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UP THE RIVER, INTO THE DARK: TEXTUAL PLAY AND DYSTOPIAN GLOOM IN JOCA REINERS TERRON'S *A MORTE E O METEORO*

André Cabral de Almeida Cardoso[1*]
[1]Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, RJ, Brasil

Abstract

The dystopian character of Joca Reiners Terron's *A morte e o meteoro* (2019) is indissociable from its critique of colonialism. But while the novel makes frequent references to the violent methods of exploitation that characterized American colonization, it mostly relies on allusions to different literary traditions—including gothic fiction, the adventure novel, and science fiction—in its depiction of colonialism. The dialogue with *Heart of Darkness* plays a significant role in *A morte e o meteoro*, which to a large extent is a critical rereading of Conrad's novella. This article examines how this appropriation of textual and cultural paradigms shapes the dystopian outlook of the novel, while also offering alternatives to the hopelessness that defines its fictional world.

Keywords: apocalyptic and dystopian fiction; adventure novel; textual appropriation; pop culture; *Heart of Darkness*

[*] Associate professor of English-Language Literatures at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), where he is also a member of the Graduate Program in Literature Studies. He holds a PhD. in Comparative Literature from New York University (2009) and a Master's degree in Brazilian Literature from Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (1997). He is a member of the research groups "Interferências: Literatura, Artes e Ciência", "Estudos do Gótico" and "Dystopia and Contemporaneity", in which he acts as leader. He is also a member of the ANPOLL WG "Vertentes do Insólito Ficcional". He has co-edited the essay collections *Distopia e monstruosidade* (Dialogarts, 2020) with Pedro Sasse, and *Epidemias: literature, história e cultura* (Makunaima, 2021), together with Claudete Daflon and Pedro Sasse. His research interests include the relationships between dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, contemporary literature, and the Gothic tradition. E-mail: andrecac@id.uff.br. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5596-2157.

[...] it is a cruel and wicked world, and for a timid man I have been mixed up in a deal of slaughter.
H. Rider Haggard, King Solomon's Mines

Os rios, esses seres que sempre habitaram os mundos em diferentes formas, são quem me sugerem que, se há futuro a ser cogitado, esse futuro é ancestral, porque já estava aqui.[1]
Ailton Krenak, Futuro ancestral

A message of doom

Joca Reiners Terron's *A morte e o meteoro* (2019) opens with an emphatic indictment of colonialism and its impact on Latin-American history: "Today I see what happened as the irrevocable epilogue of the colonial psychosis in the Americas, and I wish it were just another lie imposed by the victors instead of the whimpered truth of yet another defeat, this time undoubtedly definitive"[2] (11; my trans.). This passage sets the tone of a novel obsessed with the idea of the end. A sense of melancholy, loss and defeat permeates the whole narrative, shaping its representation of the Brazilian nation, its past, and its foundational myths.

In its unambiguous critique of imperialism, *A morte e o meteoro* points to colonial practices that extend well into the present, such as the predatory exploitation of the environment and the violent encroachment on indigenous territories. Set in the near future, the narrative begins with a description of the doomed attempt to relocate the Kaajapukugi, an isolated tribe facing extinction due to the devastation of the Amazon Forest, now reduced to a few hectares of "moribund trees about to be scorched by the sun"[3] (*A morte* 11; my trans.). The most vocal advocate for this migration is Boaventura, a self-taught anthropologist who had fiercely protected the Kaajapukugi for decades. The only white man to have made contact with the tribe, he was chosen by the Kaajapukugi themselves as their representative in this latest "episode of the misfortune of political exiles (perhaps the most unexpected and dramatic situation in this very long, even absurd, history, a joint escape from that continental prison complex that is South America)"[4] (*A morte* 12; my trans.). Although the Kaajapukugi are a fictional community, their exodus echoes the experience of exile that characterized Latin-America's authoritarian regimes, while their plight encapsulates ongoing threats to native populations, as well as the current dangers of rampant global warming and environmental collapse. In extrapolating actual processes and events to the future, in which they appear in a more extreme form, *A morte e o meteoro* offers us the elements to critically examine contemporary sociopolitical forces and their impact on everyday life—a basic function of dystopian fiction, as Leomir Cardoso Hilário (2013, 202) points out.

The novel's blend of dystopian and apocalyptic traits, then, relies heavily on its reference to empirical reality. As M. Keith Booker (1994) argues, "dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations of a situation that already exists in reality" (15). It is more or less on the same grounds that Margaret

Atwood (2011) draws a distinction between narratives involving "things that could not possibly happen"—the domain of science fiction—and those that represent "things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books" (pos. 147), which she classes under the term "speculative fiction"—a category that includes dystopian fiction. This reference to empirical reality—even though disguised by distortion and amplification—allows dystopian and apocalyptic fiction to build "figurative maps, by which to make sense of an increasingly unimaginable, global, social, economic, and cultural sphere" (Tally Jr. 2019, 169-170).

However, the "figurative map" offered by *A morte e o meteoro* includes a whole archive of fictional conventions and literary traditions. Indeed, it is through a complex network of textual allusions that the novel develops some of its central themes. Much of its symbolic work occurs at the surface of the text itself, in its relation to its models and their cultural resonances. It is through this extensive exercise of textual appropriation that the "colonial psychosis" of the Americas is dissected in Terron's novel.

Through its narrative structure, *A morte e o meteoro* presents the creation of meaning and the interpretation of reality in terms of writing and reading practices. The first and the last sections of the novel are narrated by an anonymous official of the Mexican governmental agency for the protection of indigenous populations, in charge of receiving the Kaajapukugi in their exile. The two central sections, however, are taken up by Boaventura's account of his first contact with the Kaajapukugi and its dramatic consequences. This account, which comprises some of the most relevant episodes in the novel, is sent by Boaventura to his colleague in Mexico in a video recording—an updated version of the trope of the found manuscript, so common in gothic fiction. This reappropriation of a highly conventional literary device that goes back to Horace Walpole's foundational *The Castle of Otranto*—presented in the preface to its first edition as a translation of a sixteenth-century Italian manuscript—acts as genre marker that confirms the narrative's affiliation with the gothic, already noticeable in its rhetoric and imagery (as in the metaphor that turns South America into a vast prison). Boaventura's video recording, then, is a carefully crafted text that demands interpretation and emotional investment, but also an affinity to the symbolic resonances of gothic fiction. The transition of the anonymous Mexican official from narrator to reader and commentator of Boaventura's account offers a template for the reading practices expected from the reader, besides drawing attention to their importance.

In the gothic tradition, the convention of the found manuscript raises questions about a text's legitimacy and legibility, often pointing to the conditions of its production and circulation. For Jerrold Hogle (2012), it expresses the gothic fascination with fakery and artificiality, with the reproduction of images and its connection to mechanisms of falsification. In a similar vein, E. J. Clery (1995) relates the gothic to the creation of an autonomous aesthetic sphere in which the pleasure afforded by the text was more important than its didactic or moral

application, an effect that depends to a large extent on the adoption of a literary mode that resists mimetic representation.

In embracing the gothic as one of its main literary paradigms, *A morte e o meteoro* addresses similar questions of falsification and authenticity, illusion and referentiality. At the same time, its conflation and eventual contrast of different literary models points to contradictions in the dominant accounts of Brazilian history and the concomitant consolidation of the nation's cultural identity. I would like to suggest that while the gothic informs the novel's dystopian critique of Brazilian society and its ideological formations, allusions to other textual traditions and the playfulness of its process of appropriation point to utopian longings within the narrative itself, despite its bleak conclusion. Accordingly, my analysis will focus on the novel's relation to some of its main literary models, especially Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which furnishes the basic structure for Boaventura's journey up the Purus River in search of the Kaajapukugi, as well as the symbolic framework for its representation of the colonial encounter. The novel focuses its criticism on the cultural image of colonialism, seen as an objective factor in the perpetuation of colonial practices and the driving force of Brazilian history. On the other hand, its adoption of pop culture conventions promotes a programmatic erasure of the cultural divide between art and entertainment which reflects a desire for the abolition of all social hierarchies. In *A morte e o meteoro*, cultural artifacts are as much a part of empirical reality as actual events. Therefore, its playful appropriation of fictional conventions offers some guidelines for an effective change, opening new possibilities for the future while ostensibly foreclosing it in an apocalyptic doom.

An accursed inheritance

As I have argued above, the displacement of the Kaajapukugi is a clear reference to the actual processes of expropriation that victimize indigenous populations. However, there is no attempt in *A morte e o meteoro* to offer a realistic representation of Brazilian natives; on the contrary, the Kaajapukugi are presented from the beginning as an unsolvable mystery. Their language is so different from other linguistic groups that it sounds alien, and the symbols on their ceremonial dress are equally enigmatic. Boaventura's statement that "the savage mind is impenetrable" (Terron, *A morte* 40) reinforces the inscrutability of the natives as a problem of legibility. Turned into texts—their bodies, usually hidden from outsiders, are covered with symbols that remind Boaventura of cuneiform writing—the Kaajapukugi become simulacra whose referent is already a fictional representation.

In "The Precession of Simulacra", Baudrillard discusses the Philippine government's decision to isolate the last remnants of the Tasaday people, who had lived for hundreds of years with no contact with other human communities. This decision was taken under the advice of the same group of anthropologists who had been studying the Tasaday, and who had been witnessing their rapid

disintegration after making contact with modern civilization. Baudrillard reads this episode as an attempt to preserve the idealized authenticity of an endangered indigenous population which nevertheless condemns them to a kind of symbolic death:

> The Indian thus returned to the ghetto, in the glass coffin of the virgin forest, again becomes the model of simulation of all the possible Indians *from before ethnology*. […] Of course, these savages are posthumous: frozen, cryogenized, sterilized, protected *to death*, they have become referential simulacra, and science itself has become pure simulation. (Baudrillard 1994, 8)

For Baudrillard, this forcible sequestration of the "savage" turns them into an object of cultural accumulation, the equivalent of a museum piece whose value derives from its fetishization of the past: "[w]e require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end" (10). The symbolic sleight of hand by which the past acquires its power in becoming a lifeless artifact is a symptom of the deep disconnection from the past that characterizes modern society. As metonymic embodiments of our pre-civilized origins, indigenous populations become themselves a fiction (Baudrillard 9).

In its explicit representation of the Kaajapukugi as living texts yet to be deciphered, *A morte e o meteoro* foregrounds their function as a cultural artifact that embodies the image of the savage in western society. They are put together from elements borrowed from other literary sources, such as the adventure novels that were a particularly flippant expression of British imperialism. Among these sources, one in particular stands out: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a narrative that uses many of the tropes of the adventure novel at the same time it subverts them (Dryden 2000, 14). Boaventura's account of his journey up the Purus closely follows the structure of Conrad's novella, which also provides much of the imagery and atmosphere of *A morte e o meteoro*, including its gothic description of the landscape. It could be argued that Boaventura's expedition up the river is also an incursion into fiction as he becomes the protagonist of a half serious, half parodic version of *Heart of Darkness*. It is through Marlow's eyes that Boaventura sees the forest and its inhabitants, describing them as essentially foreign and incomprehensible. The representation of otherness in *A morte e o meteoro*, then, incorporates the same dichotomy between the civilized and the primitive at the core of Conrad's narrative:

> The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those

> ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories. (Conrad 1994, 271)

This is one of the passages that Chinua Achebe (2016, 16-17) singles out as an evidence of Joseph Conrad's racism in his famous attack against *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe argues that Conrad consistently associates African natives to either silence or irrational frenzy, despoiling them of their history and their humanity. Likewise, silence is a prominent trait of the Kaajapukugi, while the irrational frenzy of the Africans has its equivalent in the drug-induced trance and the ritual self-immolation that are part of Kaajapukugi's religious ceremonies. The same evolutionary logic that relegates the "savage"[5] to the lower stages of the evolution toward civilization and reduces them to a material manifestation of the past shapes Boaventura's view of the Kaajapukugi: "My ethics would be similar to that of the Time Tunnel traveler: I would journey to humanity's past, but wouldn't interfere in any decision or event, thus avoiding any change in the future"[6] (Terron, *A morte* 48; my trans.).

As in Baudrillard's discussion of the symbolic role of the "savage" in western culture, Boaventura's desire to preserve the Kaajapukugi is a by-product of his investment in them as objects of study. They command his attention only as pristine vestiges of the past. But since they resist interpretation (they remain resolutely silent), they become uncanny, simultaneously familiar (as the pre-historic origin of western civilization) and unfamiliar (in their inscrutable alterity). For Marlow, too, the African natives are uncanny, too close to the distant past to be understood, but displaying the signs of a shared humanity. As in Freud's (2010) conceptualization of the uncanny, the indigenous other is a memory that should have been forgotten, but which returns to haunt the present.

This uncanny return of the past is a defining feature of gothic poetics; the most emblematic of its spatial tropes—the ruin and the castle—are allegorical reminders of the presence of the past in the form of its phantasmagorical remains. As Júlio França (2016) argues, the gothic is an aesthetic response to fundamental changes in the perception of time that were a by-product of industrialization. The emergence of the notion of progress, and the concomitant notion that time progressed through a series of ruptures severed the ties between the present and the past, which could no longer function as a template for future events. The past now seemed strange or even frightening, but still capable of mysteriously influencing the present (in a process analogous to the return of the repressed in Freud's formulation of the uncanny). It is significant, then, that Baudrillard uses a rhetoric connected to the semantic field of death, decay and exhumation to describe the modern appropriation of the past as a simulacrum, in a discussion that evokes a gothic logic of haunting and falsification (7-11).

The anonymous narrator's description of the old house he inherited from his parents in *A morte e o meteoro* stands as a powerful allegory in which memory itself is gothicized: "[…] I didn't know what to do with the big house crowded with old junk that now belonged to me. The family blood was languishing, and

the house was my inheritance. Everything there probably smelled just like my parent's decomposing bodies"[7] (Terron, *A morte* 25; my trans.). The sense of decay, the mention of a house that has become the receptacle of dead relics, and the anguish at the decline of the family line (which threatens to engulf the narrator in its process of decomposition) are echoes of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", and the connection between recollection, deterioration and entrapment suffuses the whole narrative, furnishing the grounds for its dystopian vision. The characters and the world they inhabit are both chained to the past, which shares the hallucinatory quality of Poe's fiction.

In the beginning of his videorecording, Boaventura also expresses a reluctance to remember the past: "[…] I'll have to go back to the past, to when I was thirty, and remember facts that I'd rather have forgotten, things that should stay buried under the sandy banks of the streams that branch out from the Purus"[8] (Terron, *A morte* 40; my trans.). Boaventura places his memories under an interdiction and banishes them to the tortuous curves of the Purus River, a more labyrinthic "dark place" than Conrad's Congo. Hence the family legacy transmitted from generation to generation smoothly slips into the "accursed inheritance" (Conrad 271) of primitive savagery, while the past becomes a distant territory, a nebulous landscape in which reality blurs into gothic horror.

The perils of the dusklands

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow is attracted by the blank spaces on a map, which beckon with the delights of adventure and exploration. But despite his fascination with the Congo River, Marlow knows that he will not find there the territory of boundless potential that he desires, for the region had already been mapped:

> True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. (Conrad 245)

This is, of course, the territory of the adventure novel, which is addressed "to those who are still young enough at heart to love a story of treasure, war, and wild adventure" (Haggard 1994, vii). Essentially an escapist literature, it offers its readers a temporary release "from everyday concerns" and an immersion in "uncomplicated exotic romance […] laced with patriotic overtones and a zeal for imperial adventures" (Dryden 2). In its pages, adventure is synonymous with colonial expansion. But even a paradigmatic example of the genre—Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*—waxes nostalgia for a pristine land of wonder now that all savages "have been tamed by the white man's bullets" (Haggard vii). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow expresses a similar longing for the "blank spaces" that can be filled by a boy's imagination, now distorted into a "place of darkness" by the process of colonization.

In going up the Purus, Boaventura follows a similar desire for exploration in the guise of scientific investigation. But like Marlow's Congo, the Purus is not completely unknown—even though the maps that track its course are imprecise and a poor guide to one's way (Terron, *A morte* 42). It is no longer, then, a space of absolute freedom; even its higher reaches, which remain virtually untouched, are circumscribed by the boundaries of colonial expansion. As the final refuge of the endangered Kaajapukugi, the Purus incorporates the memory of their persecution. In an exercise of Orwellian doublethink, it is at the same time a scene of absolute alterity and the symbolic territory of the colonial encounter, already part of a long historical process of exploitation. It is also a simulacrum, since its referents are both nature at the margins of civilization and the text of *Heart of Darkness* itself, whose landscape it virtually reproduces.

Hence, it offers a representation of the actual methods of colonial despoliation in Brazil—the Kaajapukugi were "hunted down with determination by the state and its agents of extermination: prospectors, loggers, landowners and their usual henchmen, policemen, the military, and government officials"[9] (Terron, *A morte* 14; my trans.)—through the lens of Conrad's fictional model. As Andrea White (1996) points out, Conrad's works trace distinctive moments of colonial expansion, "from the loosely administered, *ad hoc* arrangement in Malaya, to the intensified scramble for land in Africa, to the financial dependencies established in South America" (180), so it can be seen as a condensation of the nineteenth-century culture of imperialism. *A morte e o meteoro* paradoxically develops a critique of colonialism which emphasizes the experience of its victims, while reproducing a more ambiguous discourse that, despite its open attacks on imperialism, still tends to silence indigenous populations (Achebe 19) and to assume a European perspective.[10]

These ideological and textual tensions find their expression in the allegorical landscape of the forest, whose characteristic trait is its obscurity:

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. (Conrad 269)

Conrad's use of the gothic sublime turns the vastness of the river into the material manifestation of a threatening, mysterious power. The jungle is claustrophobic and essentially inhuman. Nature is an oppressive presence, made palpable by the thickness of the air, and yet it is strangely void: its waterways are empty, its trees are silent, it dissolves into a distant gloom. What seems to be a concrete description of the forest—a transcription of Conrad's impressions from his visit to the Congo—turns out to be a symbolic evocation of inscrutability and of the limits of human understanding. For Eagleton (2005, 237), this "mixture of the immediate and the intangible" is characteristic of Conrad's style, lending

a dreamlike quality to his prose. Eagleton further argues that "[t]he world for Conrad is impenetrable and opaque. It is resistant to human meaning" (238). The main danger of the forest, therefore, is epistemological collapse. Its ghostly quality points to the haunting presence of an immemorial time beyond the reach of human history, but it is also a sign of its fundamental ambiguity:

> Some things and characters in Conrad are unfathomable because they are swathed in obscurity, and some because there is nothing there to be known. Is the heart of Africa dark because we Westerners cannot penetrate it, or is it dark, so to speak, inherently? Is it meaningless in itself, or simply obscure from our standpoint? Is it the thing itself which is askew, or our way of seeing it? Is there an 'objective' chaos and horror there, or is it just a case of our blurred vision? How can something which has no meaning in the first place be said to be inscrutable? (Eagleton 240)

In Eagleton's formulation, the inscrutability of the landscape turns into the ambiguity of the text—once again, a problem of legibility. As Boaventura begins his journey up the Purus, his view is equally indistinct:

> […] the milky mists that settled over the boat contrasted with the darkness in the distance. […] The aquatic vastness was extraordinary, and in many stretches of the river the banks were so distant that they became invisible. [...] Thanks to the diffuse luminosity of the sun hidden beneath the floating rivers of clouds that followed the bed of the Purus, days and nights began to blur, and I no longer recognized their limits.[11] (Terron, *A morte* 45-46; my trans.)

In Boaventura's description of the river there is an even greater emphasis on the loss of visibility, signaled not only by the image of the "milky mists", but also by the use of words such as "darkness," "invisible," and "hidden." Consequently, while the ambiguity Eagleton detects in Conrad's text is still there, Terron articulates this as a matter of perception. Boaventura's impressions are conditioned by a longstanding cultural paradigm: the imagination of empire and the split between nature and civilization—a dichotomy that is a cornerstone of modernity, and which colonialism consolidated by turning nature into an object of study and domination (Daflon 2022, 51-78). Terron's novel draws attention to the spuriousness of this dichotomy by showing that the image of nature on which it is based is itself a cultural construction.

Marlow points to the sense of unreality that permeates his experiences in Africa:

> It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. (Conrad 263)

Boaventura relates the Kaajapukugi territory to the same dream-like sensation of unreality: "In the next morning, the island of mists emerged as the only solid thing in the liquid reality of dream"[12] (Terron, *A morte* 89; my trans.). Eagleton takes issue with Conrad's insistence on the absurdity of imperialism, which "is seen in *Heart of Darkness* not as purposeful, historically intelligible system, but as a kind of nightmarish aberration" (242). If, according to Eagleton's reading, Conrad presents imperialism as a delirium from its conception, the blurring of reality and illusion in *A morte e o meteoro* is rather an *effect* of colonialism. Boaventura's depiction of his journey as a kind of dream comes late in his account, after he has confessed to having kidnapped the last Kaajapukugi woman in the hopes of using her to get information on her culture. The violence of this attack causes her to miscarry on the way to the nearest commercial outpost. This crime is further compounded when Boaventura repeatedly rapes his captive and then sells her into prostitution so as to pay his gambling and drug debts, until she finally kills herself (but not before contracting a debilitating venereal disease). Therefore, he was the one responsible for the Kaajapukugi's eventual extinction in destroying their last chance at reproduction.

Boaventura becomes, then, an incarnation of colonialism's destructive power. His story encapsulates dehumanizing practices that reduced indigenous populations to objects of study according to a logic in which knowledge means control and domination (Daflon 53-58). His moral degeneration is a late symptom of the "colonial psychosis" that reduces the Kaajapukugi to uncivilized savages. His marginal position during his first contact with them proves this assumption to be a delusion:

> I began to watch them from the woods where I was hiding as if I were the savage. Deep in the dark, I saw everything that moved in the light. In their communal shelter, they miserably staged the spectacle of civilization, while I, kept loose but a prisoner of the distances of an impenetrable landscape, gnawed on rotten roots.[13] (Terron, *A morte* 54; my trans.)

One of the messages of *Heart of Darkness* is that civilization is a fragile illusion, since it preserves savagery as a repressed memory within itself. *A morte e o meteoro* follows the opposite route by showing that the so-called savages are not in a state of nature, but constitute a nucleus of civilization in the wild. However, in saying that the Kaajapukugi only "stage the spectacle of civilization" and that he watches them "as if" he were the savage, he denies them once again the condition of civilized beings. His misreading of the situation shows the persistence of the cultural assumptions that shape his vision. The sense of unreality that impregnates his recollection of the Purus derives to a large extent from the gap between these assumptions and their lack of confirmation in lived experience. At the same time, it generates its own artificial constructions, its own distortions, by imposing a form of social organization whose aim is the exploitation of a foreign territory, and where the principles that regulate life in the metropolis (the template of civilization) do not apply.

Unlike the dominant trend of anglophone dystopian literature, the narrative of *A morte e o meteoro* is less a projection of contemporary fears into the future than an allegorical representation of the past. Dystopian oppression is presented as a central component of Brazilian history, and the text can only reproduce its horrors in allegorical form. This finds its expression in the use of a gothic rhetoric in which the haunting return of the past plays a prominent role. Conrad's discourse on imperialism acts as a kind of epistemological model that furnishes the grounds for the representation of colonialism as a broad historical force that explains the murderous methods of exploitation still in place in Brazil. The authoritarian threat, then, is not the imposition of a highly regimented order that suffocates individual freedom, but rather the destructive processes that late capitalism inherited from earlier forms of colonialism. Consequently, there is little to distinguish the dystopian from the apocalyptic in *A morte e o meteoro*.

Little hope seems to be left by the end of the novel. The anticipated apocalypse is finally brought off by the impact of a meteor that apparently obliterates the whole planet. However, the same mechanisms of cultural appropriation that helped shape its dystopian outlook may provide the elements for a more optimistic reading of the text.

The island of mists

In *Heart of Darkness*, horror originates from the contamination of barbarism and the suspension of social norms. Although Kurtz embodies the effects of this contamination, in his famous last words ("The horror! The horror!"), he is still able to project the horror within himself to an external source. On the other hand, despite Boaventura's assurance that his "anthropological interests were above animality" (Terron, *A morte* 77-78), his act of aggression against the Kaajapukugi is motivated by his desire for knowledge, and not by his exposure to primitive violence. While Kurtz seems horrified by what he saw in the wilderness, in *A morte e o meteoro* it is Boaventura himself who becomes an object of horror. After hearing the first part of Boaventura's confession, the anonymous narrator freezes the recording, and is appalled by the monstrosity of his face:

> I paused the video, and Boaventura's mouth froze in an eccentric, death-mask grimace. His reddish eyes now emitted flashes of insanity that I hadn't noticed when we met, or that I simply didn't want to see. Frozen like that, orbiting on the screen, the eyes acquired a menacing appearance. [...] There were still fifty-five minutes left in the recording, and the Boaventura who had started it, hesitant and frightened, had been replaced by another Boaventura, whose ethical commitment to an isolated native people no longer seemed so worthy of an anthropologist.[14] (Terron, *A morte* 62; my trans.)

This moment of revelation casts Boaventura in the role of gothic villain, and his transformed appearance evokes the description of Mr. Hyde, whose deformity

is blatant but hard to pinpoint to any specific feature. The anonymous narrator acts as Boaventura's Dr. Jekyll in this scene where the computer screen turns into a mirror. Significantly, this graphic representation of the characters' condition as doubles of each other ends with the anonymous narrator's rupture with Boaventura. His reproach marks an affirmation of ethical principles as the basis for the condemnation of colonialism, and calls attention to the contradictions between the humanist respect for the integrity of the other and their instrumentalization as an object of study and exploitation. The contrast between these two attitudes is the foundation of Kant's (1997, 38) practical imperative that all beings capable of reason must be treated as an end in themselves, and never as a means to an end. The fact that the anonymous narrator tacitly applies this imperative in his condemnation of Boaventura is an indication that the novel reclaims the ethical values of enlightened humanism as an antidote for the colonial logic of exploitation.

Shortly after beginning his journey, Boaventura realizes that what he truly wanted was to erase his own identity and cut his ties with the past. This desire is connected to his fantasy of becoming a savage "with sufficient free will to decide whether a man should live or die, without obeying anyone's orders"[15] (Terron, *A morte* 48; my trans.). However, this notion of radical individual freedom is in direct opposition to the Kaajapukugi's belief system, which is fundamentally collectivistic.

The principle of collectivism is imprinted in the Kaajapukugi cosmogony and their religious practices. The consumption of the sacred drug tinsáanhán gives them access to their whole family line, in effect erasing the distinction between the past, the present and the future. They conceive time as a "river of destruction and rebirth" (Terron, *A morte* 81), in which the world is perpetually destroyed only to be created again and repeat the same events over and over. The metaphor of the river is a direct reference to Boaventura's journey up the Purus, reaffirming its allegorical meaning as a voyage through time. It is used by the young Kaajapukugi woman as a kind of curse, since she declares Boaventura will be forever confined to the river's course—which is precisely what he wanted to avoid by cutting his connection to the past. But this image is also a paradox, for it merges the idea of linear flow (a river never runs in circles) to that of endless repetition—in other words, it brings together modern and pre-modern conceptions of time.

The Kaajapukugi notion of time also challenges individual autonomy as the cornerstone of personal identity. In their drug-induced trance, they see both their ancestors and their descendants as different versions of themselves, so that the individual only exists as a link in this long chain of identification: the Kaajapukugi "saw themselves as the one and the whole. Father, son, and grandson were one simultaneous and perennial Kaajapukugi in their passage through time"[16] (Terron, *A morte* 99; my trans.). While the modern concept of the self privileges difference over communal bonds, in a process of distinction

that begins with an experience of loss,[17] for the Kaajapukugi the isolation of the individual self is replaced by an experience of plenitude.

Since Boaventura resists this integration with his ancestors, for the Kaajapukugi he is a monstrous aberration, one of the living dead, a body without a soul. In any way, he is condemned to a kind of modern *malaise* in which the price for autonomy is self-mutilation. When he clandestinely tastes tinsáanhán by himself, he is indeed visited by his ancestors in the form of frightening ghosts—an indication that his obsession with degeneration stems from the successive fissures required from generation to generation for the creation of autonomous identity. At the end of this experience, he literally severs his big toe, which he saw as an implant from his father's body into his own (Terron, *A morte* 44).

The closer he gets to overcoming his crippling sense of isolation is when he is about to enter the Kaajapukugi territory for the first time: "As we approached the riverbank, we stirred the bow into the widest stream and saw columns of smoke rising from the waters, the treetops closed over our heads, and I felt we were penetrating the navel of the planet"[18] (Terron, *A morte* 46-47; my trans.). But at precisely this moment, he is hit by an arrow shot by a Kaajapukugi, as if access to this mystical experience of transcendence were forcibly denied him. The result is the equivalent of a narcissistic wound, since the arrow hits him in his face, disfiguring him and impairing his capacity of speech. Symbolically, this also degrades his humanity, if we consider that truncated speech is traditionally associated with animalism or monstrosity. The wound also represents a blemish to his self-image as a man of knowledge, since it weakens his ability to articulate the logos.

The violence of this attack casts the Kaajapukugi back into the role of the bloodthirsty savage that is almost an obligatory feature of adventure novels. The first time Boaventura actually sees one of them, the Kaajapukugi was bashing his guide's brains all over the boat's deck. Their sacred island—the center of their world, so to speak—is a gothic labyrinth perpetually enshrouded by mists. It is also the home of the blood-sucking beetles from which they extract tinsáanhán, which means they are monsters by implication, incorporating traits of the vampire. The island is the equivalent of the secret chamber in the gothic castle, a site that concentrates its mysterious power, forever beckoning with the promise of terrible revelations.

And yet, the Kaajapukugi are the closest thing to a utopian enclave in *A morte e o meteoro*.[19] They are resolute anarchists who reject any kind of social privilege, while their collectivism is presented as an antidote for the excesses of neoliberal individualism. Their characteristic silence is clearly a form of resistance, and not a symptom of irrational primitivism, as in the representation of the savage in *Heart of Darkness*. Their viciousness only manifests itself at the entrance to their territory; symbolically, they function as the guards who bar the way into the utopian enclave, or as the warriors who protect the access to the wonderful lands of the adventure novel. A secular version of the angels at the gate of the Garden

of Eden, they maintain the integrity of the enclave and assert its exceptional character, imbuing it with the aura of the sacred.

The text, then, seems to demand from the reader a kind of double vision, holding side by side contradictory aspects of the same object. Similar contradictions abound in the novel. Some of them are motivated by the need to represent the unresolved tensions created by the culture of colonialism, as we have seen above. Others act at a symbolic level, complicating—or even arresting—the work of interpretation. Perhaps the most significant example of this is the eponymous meteor that annihilates the earth at the end of the novel. In obliterating the whole planet, it points to the hopelessness of any attempt to arrest the process of destruction already at work in the present, and forecloses the future. But if we take the Kaajapukugi cosmogony seriously, then the devastation caused by the meteor resets the clock and clears the stage for a new beginning (of course, there is the added difficulty of deciding whether each cycle of destruction and creation simply repeats the one before or introduces variations that eventually add up to an effective change). Both interpretations are valid, but they lead to completely different understandings of the novel and its political stance.

This kind of incongruity is already present in *Heart of Darkness*, a text that notoriously gives rise to disparate interpretations. Watts lists at least eight overarching paradoxes in Conrad's narrative, expressed "through explicit statement but also through ambiguous images and many-faceted symbols" (1996, 46-48). This suggests that *Heart of Darkness* furnished the template for the formal techniques employed in *A morte e o meteoro* to create the same effect of undecidability. In any case, an analogous effect can be ascribed to gothic fiction in general. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (2010) argues that the purpose of the literary gothic is less to frighten than to provide "a complex intellectual and ethical reading experience" (2-3). For Monnet, one of the pleasures offered by the gothic is that of "exercising judgment, but also of suspending it" by juxtaposition of two irreconcilable paradigms (20, 23).

In *A morte e o meteoro* undecidability is furthered by the appropriation and recombination of distinct textual traditions, and so is intimately connected to textual hybridity. As Baccolini (2004, 520) points out, recent dystopias—in particular those written from a non-hegemonic point of view—combine different genre conventions as a form of resistance against the authority of preponderant ideologies. Fictional texts are cultural signposts that point to a cluster of assumptions, principles, and beliefs that are fundamental ingredients of ideological framework. For Terron, clichés are not empty signifiers, but a manifestation of our cultural makeup. Consequently, they are an actual component of reality:

> All narratives are made up of clichés, and anyone who thinks otherwise is just being naive. And there is nothing more realistic than pop culture: it is part of people's lives, as much as the 130 sex-change operations soon to be performed by SUS.[20] (Terron 2010; my trans.)

This implies that traditional notions of what constitutes reality should be revised together with the aesthetic forms we use to represent it. It also suggests that individual authorship is an illusion, since any text is an amalgamation of collective cultural paradigms. The mechanism of textual allusion, or the kind of hybridization Baccolini associates with dystopian critique, is a way of playing these paradigms against each other so that they can be critically examined, in a process that leads to new configurations of meaning.

Hence, the use of European stereotypes to characterize a Brazilian tribe voids the dichotomy between foreign and national. In fact, if we read the episode of the kidnapping as critical rereading of José de Alencar's *Iracema*, then it can be seen as an attack against the very idea of the nation. As in Alencar's novel, an indigenous woman takes care of a vulnerable foreigner out of her own free will. They leave the young woman's tribe and have a sexual relationship. The young woman dies in a scene that reinforces her tragic nobility, leaving behind a son. But while in *Iracema* the birth of this mixed-race child marks the symbolic foundation of the nation, in *A morte e o meteoro* it signals the irreversible extinction of the Kaajapukugi. *Iracema* is appropriated here as a foundational myth that links the origins of the Brazilian people to an act of racial conciliation. *A morte e o meteoro*, on the other hand, portrays the encounter between native woman and European man as an act of violent despoliation, offering a more realistic representation of the actual conditions of sexual exploitation that characterized the process of colonization. The nation, then, is spurious because it is founded on this traumatic act of violence. In its stead, the narrative proposes other forms of group organization based on cultural affinities and shared experiences of dispossession. A particularly clear illustration of this are the Metropolitan Indians (Índios Metropolitanos), an anarchist group that congregates members of indigenous populations from all over the world, and whose appellation subverts the distinction between colony and metropolis.

However, the parallel with *Iracema* can only work as a criticism of colonialism if the Kaajapukugi are treated as an emblem of native authenticity. But as it turns out, this is a false symbol, for towards the end of the novel we learn that the Kaajapukugi were, in a way, made in China. Throughout the novel, there are scattered references to the launch of a spaceship that would carry a couple of Chinese astronauts to colonize Mars. This late effort at colonization is interrupted when radio contact with the ship is lost, probably due to electrical disturbances caused by the approach of the meteor that would soon plunge the earth into a catastrophic apocalyptic event. It is the mummified remains of one of the Chinese astronauts that Boaventura finds in the tomb at the center of the Kaajapukugi sacred island of mists. It is then revealed that the Kaajapukugi were a hybrid people formed by the last survivors of an Amazonian tribe and a smaller group of unknown origins—the descendants of the Chinese space crew, now marooned in the past. Incidentally, the miraculous drug tinsáanhán derives its name from their shipwrecked rocket, Tiantáng I—ostensibly the Chinese word

for "paradise", but also the name of the most famous whorehouse in Shanghai, as the anonymous narrator points out (Terron, *A morte* 65).

The ludicrous improbability of this series of events is matched only by the arbitrariness of the impromptu appearance of the meteor, which explodes not only the world but the narrative itself—it is *the* kind of ending that should be avoided, as anyone learns in elementary school. This is clearly a narrative that does not take itself seriously. And yet this exuberant playfulness carries some very important messages of its own. First, it is a celebration of the kind of "naïve" reading usually associated with popular fiction, of the guilty pleasure of reading "just for fun," and of the "sense of wonder" evoked by science fiction. On the other hand, when seen in relation to other textual allusions in the novel—especially those that draw attention to the connection between the adventure novel and colonialism—it functions as a reminder that no text is actually naïve. It also suggests that taking any narrative too seriously may lead to a dogmatic reading that unquestioningly accepts its presuppositions and ideological content or rejects them wholesale. A certain lack of seriousness, then, seems to be proposed here as a necessary requirement for critical interpretation, since it can point to fissures in the ideological framework of the text.

At a symbolic level, the hybrid origin of the Kaajapukugi reinforces the criticism of purity and authenticity developed throughout the novel. At the same time, the notion of a linear progression from the primitive to the modern is turned upside down when the origin becomes a consequence of the end. The juxtaposition of different cultural paradigms—in this case, Native American cosmogonies, and science fiction conventions—leads not only to a suspension of judgement between contradictory positions, but also to their fusion in a new configuration. The Kaajapukugi turn out to be a product of modernity, and the anonymous narrator explicitly relates the connection to the dead in indigenous cultures to quantum physics and the theory of relativity.

Finally, the playful appropriation of pop culture conventions in *A morte e o meteoro*, including their early manifestations in the adventure novel and the literary gothic, draws attention to the symbolic power of our fictional creations—even those that enjoy little cultural prestige. The time loop caused by the meteor impact is no less a means to subvert our traditional notion of time because it is a Sci-Fi cliché. As a confirmation of the Kaajapukugi cosmogony, it symbolically asserts the plasticity of time, drawing attention to the potential for change hidden behind the apparent stability of what we have been taught to accept as the natural order of things.

Notes

1. "The rivers, those beings that have always inhabited the worlds in different guises, suggest to me that, if there is a conceivable future, that future is ancestral, because it was already here."
2. In the original: "Hoje vejo o acontecido como o epílogo irrevogável da psicose colonial nas Américas, que eu preferia ter sido apenas mais uma mentira ditada pelos vitoriosos e não a verdade choramingada por outra derrota, agora sem dúvida definitiva."
3. "[...] árvores agonizantes em vias de serem calcinadas pelo sol."
4. "[...] um episódio da desventura dos exílios políticos (talvez a situação mais inesperada e drástica dessa história tão comprida, até mesmo absurda, uma fuga conjunta daquele complexo penitenciário continental que é a América do Sul)"
5. This is the term used by Marlow and Boaventura to refer to indigenous populations.
6. "Minha ética seria semelhante à do viajante do Túnel do Tempo: eu viajaria ao passado da humanidade, porém não iria interferir na tomada de decisões ou nos eventos, evitando assim alterar o futuro."
7. "[…] não sabia que fim dar ao casarão lotado de velharias que agora me pertencia. O sangue da família definhava e o casarão era minha herança. O cheiro das coisas devia ser o mesmo dos corpos de meus pais em decomposição."
8. "[...] terei de voltar ao passado, aos meus trinta anos de idade, e lembrar fatos que preferia ter esquecido, coisas que deviam ficar enterradas no solo arenoso das margens dos igarapés do Purus."
9. "[...] caçados com determinação pelo Estado e pelos seus agentes de extermínio: garimpeiros, madeireiros, latifundiários e seus capangas habituais, policiais, militares e governantes."
10. Cedric Watts (1996, 52-56) summarizes the main arguments articulated by critics to denounce Heart of Darkness as a reaffirmation of an imperialistic mindset. Terry Eagleton (2005, 242-246) argues that Conrad's vision of imperialism was essentially conservative and raises the possibility that Heart of Darkness was an implicit defense of British imperialism as opposed to the excesses of the Belgian colonial project.
11. "[...] as brumas leitosas assentadas sobre o barco contrastavam com as trevas na distância. [...] A vastidão aquática era extraordinária, e em muitos trechos do rio as margens se distanciavam de tal maneira que se tornavam invisíveis. [...] Graças à difusa luminosidade do sol oculto sob os rios flutuantes das nuvens que acompanhavam o leito do Purus, dias e noites passaram a se confundir, e eu já não reconhecia seus limites."
12. "Na manhã seguinte, a ilha da neblina despontou como a única coisa sólida na realidade líquida do sonho."
13. "Passei a observá-los como se fosse eu o selvagem, a partir da mata onde me escondia. Embrenhado no escuro, eu via tudo aquilo que se movia sob a luz. Em seu abrigo comum, eles encenavam miseravelmente o espetáculo da civilização, enquanto eu, mantido solto porém prisioneiro das distâncias de uma paisagem intransponível, roía raízes apodrecidas."
14. "Pausei o vídeo e a boca de Boaventura congelou num esgar excêntrico, de máscara mortuária. Seus olhos avermelhados agora emitiam lampejos de insanidade aos quais não dei atenção quando nos conhecemos, ou que eu simplesmente não quis ver. Congelados daquela maneira, em órbita na tela, os olhos adquiriram aparência ameaçadora. [...] Ainda faltavam cinquenta e cinco minutos para o final da gravação, e o Boaventura que a tinha iniciado, hesitante e assustado, tinha sido

substituído por outro Boaventura, cujo comprometimento ético com um povo nativo isolado não parecia mais tão digno de um antropólogo."

15. "[...] com suficiente livre-arbítrio para decidir se um homem devia viver ou morrer, sem obedecer a ordens de ninguém."

16. "[...] viam a si mesmos como um e como todos. O pai, o filho e o neto eram um só kaajapukugi simultâneo e perene na travessia do tempo."

17. In the beginning of Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud associates the "oceanic" feeling – a sensation of eternity, of belonging to something limitless, of complete integration with the universe – to a temporary dissolution of the self, so that it would be a manifestation of the death principle. The same notion is behind Kristeva's discussion of abjection as the repressed longing for the early state of undifferentiation between mother and infant. In modern psychoanalytical discourse, then, the self is founded on the painful separation from the mother and can only exist as a consequence of this lack. Freud, Sigmund. Civilization and Its Discontents. W. W. Norton & Company, 1989; Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Columbia UP, 1982.

18. "Próximos da margem, embicamos a proa no igarapé mais largo e vimos colunas de fumaça subindo das águas, as copas das árvores se fecharam sobre nossas cabeças e senti que penetrávamos o umbigo do planeta."

19. For an extended discussion on the role played by the enclave in the utopian imagination, see Jameson (10-21). See also Baccolini's (2004, 520) argument that contemporary dystopias assert their critical potential by including a site of resistance and opposition within the otherwise oppressive fictional world represented in their narratives. Jameson, Fredric. Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions. Verso, 2007.

20. "As narrativas são compostas de clichês, e quem pensar o contrário estará apenas sendo ingênuo. E não há nada mais realista do que a cultura pop: ela faz parte da vida das pessoas, tanto como as 130 operações de mudança de sexo a serem feitas pelo SUS em breve."

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