

Karl Erik Schøllhammer (2022) *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction*. Anthem Press: London, 132 pp. (ISBN 978-1-83998-540-9). Paperback.

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The Danish-Brazilian Karl Erik Schøllhammer, professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, has established himself as a key figure among Brazilianists in contemporary Brazilian literature. His new book, *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction*, published by Anthem Press, brings together some of his recent works. These deal with topics such as literary post-autonomy, self-fiction and the publishing market, among others, all converging around the notion of contemporaneity.

Divided into eight chapters and a preface, *Affect and Realism* moves as a parable: it begins with an analysis of the contemporary in Brazilian literature — and its unresolved dialogue with ghosts of the past, such as the Military Dictatorship —, and ends, as the title of the final chapter itself proposes, with a “Farewell to the Contemporary!”. A parable that perhaps can be thought of as analogous to the political and social scenario of present-day Brazil, in which an old authoritarianism reappears in new guises. Schøllhammer leaves no loose ends; he proposes an in-depth overview of literary production in Brazil today, and that is what he delivers. The

second chapter, for example, focuses on the issue of realism and post-realism, while the third, still in line with the notion of realism, explores the idea of post-autonomy and everyday life. The fourth chapter investigates the influence of the market on literature, through works by authors such as Paulo Coelho and Daniel Galera, while the fifth thinks about the return of the “I” in writing. Finally, the sixth chapter deals with criticism in the periphery, while the seventh revisits theoretical notions such as the “sensible” and the “sublime”.

As the name suggests, *Affect and Realism* works on a simple but effective hypothesis: that the relationship between literature and the real — in particular between literature and the politics of the real — is symbiotic. The recent rise of the extreme right in Brazil, for example, has contributed to the formation of a literature concerned with socio-political issues, in an aesthetic attempt to make peace with a past that has never been overcome. As Schøllhammer (2022, p. vii) notes, understanding the contemporary of a nation is essential to understanding literature and vice versa. Affections overlap with realism, and both are manifested in literature.

Affections and realism are manifested in a trend that Schøllhammer (*ibid*, p. 07) calls traumaphilia. As he suggests, the contemporary is no longer defined by specific generations or periods (examples: modernism, the 1945 generation, etc.), but by aesthetic manifestations intrinsically linked to reality. In a nation like Brazil, which has never made peace with its authoritarian past, the trauma is omnipresent. A fiction, therefore, that drinks directly from the real and its related affections, manifests itself

in trends such as self-fiction: “In a way, trauma has become chic, has turned into a cover story for culture magazines, and its enormous visibility in the current media expresses a banalization of suffering” (ibid, p. 08).

The intrinsic relationship between the real and the literary in Brazilian literature is obviously not new. One recalls, as the author himself does, the so-called “postmodern trend” of the 1980s, which employed a kind of aesthetic revisionism of key historical moments. *Agosto*, by Rubem Fonseca, for example, re-edits the suicide of Getúlio Vargas, while *Boca do inferno*, by Ana Miranda, has the baroque poet Gregório de Matos as its protagonist. However, postmodernism was a trend that departed from collective elements – historical fragments, points of public interest – to centre the individual, contributing to the tendency of contemporary Brazilian fiction to be thought of as egocentric. At the very least, self-centred, as the author of the postmodern often took on the leading role of the plot, which revolves around his or her traumas, pains, passions, aspirations and desires (ibid, p. 11).

The shift between trends does not only imply content, but also form. As Schøllhammer points out, in a process that gradually intensifies after the 1980's, the colloquial comes to be valued over discursive embellishments. In an increasingly particularised and self-centred literature, the blurred boundaries between speech and writing help the author to transcend reality: “a voice has appeared, often in the first person, which Expresses itself in simple, everyday, colloquial language, distant from the experimentation with the expressive boundaries of language” (ibid, p. 31). For

Schøllhammer, this type of language not only blurs these aforementioned boundaries, but also brings the reader closer to the author (*idem*).

Nonetheless, contemporary Brazilian literature seems unable to break through the barriers of the bestseller list. Even widely sold authors like Patrícia Melo do not reach the international prestige of writers like Dan Brown. The literary market is therefore constantly forced to innovate and rebuild in order to reach new readers, such as the *Amores Expressos* (Express Loves) project, which took seventeen writers to reside in seventeen different cities across the world under the condition that they would develop novels. As shown by data collected by Schøllhammer (*ibid*, p. 63), fictional literature occupies only 18.1% of the book market, a marginalisation that is reflected in the difficulty of professionalising the writer, who is often forced to carry out another parallel activity to support himself.

In this scenario, it is not surprising that the last chapter is precisely a farewell to the contemporary, as the title itself suggests. The recent escalation of authoritarianism in Brazil, with Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power in 2018 executive elections, has placed the country on the infamous list of far-right authoritarian governments across the world. The 2022 elections have, at least for the time being, managed to partly reverse this situation. Traumophilia and the writing of the self spreads as Bolsonarism becomes, itself, a piece of fiction. *Essa gente*, by Chico Buarque (2019), which was recently awarded the Camões Prize, and *A nova ordem*, by Bernardo

Kucinski (2019), are two examples of works created in the heat of the moment, launched in the first year of the Bolsonaro government.

It is worth noting the significant participation of Kucinski in the growth of testimonial literature, as Schøllhammer points out. It is with *K.*, published in 2016, that the author begins his meteoric literary career. It is no coincidence that it is a work of testimonial self-fiction in which the author-narrator's father embarks on a search for his disappeared daughter during the dictatorship. Therefore, in *K.*, we have the synthesis of the main elements of contemporary Brazilian prose underlined by Schøllhammer: the amalgamation of politics and literature, testimony, self-fiction, affect, and historical realism, all simultaneously. Affection and realism, as Schøllhammer shows, spreads through the air in these new proses. *A nova ordem*, for example, brings a dystopia that mixes Bolsonarism with military dictatorship, projecting a kind of Brazilian version of totalitarianism. *Essa gente* is more subtle, portraying Bolsonarism as a great shadow that permeates the entire book, present in the relationship between the characters, as well as in their political moods. The latter is mentioned in the conclusion of *Affect and realism* as an example of the weakening boundaries between reality and fiction, in particular because of Buarque's intention to produce an effect of *simultaneity*, as if the reader were reading events in real time. As Kucinski (2016, p. 08, own translation) says in another of his books, *K.*, "everything here is invention, but almost everything happened"; or, for Schøllhammer (2022, p. 114), "Everything is fiction and everything is real". Politics and literature, often so

closely related, merge in contemporary Brazilian prose, reopening poorly healed wounds.

It is also interesting to note the comprehensive perspective with which Schøllhammer approaches the subject. Instead of focusing on fragments of literature, he is concerned with analysing it in a panoramic way, despite the generalisation he assumes in some fragments. While authors like Eliane Robert Moraes, in *O corpo desvelado*, or Vera Lúcia Follain de Figueiredo, in *A ficção equilibrista*, focus on specific themes within national literature, such as the erotic or violence, Schøllhammer seeks to have a broader view in order to capture trends as a whole. However, it is pertinent to highlight that both methods are essential and find their own space.

Schøllhammer's book is essential not only for any researcher of contemporary Brazilian literature, but for anyone who wants to understand Brazil today. As the author himself points out in the conclusion: how could a country that until then experienced an unprecedented rise in its economy and democracy, go through such a democratic recession in such a short period of time? The author's reflections, even if they do not exhaust the question, help us to at least partly perceive the role of literature in this political-social scenario.

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