

## THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE CONSOLATION IN CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE OBJECTS<sup>1</sup>

### O BELO E A CONSOLAÇÃO EM OBJETOS NARRATIVOS CONTEMPORÂNEOS

Rogério Lima<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This article deals with the results of our research on the elaboration of hybrid narrative objects, whose objective is to identify the strategies used by literary creators as a method of incorporating and interacting narrative, non-literary artistic-cultural discourses, to the processes of elaboration of narrative fiction, such as politics, economics, fashion, cinema, the arts in general. The occurrence of the incorporation of these procedures has resulted in the breaking of aesthetic borders, of genres, of cultural and intellectual territories, and produces a new combination of different knowledges whose purpose is to translate the increasing complexity of transnational artistic, political, identity and cultural relations, which – in the present time – are under pressure from a certain form of cultural fundamentalism that translates into the almost necessity and obligation to be creative and innovative.

**KEYWORDS:** beauty; consolation; contemporary narrative objects

**RESUMO:** Este artigo trata dos resultados de nossa pesquisa sobre a elaboração de objetos narrativos híbridos, cujo objetivo é identificar as estratégias utilizadas pelos criadores literários como método de incorporação e interação de discursos artístico-culturais narrativos, não literários, aos processos de elaboração de ficção narrativa como: política, economia, moda, cinema, artes em geral. A ocorrência da incorporação desses procedimentos resultou na quebra de fronteiras estéticas, de gêneros, de territórios culturais e intelectuais, e produz uma nova combinação de diferentes saberes, cujo objetivo é traduzir a crescente complexidade das relações artísticas, políticas, identitárias e culturais transnacionais, que – no tempo presente – estão sob pressão de uma certa forma de fundamentalismo cultural que se traduz na quase necessidade e obrigação de ser criativo e inovador.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** belo; consolação; objetos narrativos contemporâneos

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<sup>2</sup> Professor at Universidade de Brasília. ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9481-6611>. An abbreviated version of this text was presented at the Second International Symposium on Law and Literature (2018), at the Faculty of Law of the University of Brasília.

## Introduction

To begin with I would like to thank my colleague Professor José Luís Jobim for the invitation to participate in the symposium "History, circulation and analysis of literary, artistic and social discourses", at the 22nd Congress of the ICLA – Macau: *Literature of the World and the Future of Comparative Literature*, which has allowed me to consider further some of the ideas that I will go on to present now. I would also like to thank the University of Brasília for granting me leave to be here and take part in this Symposium. Finally, I would like to thank the Foundation of Scientific Enterprises - FINATEC (Research Support Foundation) and the Graduate Dean of the University of Brasília for supporting me to attend events.

This paper deals with a topic relating to the development of creative processes, which has been the focus of my ongoing research. This text builds on the paper I gave at the Metropolitan University of Science and Education (UMCE) in Chile, at the 21st International Humanities Congress and the 9th Meeting of the Contemporary Textualities: processes of hybridization research group. I have been thinking about the organizational processes and forms of artistic creativity in the present moment. During the course of my research analysis, I have focused on the relationships between literature and other art forms, particularly photography, as productive processes of what I define as *critical performance*: which is, in my view, the result of the critical effort and work carried out by researchers in order to understand the present moment. For this reason, I emphasise the following quote: “We live in a world where most of the messaging we hear is based on fear and/or scarcity” (Bourne, 2014, p. 1956). This statement, which sounds more like a declaration by a sociologist concerned about the transformations undergone by political and social relationships in the contemporary world, is expressed by the American photographer Scott Bourne (BOURNE, 2014, p. 1957).

To briefly explain the title of this paper and this article, I would say that the term Beauty that I use in the title of my article is directly linked to the fact that we are able to discuss relationships of approximation and proximity between literature and its developments in forums like the International Symposium "History, circulation and analysis of literary, artistic and social discourses", the beauty of which lies in the existence of venues and forums dedicated to critical reflection on contemporary times. Consolation refers to the fact that we are able to do this at a time when the configurations of politics in the West are going backwards, being characterised by conservatism, xenophobia and indifference towards diasporic communities and people in the world, generating an atmosphere of insecurity, indecision and fear.

The sense that we are living in an era dominated by fear is not new. In the 20th century, from the start of the Cold War, this feeling was part and parcel of humanity, and it has re-emerged at various points in the 21st century. In 2011, the Thievery Corporation, a collective made up of the musicians Rob Garza, Eric Hilton and various other artists, released the album *Culture of Fear*; Polish intellectual Zigmunt Bauman, in his work *Moral Blindness*, discusses with the philosopher Leonidas Donskis the subtle forms that evil takes, without, however, revealing itself as such. Another philosopher, the Korean Byung-Chul Han (2015, p. 1), points out that “every age has its signature afflictions”. According to Han, the 20th century was a bacterial and viral age, defeated by the development of immunological techniques.

However, “From a pathological standpoint, the incipient twenty-first century is determined neither by bacteria nor by viruses, but by neurons” (p. 1). The pathological landscape of the 21st century is determined by neurological diseases such as depression, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), BPD (borderline personality disorder), or burnout

syndrome (p. 42). Han defines the 20th century, in contrast to the 21st century, as the immunological century: “The epoch sought to distinguish clearly between inside and outside, friend and foe, self and other. The Cold War also followed an immunological pattern” (p. 1). “More and more contemporary society is emerging as a constellation that escapes the immunological scheme of organisation and defense altogether. It is marked by the disappearance of *otherness and foreignness* (p. 2).

A fundamental category of immunology, according to Han, Otherness has been replaced by *difference*, although the latter does not cause any immunological reaction (p. 60), but does cause a sense of foreignness. Han continues “Every immunoreaction is a reaction to Otherness” (p. 2), or a reaction to what is foreign. Deprived of the ability to cause estrangement, difference “does not make anyone sick [...] Such difference lacks the sting of foreignness, as it were, which would provoke a strong immunoreaction. Foreignness itself is being deactivated into a formula of consumption. The alien is giving way to the exotic. The tourist travels through it. The tourist – that is the consumer – is no longer an *immunological subject*” (p. 2). “The immunological subject, which possesses interiority, fights off the Other and excludes it, even when it is present in only the tiniest amount” (p. 5).

Outdated, “the immunological paradigm proves incompatible with the process of globalization. [...] The immunologically organised world possesses a particular topology” (p. 3), which is characterised by the presence of barriers that hinder and prevent the process of change and exchange. Han reminds us that “The general promiscuity that has gripped all spheres of life, and the absence of immunologically effective Otherness, define each other” (p. 3).

Han points out that: “The dialectic of negativity is the fundamental trait of immunity. The immunologically Other is the negative that intrudes into the Own and seeks to negate it. [...] Because Otherness is disappearing, we live in a time that is poor in negativity” (p. 3). The absence of negativities permits the establishment of a dialectic of positivity. Hence the establishment of the “violence [*Gewalt*] of positivity that derives from overproduction, overachievement and overcommunication” (p. 5). I would add to Han’s list the demand for *supercreativity* that we are constantly subjected to and even the demand for *happiness*. “The violence of positivity does not presume or require hostility. It unfolds specifically in a permissive and pacified society. Consequently it proves more visible than viral violence. It inhabits the negativity-free space of the Same, where no polarization between inside and outside, or proper and foreign, takes place” (p. 6).

Han stresses that hybridization, “which dominates not just current culture-theoretical discourse, but also the feeling of life in general – stands diametrically opposed to immunization. Immunological hyperaesthesia would not allow hybridization to occur in the first place” (p. 3). Again, I emphasise the following: “The immunological subject, which possesses interiority, fights off the Other and *excludes it*, even when it is present in only the tiniest way” (p. 5). The same is not true with regard to difference, which tends to see the *Other* not as a threat but as a burden. The case of immigration is an example of this.

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The incorporation into the art world of processes of hybridization has resulted in the breaking down of aesthetic borders, genres, and cultural and intellectual territories, and leads to the coming together of different kinds of knowledge, the aim of which is to translate the growing complexity of artistic, political, identity and transnational cultural relationships, which — at the present time — are under pressure from a particular type of cultural fundamentalism that manifests itself in the virtual need and obligation to be creative and innovative.

Creativity and innovation are the words that emanate from the great “discourse factory”, news agencies, and haunt our times. In this context, writers are co-opted and encouraged to participate and to write for literary collections — engendered as part of literary marketing projects and marketing plans created by the new publishing corporations, which emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the result of commercial acquisitions and mergers — primarily targeted at the consumers of current affairs.

Pascal Gielen, director of the Arts in Society Centre at the University of Groningen, Holland, believes that neoliberalism is constantly producing tough laws to curb and restrict creativity. “These laws serve to mask the fear of freedom, of its own people, its own society, and ultimately, of itself (mankind). The aesthetics of measurability is a product of fundamentalism’s fear of the creative potential of every human being. Because neoliberalism hides its distrust behind a discourse of usefulness, helpfulness, and realism, it is also a deeply cynical ideology (Gielen, 2015, p. 72).

In Gielen’s view “the current context of production by creative entrepreneurs is characterized by a high degree of individualization or de-collectivization of project work in a fluent network structure. The ambiance of this production context, and the always youthful enthusiasm with which it is embraced, and even ‘scientifically legitimized’ under the guise of individual independence, makes the creative industry especially sensitive to the neoliberal value regime” (Gielen, 2015, p. 46–47). The pressures exerted by the creative industry tend to lead the creative entrepreneur into a precarious position.

In Gielen’s view, artists who still aspire to reach immortality and adopt bohemian behaviour “outside of society, hoping for recognition in the hereafter, are today ridiculed for their conviction. It is only the here and now that counts. Or rather, not the here and now, but the very near future on this flat foundation” (Gielen, 2015, p. 33). Gielen concludes by saying: “The artist can no longer stand outside of or above the world. Because many contemporary artists still regard creation as ‘standing upright’, rising above everyday things, they are summarily dismissed in the flat world. The creative worker of today is not so much a trapeze artist but more of a social networker” (p. 33-34).

In the midst of the process of transformation that he terms the *exhibitionistic turn*, Gielen seeks to alert us to the phenomenon that has been occurring in creative spaces — workshops and studios — namely that they are losing their importance or ceasing to exist. In the flat, damp world, the space where we used to practice slowness, verticality, reflexivity, dealing with materiality and isolation, “is predictably exchanged for an immaterial discourse that is all about mobility, and the institution dissolves in a network structure” (Gielen, 2015, p. 34).

In our time, there is a great conservatism in the air; a great attachment to realism; we live in the “age of academicism, of the application of norms and conventions, of small thoughts and short vision. It is the age of judging such-and-such a novel as boring or well-constructed, well or badly written, that the characters are psychologically credible, flesh and blood or not”

(Carvalho, 03. 02. 2016), or declaring that a given academic or aesthetic project is too big or too ambitious, therefore unworkable.

According to Gielen, “Utopia is out of the question in this ideology of realism. Worse still, whatever cannot be measured is soon set aside as impracticable and too utopian. The urgent call for an awareness of reality obliterates the breathing space for an awareness of what is possible” (Gielen, 2015, 49). Everything is debased by money, becoming measured by the latter or by numbers that can represent it or signify a supposed acceptance of a given artistic work or artist. Money comes to be used as a criterion for measuring the value of an artist’s work.

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We are living in a time of a misleading overabundance of information and narratives. This oversupply of content ultimately exhausts our desire to choose, since it provokes anxiety in the average spectator who is aware that, by choosing one type of information or audio-visual entertainment product, he or she is forfeiting another. The key word here regarding this issue is *entertainment*, which is directly linked to another term very dear to our times: *diversion*.

We live in sombre times, when large-scale exterminations are taking place before our very eyes, whether at a local, national or international level; however, we are indifferent to these facts, since we are always distanced from the events we witness by the very nature of the television and the internet. We are not evolving; we are experiencing the ‘disreality’ that the profusion of images provides us with. We change the subject with very simple gestures and can direct and redirect our attention with ease: we move from news of a tragic event to a piece of media trivia, without the slightest ceremony. We are able to get emotional over familiar clichés about the British royal family, but are not driven to reflect on the violence produced by terror, or on the desperation of thousands of refugees around the world, created by the geopolitical horrors generated at the heart of the governments of the developed nations of the West.

To conclude, perhaps the great impasse for artists in the present day will be that of remaining faithful to the truth of the narrative. Not succumbing to the temptations and pressures of taste. Not letting go of the language that can sadden and even sometimes offend. Not giving in to the spectacularized micro event that acquires value. A value dictated by the empire of taste (Baricco, 2006, 27).

Translated by Lisa Shaw

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