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“In Between Texts: Julião Sarmiento Addresses Raymond Carver”

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In this paper, I intend to engage on a necessarily brief analysis of Sarmiento’s body of work, in order to establish an interdisciplinary parallelism with Carver’s fiction. From the book *Julião Sarmiento*, organized by the Italian art critic Germano Celant and by Alexandre Melo, and published in 1997, by Assírio e Alvim, I have selected seven reproductions of the painter’s work. These will serve the purpose of illustrating the artist’s most significant themes and techniques, while contextualizing the series of fifteen paintings entitled *Tales on Dirty Realism* (1987) and dedicated to Raymond Carver. Considering the date of its production, I have chosen to concentrate on the years of 1986 (from which I shall examine two canvases) and 1987 (from which I will analyze four works, three of them coming from the above-mentioned series). To conclude, I will refer to a painting from 1991, belonging to Sarmiento’s new phase, generically known as *Pinturas Brancas* (White Paintings), in which he depurates his approach, coming closer to a “syntax of silence”.¹

Julião Sarmiento is one of the most prolific contemporary Portuguese artists, working since 1974 (the date he himself marks as the beginning of his career) in multiple languages – such as photography, Super 8 film, performance and installation. In fact, only in the eighties has he turned to painting, a more “conservative” form of expression internationally revitalized in/at? the same period, after the highly experimental decade of the seventies. All through his production the female body is a central obsession, a provocative object of desire that literally catches the eye of the spectator in a *voyeuristic* game which

¹ I am quoting from Graham Clarke’s article “Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence”, *The New American Writing: Essays on American Literature since 1970*, London, Vision Press, 1990: p. 99-122.

seeks to redefine the boundaries of the self. Indeed, *voyeurism* is a strategy that problematizes the links between signifier and referent, for it foregrounds the process of interpretation, infusing the viewer with a sense of strangeness that leads him to question some of his cultural assumptions.

The first painting we shall consider thematizes precisely this. It is titled after Michael Powell's seminal film, *Peeping Tom* (1986), and it recognizes the centrality of vision in the aesthetic experience. As it happens in many of Sarmiento's works, this piece is composed of more than one panel of interrelated but "singular" images, since they have meaning not only in the larger unity of the composition but also as separate entities. Commenting on this technique, the painter has established a parallelism with literature, stating that he intended these "fragments" to work as single chapters of a novel with their own identity.²

Curiously enough, this diptych asks to be read in a linear movement (from right to left) as it happens with written verbal language, because the image of the eye seems to have been the cause of the convulsion represented in the second canvas. By its intensity, emphasized by the framing of the white cross – a reference to the axis of the camera's lenses in the film, invested here with evident religious/sacred connotations, – the gaze has peeled the smooth surface of the painting, revealing another layer of meaning. The spectator is therefore invited to engage in a similar exercise when observing Sarmiento's work.

This is exactly the same type of exegesis that Carver's short stories demand, for the events are presented in an elliptical and inconclusive manner, forcing the reader either to search for an anterior narrative that may contextualize the characters' actions, or to invest the surfaces (the depleted words) with significance.³ The verbal exchanges that take place in most of these stories read like transcripts of an oral interaction, but the eavesdropper seems condemned to confusion, because the repetitions, the use of deictics without referent and of anaphoric vocabulary, together with the ellipsis of pieces of

² Celant (1997), p. 151.

³ The abundance of visual verbs and the constant presence of mirrors and windows points also towards the antithesis between surface/appearance and reality.

important information (implicit to those involved in the conversations) generate ambiguity. The apparent familiarity disappears to give way to what Carver has referred to as “a sense of menace.” In his essay titled “On Writing” he defends omission as a productive narrative technique, in the tradition of Hemingway’s “iceberg” approach:

What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it’s also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things.⁴

In *Descem por Ela as Mãos da Noite* (*The Hands of the Night Go Down Her*, 1987) Julião Sarmiento codifies the elliptical silence in the black square interposed between the enigmatic photograph of the female body and the deserted landscape in the second picture towards which she appears to be advancing. The fragmentation of the body is persistent in the artist’s universe and generates multiple effects: on the one hand, it emphasizes reification and ambivalence, on the other, it contributes to generalization, for the image is deprived of its face, hence of its individuating feature. Furthermore, the frozen picture strategy of the mass media, combined with the articulation of the different panels through a technique akin to cinematographic *montage*, condenses narrative suggestions (already present in the title) and accentuates the spectator’s *voyeuristic* stance.

Caught in the act, so to speak, the viewer will be faced with the imperative of deciphering the mystery of the woman’s identity, deepened by the fact that she is wearing what seems to be a robe (connoting intimacy) that veils and simultaneously reveals her body, even though she apparently is in an exterior space. The exegetic task becomes even more complex when we take into account the inferior panel, depicting the instructions for the use of chopsticks. As it frequently happens in Carver’s texts, the author’s presence is here felt through irony, since Sarmiento offers a clue to the reading of this work recurring to the familiar parallelism between sex and eating.

⁴ “On Writing”, *Fires*, New York, Vintage Books, Random House, 1989 (1983), p. 26.

While the canvas in the middle quotes the well-known *Black Painting* (1917), by Malevich, the erotic figure is reminiscent of Lucas Cranach's and Goya's nudes, which points towards a recurrent feature in Sarmiento's style – intertextuality. In 1976, the plastic artist presented the installation *D. Juan* that combined objects, photographs, entries from an illustrated encyclopedia (a strategy repeatedly used by the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth in the sixties) and excerpts from Byron's texts; in the same year, another untitled installation featured quotations from Bataille; two years later, it was Barthes' and Kleist's turn.

In the following decade the examples proliferate: David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (1989), both titles pointing directly to the sources of inspiration; or *Três Feiticeiras* (*Three Sorcerers*.) to quote a few.⁵ This last work is interesting because its relationship to the primary text is veiled and may be recognized only by "witty scholars," familiar with the following lines, superimposed on the image of one of the smaller panels – "When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning or in [*sic*] rain?"

Before focusing on the three paintings from the series *Tales on Dirty Realism*, I would still like to refer to the polyptych *Vampyr* (1986). The fragmentary nature of this composition accentuates the narrative character to be found in so many of Sarmiento's works; once again the panels have a singular identity and may be interrelated in multiple ways.⁶ In this case, the dialogue with another text is hinted at through the appropriation of one of the most well known images of the? German expressionist films - Murnau's protagonist in *Nosferatu*, itself a version of ? gothic epistolary literature.

The central panel (which is here not only cut in half, because this reproduction occupies two pages of the book and the white line marks their physical separation, but also a bit cut off; sorry but I really couldn't bring the originals!), as I was saying, the central panel is first perceived as a dark stain, on which a darker object progressively delimits itself. For those who are familiar with the

⁵ You have certainly noticed by now that I always introduce the titles of Sarmiento's works in their "original language", the fact that so many of them are in English to start with reinforces the artist's connections with the Anglo-American culture; in the nineties, with his growing internationalization, this tendency becomes more evident, especially because several of his exhibitions were organized in foreign countries only.

⁶ Referring to the strategy of the polyptychs, Sarmiento stresses that his intention was to multiply the possibilities of interpretation, creating a "work open to several readings," Celant (1997): p. 150.

film and thus possess an enlarged interpretative code, it acquires the form of a two legged, anthropomorphized coffin, the hiding place of the creature, that appears framed by a white square (suggesting a Polaroid), in the right upper corner of the painting. The standing werewolf, holding an arch, connects itself through an intratextual relation with Sarmiento's repeated representations of animals, present either through the textures of their furs, or through parts of their bodies endowed with symbolic value and sometimes attached to human forms; plus, it hints at the terrible metamorphosis responsible for the catastrophe depicted in/by? the inverted image of the human body.

The background of this last panel results from the *collage* and overlapping of several pieces of paper, apparently taken from newspapers, over which an irregular layer of white painting is spread, creating the paradoxical impression of transparency and opacity and calling for the viewer's closest inspection. Once again, the physical support of the work seems to have eroded, revealing another layer and commenting on the potentially infinite quantity of images that a limited surface may contain.

This same technique was employed in some of the works from the series *Tales on Dirty Realism*.⁷ In an interview conducted by Germano Celant, Sarmiento explains that he selected the pictures of nude women that form the backgrounds of these works from current? magazines and newspapers, "because the story [he wanted to convey] was about the unexpected."⁸

More than illustrating the stories' themes, these backgrounds (and the paintings from this series, as a matter of fact) refer to some of the rhetorical devices that structure Carver's fiction. In the first place, they dramatize the creator's voyeuristic stance, and by extension, the reader's; besides, they comment upon the contemporary reproduction of empty signifiers, hinted at by Carver not only

⁷ Dirty realism, or K-Mart realism were the terms coined to designate the American generation of writers who radically detached themselves from the postmodern experimentalism of the sixties and seventies, depicting in their texts the hardships of the growing fringe of population excluded from the materialistic promises of the American Dream. These are tales of unemployment, depression, infidelity and alcoholism, portraits of powerless figures, incapable of articulating or understanding their grief, lest of? changing the circumstances of their lives.

Since I do not wish to go into the controversy over realism, I shall consider here its broadest definition – a consensual representation of reality (or phenomenological experience), in a given cultural and historical context.

⁸ Celant (1997), p. 185.

by his use of language (as I have shown above), but also by his multiple references to television as a haunting presence in the American house. Furthermore, it can be argued that the technique applied in/to? these backgrounds points towards the exegetic practice that rebuilds the text (in the semiotic sense), configuring it as a significant whole, since the reader must “dig” under the surface (the layer of paint that covers the myriad of images) in order to look for patterns of meaning.

All these paintings contain excerpts from Carver’s texts; in the particular examples selected in this *corpus* the plastic artist chose the titles of some of his short stories. Both *Preservation* and *Menudo* are divided into two contrasting sections – the top area is covered by black paint, the rest of the canvas by white paint, which highlights the painter’s paradoxical design of showing while simultaneously hiding the background populated by cover girls. It is interesting to notice that, in this first case, Malevich’s visual signs are quoted again. When Sarmiento was questioned about the meaning of the word inscribed in this painting he stated that it paid homage to Carver’s writing, and it also referred to the need to contribute to the preservation of his predecessor’s work.⁹

In *Menudo* the effect of the black “veil” becomes more intricate, because it contains a darker image – some entangled branches, or veins, – and it covers the partial repetition of the picture of the man with the umbrella. We should notice that duplication is one of the patterns that contribute to the static quality of Carver’s narratives, since his characters not only engage in verbal repetition, but also reiterate the same gestures throughout their interactions. Finally, the strange wooden object that is depicted in the inferior portion of the painting reinforces the dichotomy between transparency and opacity and serves as a reminder that figurative art may not always be equated with immediate recognition, or, in other words, that realism is not always illustrative.

The last painting from this series that I shall be considering is entitled *Divórcio Perfeito* (*Perfect Divorce*), which is, I believe, an ironical reference to the contents of the short story title inscribed on its inferior panel. “Tell the Women We Are Going” comes from the arch-minimalist collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1982), it describes the suburban male rituals of

⁹ Celant (1997), p. 186.

drinking beer, shooting pool and talking about girls, while the women (who in due time have been told) are back home with the kids. This apparently calm scenery is brutally disrupted when the two male protagonists first chase (the metaphor of hunting is implicit) and then kill for no apparent reason two girls they have met on their way home.

Thus, Carver's portrait, sketched in white on top of the multitude of half naked women (again veiled by a transparent layer of dark paint) on the top left panel, may be related to the words underneath in two different ways. Either he is considered an anonymous speaker, trying to establish a bond with the male spectators, through the use of the inclusive second person plural pronoun; or he is recognized as the author of the short story whose title evokes the sexist discourse akin to the reified representations of the female body present in the background. Finally, the last and bigger panel of the polyptych suggests the mathematical symbol of infinity ∞ , which may be read as a tribute to the writer's everlasting name, or as a reference to the fact that the relationship among the two different genres will never change.

The last piece I chose to consider comes from a series dedicated to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, titled *Emma* (1991), who represents here the *persona* of the artist experiencing the process of creation and questioning the limits of art. The designation White Paintings (that includes the majority of Sarmiento's production since 1990) is due to the fact that the background of these canvases is covered by an irregular layer of white, over which fragmentary human figures performing ambiguous gestures are sketched.

In this new phase the stylistic approach is much sober, the chromatic spectrum is reduced to white and black; besides, the superimposition of barely perceptible sketches delineating the figures suggests movement and points towards the physical presence of the artist in the act of drawing. This particular reproduction (of which you have to imagine the background) presents a triadic relationship amongst two human figures and a book, which emphasizes literature as a privileged field of dialogue in the plastic artist's work.

The canvas seems now to be filled with silence as it happens in Carver's fiction (especially in his earlier stage) and the spectator becomes the sole locus of meaning since the author, as a source of authority, is absent. "The art that I am

more interested in is that which uses the simpler forms to get the maximum effect” these are Sarmento’s words, but they could be Carver’s.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*