

Medium	Newspaper (published in Portuguese)	Publication	Folha de S. Paulo
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Category	Article	Author	Nuno Ramos

“The Empire's Last Gala”^[1]

On March 5th I turned 60. Having not celebrated in a long time, I threw a considerable party in my backyard, from where I write this piece. It was kind of a private version of the "Baile da Ilha Fiscal". I just about avoided being the bearer of a tragic source of contamination. Pictures and videos that people still send me of everyone hugging and drinking out of the same glass seem from an entirely different era or planet. The fact I've officially entered the “elderly” category perfectly in sync with the epidemic lockdown, is the kind of irony that comes with the package. An isolated house during a pandemic does feel somewhat like a nursing home.

Nonetheless, there is a twofold apocalypse raging out there. The moment they inevitably collide, with the first (Bolsonarism) surrendering to the second (the virus), unifying in horror, never seems to come, in a permanent kidnapping of public meaning where personal motives (for instance, the “elderly” category I now belong to) loses any relevance. Furthermore is this great divide (heralded by the "Baile") here or is it yet to come? What level of our peculiar descent into hell have we reached thus far?

A constant feeling follows me in the labyrinth of my home: anger. I'm exhausted with anger. The slow relentless *naturalization of the absurd* into which Brazilian political life has been transformed (at least since the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, with a twist followed by a double somersault since the election of Bolsonaro) has finally reached the innermost of my being. It is in my body and not my mind that I feel. Under the rule and constant threat of Mrs. Macroeconomics, this Queen of Hearts that yells ‘Off With Their Heads’ to anything in her path, we are up against the wall to the point of accepting that one who wipes his nose right before extending his hand to the people, during the most violent pandemic since the Spanish Flu, is our president. In addition to Mrs. Macro there is also a strange scale that has placed this... how should we call it?... on one end, and Lula or PT [Workers Party] or the Left or populism or Moby Dick or what have you on the other; as if they could be held accountable by a single measure. What has been naturalized here is the total anomaly of one of the extremes -- Bolsonarism -- as part of the game. It is not. Therefore, it was not merely the corrupt financing of public life or tax evasion – which could have brought down a president, but not the entire democratic system itself, enthroning its worst enemy – that got us here. We were also victims of a serial- killer queen (“Off With His Head”!) that no one thought to tell was herself just another card in the deck (as did Alice and the current pandemic), and the embezzlement of an archetypal instrument of justice – an abstract scale hanging everywhere equalizing what cannot be equalized.

Now deal with it. I alternate between the viral-cosmopolitan feeling that unites us with the entire planet, and the provincial mediocrity personified by a nutcase. On the one hand, the Italian sorrow, for example, offers me shelter. Gilberto Gil singing *Volare* with his granddaughter^[2]. I belong to that. On the other hand, a nefarious face during a speech that means nothing, since it will be discredited within two hours via some sort of tweet. I am even repulsed by the facial contraction, itself authoritarian. Between pious planetary expansion and local claustrophobic contraction of rage I try to adjust my pace.

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Firstly, how should we refer to him? I don't want to honor him with the pronoun used during the elections – not *Him* – which sounds almost noble. I am from a time when a radio announcer used this same pronoun whenever Pelé got hold of the soccer ball: *Him*... So what should we call him then? Tyrant? Imbecile? Exterminator? There is a *casualty* in his path that his stabbing incident embodies better than any other episode – this it could-have-been-otherwise blurs his outlines and makes it difficult to name him. The nightmare of having him as president is still unbelievable – how to name something in which one doesn't believe?

That power is what Bolsonaro wants seems pretty obvious. After all, he has talked about re-election since his second day in office, and thought about a coup since his first, conjuring Chilean-style street scenes to promote it. But I must confess I have a hard time understanding *what he wants power for*. I can't wrap my head around it. So that unchecked capitalism can reign supreme, with the rich getting richer and the rights of the disenfranchised vanishing for good? Sure, but we must admit there are more effective and inexpensive ways of doing this. The virus itself offered him an opportunity to access groups that would have truly given him carte-blanche, imperial and reformist. But instead he chose to put all his eggs in one basket, that of his own identity group, giving up on all the rest.

To promote the return of archaic or traditional (family, religious) values? But there's nothing traditional about a military insurgent or a rape advocate, much less so in the people surrounding him. His idea of power seems to be, first and foremost, double-crossing and bullying anyone, real or imaginary enemy – or whoever crosses his path. This is how Bolsonarism understands the world – someone urgently has to suffer, loose, get beaten up. Be defamed. Killed. There is something pre- or post-political here (or, if you like, in a more anthropological sense, essentially political) – the mere capacity to attack, isolated and dysfunctional, disturbing everyone all the time, thinking only of its own replication and threatening the very plans it serves from the inside. It's hard to phrase it, to put this critter into words. Taken to the extreme, it will leave only one loser standing: the Myth himself (that's how Bolsonarists call the President), looking back like Benjamin's angel but, unlike him, laughing at the shit he's done.

I've tried (picturing him as) Hermógenes. He is no Hermógenes.^[3]

The time of the pandemic is tantamount to politics here. They are identical. Of course, in any country, there is contagion between them, but here they overlap to perfection. For it's typical of Bolsonarism to constantly get into things from the flipside, through the drain, through the fire, through making it worse and more violent. There's no hiatus, no pause, and identity in its poorest sense – remaining as is, resurfacing unchanged – is its very core. Therefore, instead of depoliticizing the virus we must, on our end, energetically politicize it. And this isn't something that should be done later, when the quarantine is over (this mirage). It is now. The most appalling struggle is happening right this moment – people are being sent to their death. These grand jerks, this combo of popular resentment and elitist sadism doesn't stop and never will. Like zombies from a B-movie they suffer from an insatiable hunger. It's up to us to stop them even as we're locked up at home. Our quarantine should not be domestic at all. It shouldn't be filled with tvseries, reading Proust, and caring for orchids – our balconies must somehow be transformed into a public arena.

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How to react to such shamelessness, which begins with referring to this fool as “Myth”? Might he be a Trickster then, one of those perverse deities, a Hermes or a Loki, who has landed in Brasília? Of course not. There ain't no “crafty wit” here – no Greek *Mêtis* – just the white light of violence shining upon the sad scene of its own creation.

The political legacy of Bolsonaro is actually not political: it's violence *stricto sensu*. His enthronement, at best, derives from the progressive increase in the murder toll -- up to 63,000 a year --, which has haunted democratic administrations for over two decades, without anything being done. It's those dead who have grown tired of us, who decided to say “fuck it” and enthroned their own executioner. In this sense, there's much more and much less to Bolsonaro than the extreme and shameless implementation of an agenda of the most perverse Right (radical loosening of labor rights, accountability and permanent abandonment of marginalized groups, left to their own devices , etc). All of this is happening, and at extremely high rates, because an opportunity like this simply couldn't be missed. But we must acknowledge that Bolsonaro also confuses this agenda, throwing away the opportunity to maximize it even further.

Up until the pandemic, I believe the country was divided into three factions: 1) Bolsonarists, for whom the entire world consists of: a) Bolsonarists, b) Communists, c) the corrupt; 2) “Naturalists,” for whom Bolsonarism would be manageable, especially if Mrs. Macroeconomics were to look kindly upon us; 3) “Catastrophists” (myself included), for whom the universal, unrelenting destruction that Bolsonarism implies can never be repaired. Though slightly dwindling, the first group remains stable no matter what the president does. The second group, since the outset of the pandemic, has been quickly migrating to the third. Something weird in the way zombies move finally seems to have caught the eye of the subjects of Queen Macro. Bolsonarism simply *does not work*. It has trouble tying its own shoes, hailing a cab, signing its name. I won't even get into the organization of *Enem*^[4]. As matter of fact its thing is *not* working, but destroying, slandering, lying. You just can't count on it.

This way it would be enough for Naturalists and Catastrophists to negotiate their versions of our recent past and tell this excrescence to go to hell – that strident fascist 20% who never manage to get into power. I admit that in the run-up to the last election, I believed this to be possible (and it wasn't). Furthermore, precisely because this excrescence has come into power, the former country is no longer available. It was profoundly and irrevocably transformed by 15 months of Bolsonarism. The mythology of twin enemies (PSDB and PT) served by a crude inbred cousin (PMDB) and struggling to deny their mutual identity no longer holds. We have lost its imperfections but also, and fundamentally , its virtues. It's because there is a *unified* legacy of the New Republic -- from Itamar down to Dilma -- that we're passively allowing ourselves to be raffled off, since no one is willing to thoroughly dispute it: SUS^[5], universal education, currency stabilization, Bolsa Família^[6], giving minorities access to higher education, empowerment of the “Sistema S”^[7], and demarcation of indigenous lands. They each face gargantuan problems, but are incredibly generous. They rely on famous or anonymous intermediary institutions with a halo of goodness that keep the country on its feet, and which Bolsonarism is carefully annihilating. There is something *communal* about this legacy, which is the very reason no one claims as theirs.

It is difficult to overcome the fatal question that irreparably divides the two groups: *how did we get to this kind of barbarity*? It's difficult to ignore the power of this expiatory act – of blaming – and simply moving forward, picking up the pieces and rebuilding the country. This is a question we'll have to answer before setting foot on any stage: should we head straight for an expiatory

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showdown (as *Ciro Gomes* does) or, in the face of a much bigger viral-political emergency, sleep with the former old enemy (but not with the current one)?

We would often listen to *Que país é este?* [*“What country is this?”*] or *Brasil, mostra a tua cara* [*“Brazil, show your face”*] on the dance floors back in the 1980s, when I was 20 years old. Now, from my quarantine backyard, the country comes to me in an exclusively distant and remote form, through the indistinct texture of an outcry bouncing off the retaining walls. It's from this place of suspension, locked up at home, that I reject the face he shows me, which he insists on showing me, with no shame whatsoever.

Something about those De Chirico paintings, with its locomotives adrift in a huge spatiality, comes to mind. The saying *“Oh, what a sweet thing perspective is!”* with which Paolo Uccello referred to the spatiality of the Renaissance, returns transformed into an empty scheme from where all movement has been all but removed, and where human steps, if rehearsed, would lose all their vigor power. It's the exact opposite of Marinetti's Futurism, that kinetic enthusiasm that, notwithstanding, leads to war. De Chirico's world is “a world without us” – it's harder for fascism to find its way in through its motionless smoke.

This echo that hits the wall, where I search for something that makes sense, will soon be upstaged by the outcry from the TV, from UOL, from rumors. That is why I know I should be proud of what I don't know, and this statement is more precious to me than its Socratic truism. Even under an emergency regimen, we should have patience with our struggle in fathoming things. Those who interpret Brazil nowadays, and they do it with unprecedented stupidity, are the zombies themselves. They have an explanation for everything. The Virginia sniper^[8] manipulates the Brazil-code, which serves as backdrop to all kinds of brutality, better than anyone. There's a reverse Maoism in these people, starting everything from scratch. Since, for them, reversing is enough. They leech on a reverse, yet symmetrical, creationless parasitism. *Slavery was good to enslaved peoples*^[9], for example. We must, in contrast, honor a certain silence, take these treasures, amulets of linguistic empathy seriously: *look, don't you think that maybe...* etc. Indigenous people in North America referred to white people as an animal species that used speech in an immoderate fashion. Bolsonarists are the heirs of these rambunctious invaders. Today, stridency is Bolsonaristic.

If anything our culture has “captured” Bolsonarism and its offshoots, it would be the Cinema Marginal movement (Brazilian Underground Cinema), 50 years ago, in the late 60s and early 70s – a period of our film history that was, however, essentially strident. The lack of an explicitly political perspective (unlike its founding father, Glauber Rocha); consumerism as waste, practically garbage; the tension and length of each take, as if the film would end every time a take came to an end; the almost documentary coincidence of the length of the take and the time span of reality; violence as a generic form of film – all of this coming together in a body of unmistakable resistance.

If the characters spin over and over in endless loquacity it's because the common political symbolic ground, or whatever it is, crumbled beneath their feet with the coup within the coup (AI-5)^[10], as well as with the “Economic Miracle”^[11]. They yell their own names so as not to crumble before our eyes. Caught in a self-circuit of gestures, wardrobes and slogans, they reach a kind of *continuity* that was historically lacking. “I failed... I had to make a mess out of it”; “The solution for Brazil is termination, complete termination,” says the Red Light Bandit. Everything

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was betrayed, and even in a mood of national megalomania (with Mrs. Macroeconomics howling: "It's a miracle! It's a miracle!"). Killing the family (*Matou a família e foi ao cinema* / "Killed the Family and Went to the Movies"); sharing a woman (*A mulher de todos* / "The Woman of Everyone"); merging consumerism and crime (*O bandido da luz vermelha* / "The Red Light Bandit"); torturing oneself (*Hitler no Terceiro Mundo* / "3rd World Hitler") – all values were examined, ravaged, parodied, punctured with a knife and covered in lots and lots of blood.

These are movies that, in this way, reflect the turn of the decade for what it really was: a (seductive) sham. From this crack, Brazilian underground cinema released its combined energy, overcoming contradictions between high and low culture, the feminine and the masculine, the profound and the superficial, reckless and political, on different terms from those of Tropicalismo. On terms that were... non-negotiable. This is the tonicity that returns to us now. How do we portray this flock of vultures, or even act before them? These films state: it's through this crack only, under the terms of our own contract, that reality may someday reward us. With Luiz Gonzaga^[12], for example, singing "Boca de forno" from the hilltops of the hood (*Sem essa, aranha* / "No way, Aranha," 1970) in an endless travelling shot – has Brazilian Cinema ever filmed such royalty^[13] and joy?

But I digress while in evoking Brazilian Underground Cinema. Perhaps because there is something paradoxically reassuring in this evocation: from its perspective, the apocalypse had already been ushered in. There was a "negative" ground before them, laid by the AI-5, the deepest pit from the living hell that was 1964, and by the "Economic Miracle", this tempter of the damned. What about us? Have we hit rock bottom yet? Well, to make a beautiful motto by Arnaldo Antunes^[14] just a little bit gloomier, reality resists, indeed, but on the other side too. How far will Bolsonarism go?

In the case of the first apocalypse, the pandemic, there are some fixed conditions that set the scene – social distancing, the death toll, etc. But what can be said of our second one, exclusive and private? Will tanks occupy the streets? Will there be an impeachment? Will we see F-10s flying full speed, firing mock and real guns at the buildings of Higienópolis? Gravediggers on strike? Militiamen enforcing the quarantine? Are we in the middle of, ahead or behind of our destiny?

I read the following question online: *How does a fascist lie?*

Well, he doesn't lie – he *believes*. He denies what he says and accuses us of having said it for him. He creates an echo chamber where the energy of what he said, from his verbal "act", is immediately lost. And it's in this very loss that he is invested. A fascist doesn't employ grammar in lying, not out of ignorance (making grammatical mistakes is never a problem), but because he needs a linguistic diversion that verges on the unintelligible and in which, though the meaning of what he says is clear (for example, "attempting a coup"), the opposite will also be implied, as a seemingly meaningless side comment, which can always be retrieved if necessary. Worse than deceit, the fascist lie is a case of cowardice.

I remember an excerpt from a famous essay by Lévi-Strauss ("Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss") in which he states that language was born all at once and for this reason there would forever be a surplus of Signifiers over Signifieds (more possibilities of signification than actually acquired signifieds); in a "disability of all finite thoughts but also the surety of all art, all poetry,

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every mythic and aesthetic invention.” The fascist lie is the opposite of this. It is the imprisonment of this signifier within a chamber where signifieds repeat themselves over and over, like birds hitting the glass, until it is exhausted, in shock.

There's a telluric mythical character who spans different cultures, the “anus-less dwarf” (Lévi-Strauss, *The Jealous Potter*) – a kind of titan of retention. Defecating is, to a certain extent, a separation from oneself, and this is the problem that this character illustrates. Although a release of the grotesque, the energy of Bolsonarism comes from this same place. Because, as the comparison with Brazilian underground Cinema shows, this tawdry parade conceals its flip side. It came into the world under some veneer of authority to retain, to imprison, to contain. The fact that Bolsonaro never showed his blood after he was stabbed^[15], but instead his gut waste, is proof of this self-identification. By publicly revealing the matter he's made of, through a colostomy bag, thus fleeing TV debates (some kind of, say, Logos), Bolsonaro asserted himself throughout the country. His stabbing brought to light what couldn't be excreted because of the lack of an anus. Not the red blood of martyrs, but the brown of intestinal waste. Bolsonaro is an anus-less dwarf.

Sit down and bargain
 All you like, grizzled old foxes.
 We'll wall you up in a splendid palace
 With food, wine, good beds and a good fire
 (...)
 But outside in the cold we will be waiting for you,
 The army of those who died in vain,
 We of the Marne, of Montecassino,
 Treblinka, Dresden and Hiroshima.
 (...)
 Heaven help you if you come out disagreeing:
 You'll be clutched tight in our embrace.
 We are invincible because we are the conquered,
 Invulnerable because already dead;
 We laugh at your missiles.
 Sit down and bargain
 Until your tongues are dry.
 If the havoc and the shame continue
 We'll drown you in our putrefaction.

The poem was written by Primo Levi (and translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann in *Collected Poems*, Faber & Faber, 1992). In the face of what seems to be a political bargaining (a nuclear weapon limitation treaty?), Levi calls on the dead. They are the ones who offer the negotiators a bed, food, heat. The poem's premise is that the living, in this case the politicians, are entirely in their hands. It is those who are “invincible because (...) conquered / Invulnerable because already dead” that deal the cards. But, if anything goes wrong, beware of us... you'll be crushed by our embrace.

The time has come for Brazil to call on its dead. Not the most famous, the role models, the saints, the historical figures, those whose biographies are honored in newspapers, in street names. Involuntarily, these – bronze statues on stone plinths – already belong to the thread of horrors that brought us here.

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We need the anonymous, recently dead, sent by their president to hospitals with no beds to die, drenched on a stretcher. We need every child taken by a stray bullet to whom no one bothered to explain the meaning of the word “stray.” We need every little head in official crosshairs. We need those killed for futile reasons – by a stranger, a neighbor, a traffic-jam rival, a former friend, a relative, someone for whom doing this seemed so “natural.” The banality we’ve reached thus far is not that of evil, but of death itself. We need the little indigenous girl contaminated by the virus that the preacher brought in with the bible. And if we don't behave accordingly, if we don't do what we're supposed to (and we definitely are not), then bring on the fetid embrace of these people.

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- [1] The Empire's Last Gala was a lavish party that took place in Rio de Janeiro on Fiscal Island on November 9, 1889, to celebrate and reassert the strength of the Brazilian Empire – nonetheless abolished just six days later, with the proclamation of the First Brazilian Republic.
 - [2] In a show of support during the tragedy in Italy, singer-songwriter Gilberto Gil and his granddaughter performed Domenico Modugno and Franco Migliacci's “Volare” in a video that went viral on social media.
 - [3] A character from the novel “The Devil to Pay in the Backlands” by Guimarães Rosa (1956).
 - [4] Enem is the Brazilian equivalent of the SATs. The Bolsonaro administration's organization of the test in the year 2019 was rife with blatant errors.
 - [5] SUS – Sistema Único de Saúde, Brazil's national health system, created by the 1988 Constitution. It guarantees the entire population the right to health care access.
 - [6] Social welfare program of direct income transfers for families in extreme poverty.
 - [7] Sistema S is a body of institutions which provide professional training and access to leisure and culture for trade workers and the population in general.
 - [8] Reference to Olavo de Carvalho, who lives in Virginia, USA, and is often photographed wearing a hunting vest. He is the main ideologue of Bolsonarism.
 - [9] This appalling comment came from the current president of Fundação Palmares, founded in 1988 to fight racism and reassert the rights and history of ethnicities of African ancestry.
 - [10] Ato Institucional Número 5 (Institutional Act Number 5, or AI-5) was issued by military president Costa e Silva on December 13, 1968, resulting in the arrest of congressmen and the suspension of constitutional guarantees. The practice of torturing political prisoners was thus instituted.
 - [11] 1969 – 1973, a time of increased economic growth (and the concentration of wealth) during the Military Dictatorship.
 - [12] T.N.: Singer-songwriter who is considered “The King of Baião” in Brazil, “baião” being a Northeastern Brazilian music genre
 - [13] T.N.: In the original article the author plays with the word “realeza” here, since in Portuguese it may mean both “royalty” and “realness.”
 - [14] Singer, songwriter and poet. Founding member of the bands “Titãs” and “Tribalistas.”
 - [15] Bolsonaro was stabbed during a campaign rally in Juiz de Fora on September 6, 2018 by Adélio Bispo de Oliveira, now interned in a psychiatric hospital. The convalescence that stemmed from this attack spared him from the series of Presidential Debates preceding the elections.