic, the novel as a modern genre (including all sub-genres) is the only one that can be considered “unfinished”, as “its structure is far from having been consolidated.” Because of this, “the novel introduces a problem, a specific semantic non-finish and the live contact with what is unfinished, with the time that is developing. The novel is the only genre that is evolving, and thus it reflects the evolution of reality itself more deeply, more substantially, more sensitively and more quickly”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it continues to introduce important issues related to the structuring of literary representations, which, in turn, are closely linked to “current life and ideology”.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, I believe it is possible to define a typology of the novel (sentimental, historical, fantastical, adventure, etc.), attributing a specific *place* to the crime genre within the historical-literary series and an important *function* within ideology. We understand *place* as the concrete socio-economic conditions for its production and consumption; *function* is the purpose related to obtaining, at the symbolic level, a reflection of private life, a substitution of the private sphere, the vicarious participation in other peoples’ activities, which are, not by chance, related to crime (which we have already discussed and which have changed throughout time and in the process of transplanting from Europe to other countries, such as Brazil).

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<sup>18</sup> I am thinking generically of Domingos Pellegrini Jr., in *O caso da Chácara Cão* (2000), Ignácio de Loyola Brandão and *O anjo do adeus* (1995), Toni Bellotto, with *Bellini e a esfinge* (1995), Joaquim Nogueira and *As Informações sobre a vítima* (2002), Marçal Aquino and *O invasor* (2002), and Chico Buarque de Holanda himself with *Estorvo* (1991), besides the ones which are the themes of this essay.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Questões de literatura e de estética – A teoria do romance*. São Paulo: Editora da Unesp/Hucitec, 1998, p. 400.

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit., p. 422.

"Current life and ideology" are therefore interrelated. It is opportune to mention here Marx's words cited by Mandel:<sup>21</sup> "Criminals commit crimes. Besides, they produce all the police and justice system, guards, judges, executioners, juries, etc., and all the different aspects of businesses that equally make up the various categories of the social division of labour. The criminal makes an impression, partially moral and partially tragic, according to the case, and thus supplies a "service", stimulating moral and ethic feelings in the public. The criminal breaks the monotony and daily safety of bourgeois life. Therefore, he prevents stagnation and creates uncomfortable tension and agility, without which even the friction in competition would be nullified."

Crime, the final act of a violent impulse, from any angle you see it, emerges as constitutive of Brazilian culture – as in all other cultures –, but its specificity makes it a basic element on which the social order itself is organised and, consequently, the creative experiences and symbolic expressions. Thus, Brazilian history, which has been transposed to literary themes, highlights crime of all types found since its origins, both in prose and poetry: conquest, occupation, colonisation, the wiping out of Indians, slavery, struggles for independence, the formation of cities and large estates, the industrialisation process, imperialism, dictatorships... All these themes are divided, roughly speaking, into the already classic nomenclature *urban literature* and *regional literature*. Moreover, throughout the slow and gradual transformation of the socio-economic and demographic structure of the country, the development of literature has always looked for an appropriate expression of the complexity of the country's experience which developed having violence and crime as a background.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, the aesthetic appropriation of crime by a specific genre such as crime fiction does not surprise us. The fact that it came later in relation to its origins is also not a surprise. As mentioned above, the history of crime is the propeller behind the evolution of the genre. As the proliferation of crime in Brazil today is an alarming fact, which seems to create a clear necessity of specific symbolic representation, it is right to suppose that crime narratives are one of the ways of this representation. Moreover, it is important to mention some structural aspects of Brazilian social history that are related to crime and until today have not been overcome.

Luiz Eduardo Soares<sup>23</sup> considers that the stumbling block of Brazilian history is the agreement among the elite, the arrangements among the oligarchies. It is this

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<sup>21</sup> Op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> See Scholhammer, K. E. "Os cenários urbanos da violência na literatura brasileira". In: Pereira, Carlos Alberto M. (ed.) *Linguagens da violência*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Soares, Luiz Eduardo. "Uma interpretação do Brasil para contextualizar a violência". In: Pereira, C.A.M. Op. cit., p. 23-46.

kind of agreement that, in my view, instigates and, at the same time, disguises violence and does not always turn violence into bloody crimes which are symbolically visible, but many times into “white crimes” (political and administrative crimes). This deal was also present during the impulse of conservative modernization that took place from the 1960s, during the military regime, and which had another component: the bloody crimes of repression and torture.

It is known that the explosive growth of the country from then on changed the Brazilian sociological map. In less than two decades 70% of the population from the countryside moved to the cities in very precarious conditions (it was our “Industrial Revolution” three centuries late); Brazilian capitalism finally established itself, turning the country into one of the world’s prime examples of income concentration and social apartheid. The result of this process is quite well-known: emphasis on class domination, a break down in traditional social relations which was substituted by a system of individualistic relations, structured by the market and by universalistic and egalitarian principles of justice and citizenship.<sup>24</sup> This has given rise to an ambivalence within the process of development of Brazilian society: for the poor, the idea that they should respect the limits of their position in the social hierarchy and not wish for more than they can obtain, while the market advertises the possibility of having everything and justice is said to be equal for everyone; for the elite, which can have everything, the idea is that the law is flexible, just a symbolic instrument to confirm the segregation of classes.

In this context, *ambivalence* seems to provide a stimulus for criminality. Soares<sup>25</sup> describes the appearance of some kinds of crimes common nowadays: the first type, corruption and embezzlement of public resources, practised by the elite; the second one, drug and weapons trafficking, which involve the rich and the poor, and the third type, which is present in all the social classes and is non-profit making: domestic crimes. All these types, with their different degrees of violence, which evidently involve individual motivations, become valuable products in the hands of the media, and have been fed into contemporary Brazilian fiction as a whole, giving it new forms, like a new raw material that inspires a variety of types of representation, forging genres, styles and points of view, which closely adhere “to current life and ideology”, as defined by Bakhtin.

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<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Op. cit., p. 40 – 41.

## Dark delight

We have been trying to prove some hypotheses following clues which have enabled us to situate our *corpus* within the social-historical, cultural and literary contexts; we will now attempt to interpret it as an enigma which can be finally solved.

Luiz Alfredo Garcia-Roza's novel, Uma Janela em Copacabana [A Window in Copacabana], is the author's fourth book.<sup>26</sup> In this book, detective Espinosa, of the 12th Police Precinct in Rio de Janeiro, helped by his "loyal valet", Welber (who could be Watson), tries to solve another difficult case. The name Espinosa has in itself a subtle irony, which carries on throughout the whole narrative: the incompatibility between the philosophy of ethics as a humanist area of experience and a literary genre, whose essence would lie in the transgression of ethical limits through crime. This is a double edged sword, as what is intended in the crime genre (discovering and punishing the criminal) is to re-establish order and restore rationality, following irrational subversions, in societies in which, historically, ethics and order are relative concepts. Here is the core of the ideology of the crime novel, in which detective Espinosa is an interesting emblem.<sup>27</sup>

Two policemen with mediocre careers are murdered in Copacabana, shot at close range. Among the Rio police, an atmosphere of fear and distrust is created. More deaths follow, this time, the wives of the murdered policemen. A new character, Serena, married to an important figure within the government's economic team, appears. One night, looking out of her apartment window, she sees a body fall out of the window of the building opposite. Detective Espinosa and his assistant try to solve this mystery, related to the close link between police and criminals in Rio de Janeiro. In this case, it involves a gang that steals cars, while the police are receivers of stolen goods. Espinosa discovered this from the lover of one of the murdered policemen, Celeste; she says she could be the "next victim", and thus gets Espinosa to protect her, when in fact, she escapes and manages to hide from everybody that she was in fact the murderer.

The classical crime narrative, also called "English form", rests on traditional plots in which a murder is the focus. In general, the murderer is the only individual who, besides being found out by the detective, has to be found out by the reader as

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<sup>26</sup> The others are O silêncio da chuva (1996), which received the prizes *Jabutí* and *Nestlé de Literatura*, Achados e perdidos (1998) Vento Sudoeste (1999) e Perseguido (2003).

<sup>27</sup> Regarding this, it is interesting to know the intention of the author of the book in an interview given to the paper O Estado de São Paulo: "Does the name Espinosa pay homage to the philosopher?" *Garcia-Rosa*: "Yes. Because I believe that being ethical – and Espinosa was magnificently ethical – should not be an accident in a person's life, but something that makes him a man. And a police officer, as well as a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, and a tailor should be ethical". In: "A psicanálise de um delegado em Copacabana". O Estado de S. Paulo, 23/01/01.

well. The plot's main point of interest is the confrontation between the analytical sagacity of the detective and the astuteness of the criminal; the murderer does everything he can not to leave clues and the suspense is held until a proof of the crime is obtained. The plots are abstract and extremely rational, and for Mandel<sup>28</sup> this is the peak of bourgeois rationality. Therefore, logic and calculation are paramount; the crime and its discovery are cold and impersonal, almost disconnected from real human beings, always motivated by conflict and passion.

By definition, this type of narrative evolves around a problem or enigma, and contains the origin of all the genres that seem to derive from it or will later be considered its evolution. The method used by the detective is hypothetical-deductive; it has its basis in the facts and leads to a provisional theory which he then uses to go through the facts themselves, as many times as necessary, in order to check whether it can be applied to all of them. If there are still some which can not be explained, there is a revision, until the elements are adjusted; the investigation finishes when the guilty person is discovered. It is, therefore, from clever plotting that the author knows all the ins and outs, applied to the detective's method. It means that the detective cannot fail, "he is infallible, not because he is a superman, but because his role is to solve an *imbroglio* which presented to him."<sup>29</sup>

The dynamic of Uma Janela em Copacabana [A Window in Copacabana]<sup>30</sup> attempts to subvert this rationality up to a certain point, as Espinosa cannot effectively prove who committed the crimes. After chasing some suspects and following some clues, involving some beautiful and seductive women, as usual, he cannot prove the basis of his hypotheses, or better still, he cannot reveal the guilty person or the one he believes to be guilty. At the end of the plot, the rational game continues unsolved, but now as a game that *the character plays with the narrator*, in a kind of mutual complicity, as if they were one and the same person, which denies the reader one of the most "consoling" aspects of crime fiction: the one in which the Good always defeats the Evil. When narrating his unproved certainties to his girlfriend, Irene, Espinosa claims:

"Look, this is the story that I told you. It is mostly made of suppositions; a small part only stems from deduction, but I do not have any evidence in relation to the beginning of these deductions; there is

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<sup>28</sup> Op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>29</sup> Boileau, Pierre and Narcejac, Thomas. O romance policial. São Paulo: Ática, 1991, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Garcia-Roza, Luiz Alfredo. Uma janela em Copacabana. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001.

also still a lot which is made up of fantasy that I used to fill the gaps, maybe most of it. (...) So, for now it is only a story”<sup>31</sup>

Or even:

“I am going to summarise the story for you. Nothing is final, several points still need to be clarified and the gaps of the story, which are many, were filled by my imagination, which makes this report fictitious. My hope is that one day this fiction may be substituted by the true version.”<sup>32</sup>

And then:

“- Are you really sure about everything you told me? Including your conclusions?  
-That is exactly what I have: deep certainty. That is why I am talking to you. Every certainty is, as you said, subjective. Certainty is not the truth.”<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the commitment with the truth that underpins the pact with reality which is essential to revealing the enigma is broken, establishing a series of uncertainties in which, in spite of this, the existence of a mere mind game, without any link with “current life”, continues to be dominant. In general, in the classic crime story, crimes and their detection are reified because they do not have social causes or effects, whether big or small. In other words, the structure of *cosa mentale* in this narrative highlights another basic ideological aspect: the non-interest in the fact that some social contexts produce more and more crimes, while others do not. In addition, the classic crime story is the empire of the happy ending – where the

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<sup>31</sup> “Mas veja bem, essa foi a história que contei para você. Ela é em grande parte feita de suposições; uma pequena parte é fruto de dedução, mas não disponho de provas quanto ao ponto de partida dessas deduções; tem ainda uma boa parte que é feita de fantasia com a qual preenchi as lacunas, talvez a maior parte. (...) Então, por enquanto é apenas uma história.” Idem. p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> “Vou resumir a história para você. Nada é definitivo, muitos pontos precisam ser esclarecidos e as lacunas da história, que são muitas, foram preenchidas pela minha imaginação, o que torna esse relato uma obra de ficção. Minha esperança é que algum dia essa ficção possa ser substituída pela versão verdadeira”. Idem. p. 214.

<sup>33</sup> “- Você tem certeza íntima quanto a tudo isso que me contou? Inclusive quanto às conclusões ? - É exatamente o que tenho: certeza íntima. Por isso estou conversando com você. Toda certeza, como você disse, é íntima, subjetiva. Certeza não é verdade.” Idem. p. 218.

criminal is always caught, justice is always done, crime does not pay and, in the end, legality, values and the bourgeois society always prevail. It is comforting literature, socially integrating, in spite of the concern with crime, violence and murder.<sup>34</sup>

In the text in question, the key to the enigma is the first kind of crime pointed out by Luiz Eduardo Soares as the most common in Brazil nowadays, corruption. Among other things, in many ways it promotes a promiscuous relationship among thieves, the police, government figures and the legal system itself, contributing to the increase in urban violence. The “cerebral” plot works very well, crimes happen one after another, clues are given, logical connections are made, but *remain as hypotheses to be proven*, as Celeste manages to escape, leaving no traces or evidence of being guilty, only a note with ambiguous content. Thus, the “happy ending” is denied, making the traditionally comforting nature of the genre relative, timidly pointing to a possible critical approach which, however, does not materialize. Sentences like: “...the victims were part of the so-called *rotten gang of the police*?” [“os assassinados faziam parte da chamada *banda podre da polícia*?”]; “are there people dying because they know too much?” [“está acontecendo uma grande *queima de arquivo*?”] or “was a self-erasing directive instituted within the police force?” [“foi criado na polícia um *dispositivo autolimpante*?”], always interrogative sentences, confirm this;<sup>35</sup> they only suggest a wider context, full of social-political implications that are scarcely touched on.

This novel, as well as the others by the author, seems to be a hybrid between the English and the American forms, as the plot is placed in a phase of crime development in Brazil where it has already reached the full legal age, invading all economic activities and political institutions, developing into organized structures, with branches that infiltrate all levels of society. As in the 1930s United States, where the “crime syndicates” involving keen financial interests put an end to the crime narrative in which the sinister delight of the readers involved reading about the sagacious detective discovering the murderer without leaving the comfort of their armchairs. Since the 1960s in Brazil, the police and politicians also started to be part of the plot and the detective, also sometimes called “police chief”, goes out onto the streets to fight against corruption and powerful organizations, although these only appear as a ghost floating over the main plots.

However, Espinosa is a different detective compared to the tireless American *tough guys*, who are cynical, tough and sentimental. He is also different from

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<sup>34</sup> Mandel, E. Op. cit., p. 80-81.

<sup>35</sup> Garcia-Roza. Op. cit., p. 35. The italic terms are part of the jargon referring to criminality in Rio de Janeiro and which are frequently reproduced in the media.

Mandrake, his Brazilian counterpart, created by Rubem Fonseca in *A Grande Arte* [High Art].<sup>36</sup> Above all honest, he has something of the anti-hero in him, as he does not get involved in violent clashes and shows a certain fragility in his solitude, living a mundane life around his piles of books, his old car and a toaster that only toasts one side of the bread. A man like any other.

With no family to care for, as is typical in crime fiction, and with all the time in the world for himself and his work, the detective is in the habit of roaming the streets looking for clues, which is also something he has in common with his predecessors. He wanders the streets tirelessly, on foot or by car, but never strays far from the Peixoto district, where he lives, or from the other nearby neighbourhoods that are part of his jurisdiction: Leme, Copacabana... And through this character's wandering, the narrator – who wanders beside him, impersonal but not omniscient – is going to reveal, with a subtle touch of nostalgia, the pleasant Rio de Janeiro landscape of the middle class districts which are still peaceful, although they are already part of the *landscape of fear*, often featured in contemporary fiction about Rio de Janeiro.

“There were five blocks along the Avenida Atlântica and two more inland, by Hilário Gouveia, until the police station. Whenever possible, Espinosa preferred the route along the Avenida Atlântica to any other. The light breeze kept the sea calm, with small waves, and flocks of seagulls flying in formation headed for the Cagarras islands.”<sup>37</sup>

Or even:

“In spite of the name, the Peixoto district is not strictly speaking a district at all (...). Like in a medieval city, the buildings face the interior of this mini-district (...). Most of the buildings do not have more than three or four floors and are from a time when lifts and garages were

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<sup>36</sup> García-Rosa, in an interview on *O silêncio da chuva*, confesses to having Rubem Fonseca as one of his inspirations, as well as Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler: “Among the national authors, he [Rubem Fonseca] was a strong character. He showed me it was possible to make this kind of literature in Brazil. The big doubt was how well one could reproduce a strongly American genre in the country. The Brazilian police officer suffers the consequences of living in Brazil, which has corrupt police, almost an absence of technical resources. He is a being struggling with bureaucracy and fighting for survival. Rubem Fonseca showed that it was possible to do this, to conceive a Brazilian police-officer”. In “A filosofia começou com um crime”. *Jornal do Brasil*, 07/06/1997.

<sup>37</sup> “Eram cinco quadras ao longo da Avenida Atlântica e mais duas para dentro, pela Hilário Gouveia, até a delegacia. Sempre que possível Espinosa preferia o percurso pela Avenida Atlântica a qualquer outro. O vento leve mantinha o mar calmo, com pequenas ondas, e bandos de mergulhões voavam em formação rumo às ilhas Cagarras.” Garcia-Rosa. Op. cit., p. 16.

not a concern, but when there was a certain taste for French windows which opened onto small balconies.”<sup>38</sup>

Unlike Rubem Fonseca, in whose texts the city is seen from a “nocturnal” perspective, as a beating heart of human matter, with its poverty, with dirty local bars, cheap restaurants, filthy government offices, alleys, little streets and dives, with sufficient details to form a setting which is abject in its explicit naturalism, Garcia-Roza shows an almost idealised Rio de Janeiro. Indeed, one can notice a stylistic effort to stress positive aspects: the outline of the sea, the tolerable heat, pleasant evenings, occasional rain, pleasant bars and restaurants, almost ethereal passers-by, impersonal streets, a kind of *neutral landscape*, which does not disturb because does not attract undue attention. A blank canvas, perfect for mind games. The crimes are “clean”, surgical executions, without cruelty: point-blank shots, which leave only a hole, almost without blood or an inert body fallen on the pavement. “The magic of the place” is one of the features of the crime genre, as if it were a concentration of senses in a specific point in space; so, the window of the novel’s title is the catalyst for the proliferation of meanings that can be picked up through our wanderings in the Peixoto district and its neighbouring quarters; it is the place where, symbolically, all the committed crimes are concentrated and the body that falls from the window is the key for all of them. This “indiscreet window” (“the maximum of visibility” and at the same time “the maximum of blindness”, dealt with by Hitchcock, were already present in Carta Roubada [The Purloined Letter] by Poe) is what satisfies the reader’s curiosity, a cerebral curiosity, “clean”, and, at the same time, pleasant, mainly because it is sustained by the hope of a satisfactory ending. And then the figure of the honest police-officer Espinosa appears to try to solve the crime, revealing the truth to the reader, relieving the tension, putting an end to the fear and re-establishing order, which, as we have seen, only happens as a hypothesis. But to these readers, who usually live in big centres, there is still the pleasure of having spent some hours far from the real fear and anxiety that follows them as a shadow.

All Garcia-Roza’s novels are like this: calm, pleasant, delightful, due to their sober, elegant, correct prose, which does not include slang or stylistic quirks, where nothing is excessive and nothing is missing. His novels steer clear of atrocities, cruelty, feature blood in moderation, as if, standing at a crossroads, the author

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<sup>38</sup> “Apesar do nome, o bairro Peixoto não é um bairro no sentido próprio do termo (...). Como numa cidade medieval, as construções são voltadas para o interior desse minibairro (...). Os prédios, em sua maioria, não têm mais de três ou quatro andares e são de uma época em que não havia preocupação com elevadores e garages para carros, mas havia um certo gosto por janelas francesas que se abriam para pequenos balcões.” Idem. p. 22.

decides to lead his character along the most pleasant route, to a safe refuge, the comfortable armchair of his living room, in a three-storey-building in the Peixoto district, from where he can at least try to solve all the crimes, without too much effort and without getting his hands dirty.

### **Obscene exposure**

Patrícia Melo does it differently. She voraciously dives into the narrated material, extracting from it poverty, abjection, violence in its raw state and senseless cruelty. This is because in her “crime novels” what is important is no longer the solution to a crime, but rather showing its crudeness and narrating the ways and misleading paths that leads someone to commit it.

In fact, stronger than Garcia-Roza’s texts, which, as we have seen, introduce variations into the genre, while still following the classic model of the mystery narrative, Melo’s texts<sup>39</sup> confirm the Bakhtinian premise that the novel has a “non-consolidated skeleton”, thanks to the way in which she introduces elements that can be applied to any other kind of fiction, keeping only the crime element from the original model. Death, and its mysteries, become nothing more than a simple part of reality here; there is nothing to investigate. The focus of interest is atrocity, the detail of the execution; the crime is not the beginning of an investigative process, it is only the corollary of the already given motivations in the plot. These texts fit better into a certain tradition of representations of violence nowadays common in Brazilian fiction, which the author seems to have been the first one to discover after Rubem Fonseca, and exemplified by the success of Paulo Lins and Ferréz, both of whom turned the visibility of crime into the main character of their work.<sup>40</sup>

As it is known, to this day there is no tradition in Brazil, in what concerns crime investigation, of serious, detailed, “scientific” investigations, which lead to the discovery of crimes and criminals, as in some parts, Garcia-Roza’s plot suggests. In other words, there are no practical conditions provided by a police force which works hard to solve crimes and arrest criminals, which can inspire the creation of mystery novels. This failure enhances the strictly fictional character of the sophisticated detective Espinosa. What we have is a tradition of ruffians, thugs and hired

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<sup>39</sup> She also published *Acqua toffana* (1994), *O elogio da mentira* (1998), *Inferno* (2000) and *Valsa negra* (2003).

<sup>40</sup> The following statement, extracted from an interview given to *Folha de S. Paulo* reveals Patrícia Melo’s own thoughts on her work “Concerning the crime novel, I think it is a lack of understanding of the literary critics in Brazil. The crime novel has always needed the city to exist. It comes from urban pathologies, like violence, social differences, hunger. We don’t have a tradition of crime novel. So, any writer who deals with urban pathologies and who adopts the theme of violence is automatically labelled as a crime novel writer. I don’t consider myself either a popular writer or crime novelist.” In “Sinfonia do adeus”. *Folha de S. Paulo*, 03/08/2003.

assassins, acting without the need for proof, relying on informers – similar to the European 19<sup>th</sup> century – obtaining confessions under torture and murdering on the basis of particular codes of honour and justice. In big cities, the police are silently complicit with the “killers”, who, in a way, make their impossible task easier, impossible either because of the lack of practical conditions conducive to positive results, or because of their involvement in corruption. It is from this material that Q matador [The Killer], by Patrícia Melo, is drawn.

The novel is about the rise and fall of Máiquel (the inspiration for the name is obvious, Michael Jackson, as it portrays the world of popular culture), a poor young man who becomes a “justiceiro” [vigilante] when he is 22 years old and kills poor criminals of his own free will or under the orders of uncouth rich men. After having to have his hair died blonde following losing a bet, he kills an unpopular member of his community, who had made fun of him. From this point onwards, everybody treats him like a hero, which makes him commit another crime, this time ordered by a dentist. He accepts in exchange for dental treatment on his own teeth, which are as rotten as his life. This character (the dentist) introduces him to other important, rich men who advocate “justice”, and finally he is part of a kind of “death squad”, an organization bent on the extermination of criminals, coordinated by the police. Once he is there, he cannot escape anymore, even knowing he is a disposable cog of the scheme, because he earns more and more money and gains increasing recognition.

Patrícia Melo structures her narrative around a real effect of the mass media, i.e., the distortion that the term “hero” undergoes in the minds of criminals: “among young criminals, the reputation as a killer, especially when it is properly recorded in the press, with a name, and better still, with a photo, is celebrated as the acquisition of fame, the escape from personal obscurity. The subject of the news item or the immorality of the act does not matter, as it is not the act of practising the crime which is seen, but the photo or the name of the author in the newspaper.”<sup>41</sup>

However, in a book that intends to be about the “banality of evil”<sup>42</sup>, the author does not go deeper into the potential social and ideological conflict which is outlined, remaining on the surface of the action. Circumstances or mere chance, as well as unclear wishes of getting ahead in the world, are what define the activities of the alienated criminal; the plot proceeds based on an oppressive fatality that is mirrored in the language used, with its restricted vocabulary, articulated in short, coordinate,

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<sup>41</sup> Zaluar, Alba. “Para não dizer que não falei de samba”. Novais, Fernando A. (ed.) História da vida privada no Brasil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998. Vol. 4, p. 247.

<sup>42</sup> “Sinfonia do adeus”, Op. cit.

precise and sharp sentences, filled with catch-phrases and commercial slogans, proverbs and popular songs.<sup>43</sup>

As it is narrated in the first person, one can notice an attempt to enter the psyche of the character, perturbed and uneducated, which leads to a style that mimics the action itself, quick and direct, as in American action films. This differs considerably from the concise and economical style of Garcia-Roza, whose narrator in the third person maintained a neutral distance from the characters and their actions, allowing him also to observe “neutrality” in the language, with traces of discrete irony, which is very appropriate to the model of the classic crime novel.

The narrative of O matador [The Killer] is made up of two parts almost identical in length, which, do not, however, maintain this style throughout. The first part, which describes the social rise of this mediocre anti-hero from the urban outskirts, is conveyed in the form somewhat reminiscent of a music video, with endless repetition of the same phrases or words, in a monotonous rhythm that stresses the brutality of the narrated subject. The second, about the downfall of the anti-hero, is less fragmented and is uniform in its predictability, without surprises or bumps, inevitably going nowhere.

The novel could perhaps be defined as an “inside-out crime” novel, but only because it completely inverts the structure of the genre. Nobody looks for the criminal, who is there from the beginning, confessing his crimes, for which he tries to find a justification in his former life in a poor neighbourhood of São Paulo, addressing an interlocutor who is not named in the text and is, in fact, the reader himself. Yes, there is no enigma to be deciphered: the list of murders, abuse, rapes and robberies that Máiquel describes works as a kind of purgation of his own sins, for which he does not apologise, since he attributes them to the disjuncture between his real extremely poor life and the ideal life represented and re-presented incessantly by the media.

“It’s good to tell stories, it’s a way of remembering that before being a dog I was something else, I was a man, I was good. Fair enough. I was honest and pure, I was a saucepan that kept warm all the stuff they threw into me.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> This type of language is not new; it first emerges in Zero, by Ignácio de Loyola Brandão, who, in 1975 already used this strategy to narrate situations related to his character José, maybe a predecessor of Máiquel, who also becomes a killer, but while undergoing a journey from alienation to political awareness.

<sup>44</sup> “É bom contar histórias, é um jeito de lembrar que antes de ser um cachorro eu era outra coisa, eu era um homem, eu era bom. Justo. Eu era honesto, puro, eu era uma caçarola que mantinha quente todas as coisas que eles jogavam para eu cozinhar.”  
Melo, Patrícia. O matador. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995, p. 80.

He professes innocence and to being a young dweller of the suburbs, who in the past just wanted to have nice clothes, be a member of clubs, wear new shoes (a symbol that is mentioned repeatedly), meet girlfriends in the gym. In fact, all he wanted was to lead the life of a “normal” middle class youth, with all its fetishes, until he opted for a life of crime. Initially, he commits crimes with a certain degree of bewilderment and later with evident pleasure, with the connivance or complicity of the police themselves. Máiquel is constructed as a kind of “fee collector”, similar to a character in the homonymous short story by Rubem Fonseca,<sup>45</sup> who kills in order to charge society for what it owes him.

The narrative, in turn, deals with the crucial issue concerning the kinds of representation in fiction and contemporary cultures: the taste for excessive cruelty, violence and perversion, as an absolute imperative, that seems to reflect the increase of urban violence in Brazil.

If this is a crime novel – the genre issue is not important any longer – the text is full of this material, which raises questions not only related to “current life”, but above all to “ideology”. In other words, the exacerbation reveals a pseudo-criticism, since it hides all the social and ideological issues related to poverty and exclusion. Thus, the lenience and flirting with the limits of human nature, transformed into an instrument of all experiences to which reason or passion choose to submit it,<sup>46</sup> are clear, creating a kind of morbid complicity with perversion.

The obscene display of violence, in the exact sense of “scene excess”, treated as a relief for the character, in search of his secrets and vague social implications, which do not go beyond the realms of the dentist and the local police, ends up attesting once again to the compulsion to show everything, to say everything, which is typical of contemporary culture, impeding the critical investigation of its causes. This leaves, untouched, again, the existing ideological stereotypes regarding the place of violence in Brazilian society: for most of the middle class readership, consciously or unconsciously, it is in the outskirts, among the poor, mixed-race and black, similar to Máiquel and the others that he killed.

“I was approaching, ready to shoot. Neno was kneeling besides Coca-Cola bottles, praying. Residents set fire to a bus. The drug trade adopts a lighter kind of gun. A shopkeeper is found dead in the boot of

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<sup>45</sup> A self-confessed disciple of Rubem Fonseca, Patrícia Melo pays explicit homage to him, giving the dentist who leads Máiquel to crime the same name as the one who extracts a tooth of the “fee collector” and receives a shot as payment: Dr. Carvalho.

<sup>46</sup> Pereira, Vitor Hugo A. “A lei do silêncio da violência”. In Dias, Ângela Maria e Glenadel, Paula (eds.). *Estéticas da crueldade*. Rio de Janeiro: Atlântica Editora, 2004, p. 33-34.

a car. Thieves steal sixteen cars from a club in Rio de Janeiro. Guns for personal defence in three installments, interest-free. Police invade slums and kill ten. I just saw the bloody face, said the mother. The day was good for the police, says the news anchor. In a cartoon, a smiling man shoots an elderly man. The Government says the operation was legal. The problem, says Dr. Carvalho, the problem of these boys is that the police arrests and the court sets them free. Neno begged in the name of God for me not to kill him. But I didn't believe in God anymore. I'm gonna kill you, you son-of-a-bitch, I'm gonna kill you now, because from now on I'm the killer. I'm the iron bars, the dog, the wall, the sharp piece of glass. I'm the barbed wire, the armour-plated door. I'm the Killer. Bang. Bang. Bang."<sup>47</sup>

Nothing stops the killer. The iron bars, the dog, the wall, the armour-plated door, all the security equipment that the scared middle class uses do not deter the killer, the vigilante who – in the place of the middle class – dirties his hands with the blood of his equals, without the notion that “white crimes”, unpunishable, command everything from a far greater distance.

O matador [The Killer] is part of a kind of contemporary fiction, crime or not, in which paying the price of market demands – for in fact this is what it is about – impedes proper investigations into the social implications of the subject dealt with and includes massive doses of aggression, violence and obscenity, spectacular “special effects” that are hard currency on the market, disguised as critical representations of the only “true” reality.<sup>48</sup>

### **Violence carnivalized**

In a completely different key, the humorist Jô Soares takes the Brazilian reader back to nineteenth century Rio de Janeiro to follow the adventures and

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<sup>47</sup> “Fui me aproximando em posição de tiro. Neno estava ajoelhado ao lado das garrafas de Coca-Cola, rezando. Moradores incendeiam ônibus. Tráfico adota fuzil mais leve. Comerciante é encontrado morto no porta-malas do carro. Ladrões roubam dezesseis carros em um clube do Rio de Janeiro. Armas para defesa pessoal em três vezes, sem acréscimo. Polícia invade favela e mata dez. Só vi o rosto ensanguentado, diz a mãe. O dia foi bom para a polícia, diz o apresentador. Desenho animado, um homem sorridente atirando num velho. Governo diz que operação foi legal. O problema, disse o Dr. Carvalho, o problema desses meninos é que a polícia prende e a Justiça solta. Neno pediu pelo amor de Deus para eu não mata-lo. Mas eu não acreditava mais em Deus. Eu vou te matar, seu filho da puta, eu vou te matar porque, a partir de agora eu sou o matador. Eu sou a grade, o cachorro, o muro, o caco de vidro afiado. Eu sou o arame farpado, a porta blindada. Eu sou o Matador. Bang. Bang. Bang.” Melo, Patrícia. Op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>48</sup> Patrícia Melo: “In a way, I'm rather pessimistic in relation to the idea of humanity progress (...) I have a certain feeling that humanity is a lost cause, and that the human power to build is the same as its power to destroy. My literature reflects a little of this dark view.” In “Sinfonia do adeus”, Op. cit.

misadventures of the most British of detectives, Sherlock Holmes, on home ground. His book O Xangô de Baker Street [The Xangô of Baker Street] appropriates the crime genre in a peculiar way, as it combines it with the historical novel, adding, mainly, the unmistakable element of parody, carrying out what one can call genre hybridism.<sup>49</sup> Once again, the Bakhtinian view of the novel as a genre in constant transformation is confirmed. From the beginning one can detect a background narrative structure drawn from the original mystery novel, around which revolves an intricate process of valorisation of the daily life Rio de Janeiro under Dom Pedro II. Complex and apparently superfluous to the crime genre, the device highlights the food, religion, ways and customs of the population, guiding the aesthetic aim and the structure of the plot. One could say that Jô Soares swallowed both genres anthropophagically, subverting them, in a process where both genres are modified in the end, and where another, different one, consisting of a combination of characteristics emerges, a kind of hybrid mosaic, in tune with the so-called “Brazilian way”.<sup>50</sup>

It seems to be possible to bring both the notions of anthropophagy and carnival together, inasmuch as the first one, a specific characteristic of Brazilian culture, named by Oswald de Andrade, consists of (as it is known) welcoming foreign “influences” and recreating them, interpreting them according to certain kind of “national” vision. Being a bit more daring, one could say that such an approach may include, among other things, a Bakhtinian “carnavalesque” view, which opposes any notion of perfection and completeness, rejects immobility and stagnation and, as a result, opposes the idea of the existence of a definitive interpretation on any given phenomenon. This leads to what we call cultural *ambivalence*, which may manifest itself in a number of ways, in all dimensions of national “current life”. For Bakhtin, “all forms and symbols of “carnavalesque” language are impregnated with the lyricism that stems from the notions of change and renovation. It is characterized, mainly, by the original logic of “inside out”, “opposite” things, of the constant permutations of ups and downs, of front and back and by the various forms of parody, transsexuals, degradations, profanations, playful coronations and dethronements.”<sup>51</sup> There is no denying that Brazilian culture is filled with these elements.

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<sup>49</sup> Rubem Fonseca uses this same device in O doente Molière (2002), where he tries to solve a crime which takes place in France in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>50</sup> Ferraz, Salma. O jeitinho brasileiro de Sherlock Holmes. Blumenau: Editora da Universidade Regional de Blumenau, 1998.

<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. A cultura popular na Idade Média e no Renascimento. Brasília/São Paulo: Editora de Universidade de Brasília/Hucitec, 1999, p. 10.

In this sense, carnival and anthropophagy enhance the possibility of changing places and highlight the relative positions of power or authority, reflecting the ambivalence implicit in the Brazilian social make-up. Therefore, a large number of incidents, situations, episodes, characters and complications of all kinds are accumulated in the book in question, in a broad canvass that is totally defined by this perception, which influences the style, with its direct and dry language, which makes the storytelling fast-moving, colourful, tongue-in-cheek and ironic. For this reason, there are *situations which are apparently out of place*, as the crime and historical novels are combined within a Brazilian context, with the anthropophagic-carnavalesque notion providing new forms of representation, which aim to cause both anxiety and laughter.

Jô Soares, availing himself of rigorous historical research, creates a plot based on the enigma of the disappearance of a Stradivarius violin, which was given by the emperor D. Pedro II to the beautiful Baroness of Avaré, when the legendary French actress Sarah Bernhardt first visited Rio de Janeiro. The actress suggested that detective Sherlock Holmes and his faithful partner Watson should be called in to solve the case. Arriving in Brazil, the detective was also requested to solve a series of less high profile crimes, but which were very cruel and mysterious: the murder of various women in different circumstances and in remote areas of the city. After following up a number of clues, making lots of deductions and involving himself in the strangest situations for a European, he decides to go back to England without having managed to solve anything. The criminal escapes, leaves the country on the same ship the detective boards on his return trip to England, from where, after some time, the first news of Jack the Ripper comes, revealing that he has been carrying out a series of brutal acts of crime around the English capital.

The most obvious formal element which structures the plot is, as we have pointed out, the articulation between historical and crime narrative, given that, in the picture set, even at the beginning of the composition, an urban landscape is presented which incorporates and subverts the urban archetypes created by Poe. The wet streets, fog, darkness, the characters of the night lurking close to the houses, the dimming light of oil street-lamps, dogs barking far away are replaced by the equivalent scenery found in Rio de Janeiro in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet made less glamorous and conveyed by certain good-humoured rawness:

“At three o’clock in the morning, some black slaves could still be seen coming out of brothels in Rua do Regente [Regente Street] with barrels full of rubbish and excrement. It was all thrown nearby,

creating another rubbish dump that decorated the landscape of Rio de Janeiro in May 1886. Certain slaves competed to see who could make the biggest pile in the quickest time, and little flags were planted at the top of the dirt when it was thought they could hold no more waste. (...) On the corner of Regente Street with Hospice Street, a pale figure all dressed in black, a hat with a wide brim down over his eyes, spies on the exit of the last customers.”<sup>52</sup>

Keeping this narrative tone, throughout the book the narrator covers the city’s landscape, naming fictitious and real places, many of which have disappeared, revealing details of the day-to-day life of the time, patterns of behaviour and social relationships, bringing back to life popular types and real historical figures, who interact in a wide variety of situations. All these parade through the narrative: musicians, painters, politicians and writers such as Vítor Meireles, Aluizio de Azevedo, Machado de Assis, Coelho Neto, Chiquinha Gonzaga, D. Pedro II, Sarah Bernhardt, all sharing the same fictional space with detective Sherlock Holmes. This procedure dismantles the sacredness of both historic and literary notions of hierarchy, since, even if symbolically, it ends up eliminating the differences between the “objective” genres (History) and “subjective” ones (fiction), high (drama) and low (crime), between “high” and “low” literature.

The ironic, at times burlesque-like, almost buffoonish tone with which the characters are treated in the situations narrated and also in the adventures of the European detective in the tropics, stresses the idea that things in Brazil should be considered within the context of a “happy relativism”, against the background of a peculiar culture in which not all is what it seems to be. In fact, what dominates the narrative is the humorous denial of the European model, through its “carnavalesque” ridicule. The old ironic maxim seems to ring true here: “Europe bows down to Brazil”. All the events in the plot are developed in such a way as to undermine the superiority of European models, inverting the positions of metropolis and colony. Sherlock Holmes, stepping down from his throne, succumbs to the heat and the laziness of the tropics, falling into the arms of a beautiful mulatto woman, contradicting the basic

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<sup>52</sup> “Às três horas da manhã, alguns negros escravos ainda podiam ser vistos saindo com barris cheios de lixo e excremento das casas das putas do Regente. Tudo era amontoado num local próximo, criando mais um dos aterros de monturo que enfeitavam a paisagem do Rio de Janeiro naquele mês de maio de 1886. Certos escravos competiam para ver quem fazia mais rapidamente o maior monte, e bandeirolas eram plantadas no topo das imundícies quando achavam que ali não cabiam mais dejetos. (...) Na esquina da rua do Regente com a rua do Hospício, uma pálida figura toda vestida de negro, chapéu de abas largas enfiado até os olhos, espreita a saída dos últimos fregueses.” Soares, Jô. Q Xangô de Baker Street. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995.

rules of the classic crime novel, in which there cannot be a love story. His power of deduction, symbol of the positivist reasoning that sustains the genre, does not work, as it is out of place. There are many passages in which this quality is ridiculed:

“The baroness would be amazed at how the small details that go unnoticed in the eye of a layman can be significant for the ones that have developed the art of deduction. For example, I am capable of saying that the baroness is a widow, that her husband was the owner of a considerable fortune, that he died after a hunting accident (...) and that, when he died, he left her all his wealth. (...)”

-This is amazing! How did you deduce all that?

-I read it in the Compendium of the Brazilian Nobility I found in the hotel.”<sup>53</sup>

Apart from this, the detective exchanges his inseparable pipe for a green coconut and his English winter clothes for white linen suits; he appreciates traditional Brazilian delicacies such as “feijoada” (a black bean stew), “vatapá” (a fish dish with coconut), sausages, pineapples and mangoes; he recognizes the unique superiority of cannabis sativa (marihuana), reveals himself to be the inventor of the famous drink “caipirinha” (pinga [an alcoholic drink made of sugar cane] with lime) and ends up involved in African religion, receiving a Xangô guide from the hands of a “babalorixá” (a spiritual guide), recognised as his protector. Thus, the most famous British detective is transformed into a Brazilian. This dialectically emphasises another parodic element implicit in the anthropophagic and “carnavalesque” nature of the text: the adoption of French customs by the Rio elite during the reign of emperor Pedro II, symbolised mainly by the character of Sarah Bernhardt, demonstrating that, like England, “France was not far from here”. The various scenes related to the presence of the renowned actress contain important elements which make us laugh, a special reference being made to the broken French that various characters slur:

“When she arrived, two hours earlier, the actress had been welcomed by excited students who threw flowers and shouted in adoration,

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<sup>53</sup> “A baronesa ficaria espantada como pequenos detalhes que passam despercebidos aos olhos do leigo podem ter significância para quem desenvolve o exercício da dedução. Por exemplo: sou capaz de dizer que a baronesa é viúva, que seu marido era dono de uma apreciável fortuna, que ele morreu em decorrência de um acidente de caça (...) e que, ao morrer, lhe deixou todos os seus bens. (...) - Mas é espantoso! Como deduziu tudo isso?! - Li no Compêndio de Nobiliarquia Brasileira que encontrei no hotel.” Op. cit., p. 127.

attempting to speak French, learnt with the Polish prostitutes from the brothels: *'Vive madame Bernhardt!; Vous êtes une artiste supimpe! Vous êtes bonne à besse!; Allons enfants de la patrie! Sarah Bernhardt est arrivée!'*<sup>54</sup>

It is in this context that crimes happen, which neutralizes the violence and cruelty of the account, as if, masked by a general comic quality, with macabre humorous undertones (the murderer curls a violin string in the pubic hair of the victims, who are always women), such crimes should remain crystallized in cliché-images, often repeated in similar texts, since the creation of the genre:

“...the man in black throws himself towards her, having a dagger in one of his hands and opens her neck with surgical precision. From the flung open gullet, blood spurts mixed to the first gushing of blood that was going through her throat. Without hurrying, the man kneels at the side of the young whore. Using the knife, he cuts off both ears and puts them carefully in his coat pocket.”<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, in Jô Soares' novel, a new possibility for the crime novel is exemplified: keeping the structure of the classic mystery novel, mixing it with the contemporary historical novel form and then subverting it in order to critique Brazilian history and culture, the final product anthropophagically points to a possibility of literary and cultural creation that does not reinforce the idea of violence as a spectacle, which is nowadays predominant. Rather, it rejects excess or obscenity, privileging laughter instead. Drawing on the “current life” of the Second Empire, whose representation is turned into pleasant and harmless entertainment for today's public, the novel seems actually to work, in its subtext, as a criticism to contemporary Brazilian culture, which no longer looking to France and England for inspiration, now takes America as its preferred model.

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<sup>54</sup> “À sua chegada, duas horas antes, a atriz fora recebida por fogosos estudantes que lançavam flores e gritavam apaixonados, num francês precário aprendido junto às polacas dos bordéis: *'Vive madame Bernhardt!; Vous êtes une artiste supimpe! Vous êtes bonne à besse!; Allons enfants de la patrie! Sarah Bernhardt est arrivée!'*” Op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>55</sup> “...o homem de negro lança-se sobre ela com uma adaga numa das mãos e abre-lhe o pescoço com precisão cirúrgica. Pela goela escancarada jorra uma cascata de sangue misturada à primeira golfada de sangue que já passava pela garganta. Sem pressa, o homem ajoelha-se ao lado da jovem puta. Com a faca, corta-lhe fora as duas orelhas e as guarda zelosamente no bolso da sobrecasaca.” Idem, p. 12.

It is important to highlight, however, that, in this case, the anthropophagic process, despite and because of its comic, parodic, farcical nature,<sup>56</sup> reiterates – because they remain untouched – ideological issues that are lie at the heart of the crime as a genre, i.e., the matters related to death and crime, which are now so pressing in Brazil. While treated as a simple game, pure entertainment, these complex aspects cannot be tackled or even mentioned, since they are metonymically transformed into mere impersonal bodies to be dissected and analysed, reinforcing the idea of death as a spectacle, an outstanding feature of contemporary TV and cinema performances. The critical dimension of the Bakhtinian perspective, where death is not only seen as an ending, but also as a new beginning, is also lost. In the book, the scene of the autopsy of one of the killer's victims, when a liver is surreptitiously passed from one hand to another, while the girl's father cries continuously, is emblematic:

“Saraiva, who was still holding the girl's liver, covertly handed it to Holmes (...) the detective hid the organ behind him and moved away (...) without being noticed by the funeral agent, Holmes threw the liver accurately to Mello Pimenta (...) Saraiva, in a typical acrobatically style, projected the liver to Doutor Watson (...) Watson, who had disguised the removed organ under his coat, took the liver from his pocket, cleaned it using a handkerchief and gave it to Josué Calixto, stating in an emotional tone and in perfect Shakespearean English: I believe it belongs to you.”<sup>57</sup>

Mandel claims that “the preoccupation with crime (in crime fiction) is a concern with some objective rules, law and order and individual safety, which inevitably leads to a Manichaeian polarization. Individual safety is, by definition, something good; an attack against it, by its own nature, something evil.” Therefore, the psychological or social analysis, the complexity and ambiguity of human motivation and behaviour are not important for the plot.

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<sup>56</sup> It is not my intention to go deep into the differences among these genres, but mention them as adequate qualifiers to argumentation.

<sup>57</sup> “Saraiva, que ainda segurava o fígado da moça, entregou-o disfarçadamente a Holmes (...) o detetive escondeu o órgão atrás das costas e afastou-se do caminho (...) sem ser visto pelo agente funerário, Holmes lançou, com precisão, o fígado para Mello Pimenta (...) Saraiva, numa manobra típica de malabarista, jogou célere o fígado para o Doutor Watson (...) Watson, que dissimulara no casaco o órgão extirpado, puxou o fígado do bolso, limpou-o com o lenço e entregou-o a Josué Calixto, declarando, compungido, no melhor inglês shakespeariano: Creio que isto lhe pertence.” Soares, Jô. Op. cit., p. 231-237.

Thus, we can infer that in O Xangô de Baker Street [The Xangô of Baker Street], the comic tone, while playing down aggression, avoids violence itself and eliminates pain (as Garcia-Roza), thereby satisfying the demands of the market, which demands “light” and “easily-digested” entertainment products. While apparently criticizing, it in fact accepts the rules of the social game, without touching them, since the final product was conceived simply to be pleasantly ironic. It is also clear that the intention is to attack the exception without touching the norm, since today’s urban violence is transported to a remote past, when hair-raising murders, such as Jack the Ripper’s, were not characteristic of Brazilian “cordiality”.

### **Unveiled enigma**

As it is known, crime fiction is guided by ideals which go back to the Enlightenment, in its belief in the power of reason and justice. Yet, it also has its limitations, inherited from the same ideological framework, as it cannot, as a literary model, overcome bourgeois consciousness and point to other possibilities. Crime fiction is courageous in affirming that the rich and powerful can be criminals, but does not analyse the social conditions regarding the existence of crime neither the criteria that define what an offence is. According to its model, the absolute value is life, it does not matter what type; it discusses greed, hunger for power and wealth, but not poverty or deprivation. Furthermore, it organises the universe and society as if it was determined by predictable forces, with no room for chance; “it does not realise that, when showing the cleverness of the detective, it also shows the failure of reason, its impotence when facing crimes that are always committed again.”<sup>58</sup>

The three novels analysed, each in their own way, return to these issues, with greater or smaller emphasis, as we have seen. Garcia-Roza, following the traditional model, manages to transpose it to Rio de Janeiro, without much ado and without spilling blood – and, not simply by chance, at a moment when the discussion about violence and crime is present at every instance of social life and, above all, in the media – but also leaving the causes of crime, such as corruption and theft of public money, carried out by the elite, with its known consequences, practically untouched. Jô Soares, transferring his talent as a humorist to the novel, composes an *opera buffa* in which crime, individual, domestic, related to passion or pathologic, even when subverting the classic model with the first failure in Sherlock Holmes’ career, serves as a pretext for a harmless chronicle of mores, in which crime is a histrionic component, whose violence is crystallised as an element necessary to the

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<sup>58</sup> Kothe, Flávio. A narrativa trivial. Brasília: Editora da UnB, 1994, p. 80.

construction of a happy setting. On the other hand, Patrícia Melo, eliminating the detective, leaving the reader helpless in the face of crime, destroys the classic model, and shows, as an unashamed accomplice, the failure of reason, trying to mask as social criticism the macabre chronicle of customs in the slums, reminiscent of a pre-Enlightenment world, in which the survival of the fittest still governed the codes of justice and honour.

The different solutions, variations and points of view for this European genre found in Brazil, makes it clear that it now has a different place and function from those of its origin. Its *place* is being defined by the pressures and limitations of a strong publishing market, which is part of a sophisticated cultural industry, and which produces texts that reach few readers, considering the continental dimensions of the country. This defined place generates specific *functions* which reinforce the idea that crime and violence are not the result of specific social and economic structures.

The history of the genre in Europe developed together with the consolidation of democracy, often following difficult revolutionary movements. On a cultural and literary level, this process coincided with the gradual formation of a public that was able to experience citizenship also through reading – to *whichever degree*. In Brazil, this process occurred via conciliation and ambivalence, which, to this day, appear to underpin the genre in question. The reason for this is that it is perceived by the public as a harmless and distant *fictional representation* – therefore providing a comforting experience – of the world of crime, while out there this same world is being organised and reorganised, transforming fiction into reality.

Thus, in her apparent social criticism, Patrícia Melo actually foregrounds the principle of cruelty, aestheticizing poverty and deprivation, which work as the only formal guiding principle of the text. Her text relies on the “excess of scene”, transposing the limits of what can, must or cannot and must not be said, thereby ultimately paying the price for the requirements of the market.. Jô Soares, in the well-wrought *bricolage* of his text, opts for a setting distant in time, and also aestheticized. However, his choice reveals a humorous and well thought-out process of cultural assimilation, whose only commitment is entertainment. Garcia-Roza, faithful to the original classic, demonstrating that it is possible to use it with ease and sophistication even “south of the Equator”, in fact steers clear of Brazilian crime, violence and poverty, widening the gap between fiction and reality. These are three solutions, three personal interpretations, three styles which exemplify the successful adaptation of a transplanted genre, and which come at a time when crime has reached the

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highest levels ever in Brazil. They also come at a time when the publishing market is flourishing, with its multiple niches and shares, when the country has an established middle-class readership, consumers of a sophisticated cultural industry. Against this background, this is also the time when, on a strictly literary level, the anthropophagic adaptation of the crime genre is taking place. It seems that the enigma referred to in the title of this paper has been solved.

We are now left with the awareness of the increasing exclusion of anything that does not have a defined *place* within the magic circle of the media or that does not have a comforting role, functioning as a smoke screen just to “help in the task of deceiving”.<sup>59</sup> This causes a certain disquiet, due to the fact that the conditions that would enable the appearance of texts whose objective is not to turn the reader into *just* another passive accomplice in our long history of crime and impunity seem increasingly unlikely.

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<sup>59</sup> Adorno, Theodor. “A posição do narrador no romance contemporâneo”. In Os pensadores. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1980, p. 269.

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