



Dystopian and Apocalyptic Gothic

O gótico distópico e apocalíptico

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Resumo: Este artigo explora o surgimento da ficção distópica e apocalíptica no Brasil contemporâneo, particularmente em resposta à pandemia de COVID-19 e ao clima político sob Jair Bolsonaro. A análise destaca o uso de tropos góticos nessas narrativas, caracterizados pelo foco em decadência, ruína e o retorno do passado. Distopias brasileiras frequentemente retratam uma nação em estado de dissolução constante, assombrada por sua história colonial e lutando com crises sociais e ambientais. Essas narrativas desafiam a ideia de progresso e questionam a validade de mitos nacionais, muitas vezes retratando um futuro sombrio onde o passado se impõe implacavelmente no presente. O artigo também enfatiza o papel da incerteza epistemológica e da crise de julgamento nessa literatura. O embaçamento da realidade e da ilusão, característico da ficção gótica, reflete ansiedades sobre o lugar do Brasil na modernidade ocidental e a inadequação das narrativas existentes para compreender e abordar as complexidades da realidade nacional. Em última análise, essas narrativas distópicas e apocalípticas oferecem uma perspectiva crítica sobre a história e a sociedade brasileiras, destacando o impacto duradouro do colonialismo e a necessidade urgente de justiça social e ambiental.

Palavras-chave: distopia; contemporaneidade; literatura brasileira.

Abstract: This article explores the rise of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction in contemporary Brazil, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the political climate under Jair Bolsonaro. The analysis highlights the use of gothic tropes in these narratives, characterized by a focus on decay, ruin, and the return of the past. Brazilian dystopias often depict a nation in a state of constant dissolution, haunted by its colonial history and grappling with social and environmental crises. These narratives challenge the idea of progress and question the validity of national myths, often portraying a bleak future where the past relentlessly intrudes upon the present. The article also emphasizes the role of epistemological uncertainty and the crisis of

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judgment in this literature. The blurring of reality and illusion, characteristic of gothic fiction, reflects anxieties about Brazil's place within Western modernity and the inadequacy of existing narratives to understand and address the nation's complex realities. Ultimately, these dystopian and apocalyptic narratives offer a critical perspective on Brazilian history and society, highlighting the enduring impact of colonialism and the urgent need for social and environmental justice.

Keywords: dystopia; contemporary times; Brazilian literature.

*porque exumar os fósseis
cavar sulcos na memória
para encontrar terra sobre terra
ossos sobre ossos
uma história que germina
entre os dentes
Prisca Agustoni, “O gosto dos metais”*

*Este país te mata lentamente
País que tu chamaste e não responde
País que tu nomeias e não nasce
Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, “Camões e a tença”*

“The end of the world is right behind the door, but he doesn’t know that yet.”² This is the opening line of Ana Paula Maia’s apocalyptic novel, *De cada quinhentos uma alma* (2021). Despite its formal simplicity, it encapsulates the dominant mood of the novel and raises complex issues concerning the representation of the end of the world in contemporary Brazilian literature. In the last few years there has been a boom of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction in Brazil – 2021 alone saw the publication of a significant number of novels and short-story collections related to the two genres, including Bernardo Carvalho’s *O último gozo do mundo*, Daniel Galera’s *O deus das avencas*, Natalia Borges Polessó’s *A extinção das abelhas*, Bruno Ribeiro’s *Porco de raça*, Joca Reiners Terron’s

² In the original: “O fim do mundo está do outro lado da porta, mas isso ele ainda não sabe.” All passages in Portuguese quoted in this paper have been translated by me.



O riso dos ratos, and Paulliny Tort's *Erva brava*, besides the already mentioned *De cada quinhentos uma alma*.³ To a large extent, this is a reaction to the covid-19 pandemic and the authoritarian turn in Brazilian politics marked by the presidential election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. On the other hand, most of these narratives allude not only to their immediate context, but also to broader cultural traits and historical processes.

The first line of *A cada quinhentos uma alma*, with its mixed tone of immediacy and expectation, conveys some of the terms in which dystopian and apocalyptic tropes are activated in contemporary Brazilian fiction. The image of the door that opens to the end of the world places the apocalypse in the very near future – the door is still closed, but it can easily turn on its hinges. However, in spatializing this transition, it implies that the apocalypse is already there, waiting in the next room: a change of perspective is all it takes to realize this. In this case, opening the door means the removal of an obstacle to vision, the acknowledgement that reality is already in a process of disintegration.

The instantiation in fictional form of a nightmarishly degraded world is, of course, the purpose of all dystopian and apocalyptic narratives, which could be grouped under the broader term of negative predictive fictions (SASSE, 2020, p. 186). However, as Júlio França (2016, p. 2493) argues, the manifestation of a disenchanting view of the world through highly aestheticized, symbolic, and conventionalized artistic expressions is a defining characteristic of the gothic. This reveals the deep connections between negative predictive fictions and the gothic tradition, from which they are largely derived⁴ – especially if we take into account the importance of texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H. G. Well's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* for the consolidation of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction. Gothic poetics continues to influence the production of negative predictive fiction today, where it plays a structural role. The main conventional features that França (2016, p. 2493) identifies as defining elements of the

³ Not to mention Lucas Mota's dystopian novel *Olhos de Pixel*, winner of the prestigious Jabuti prize for the category of entertainment fiction in 2022 (the prize awards books published in the previous year). In 2021, the Jabuti for entertainment fiction went to *Corpos secos*, an apocalyptic narrative (actually a zombie story), written in collaboration by Luisa Geisler, Marcelo Ferroni, Natalia Borges Polesso and Samir Machado de Machado.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the relation between the gothic and negative predictive fictions, see Schäfer (1979) and Cardoso (2021).



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gothic – the *locus horribilis*, the monstrous character and the return of the past to haunt the present – are also prominent aspects dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, although in a modified form: the *locus horribilis* is no longer a carefully delimited enclave (such as a medieval monastery or a labyrinthic castle), encompassing now the social or the natural world as a whole; monstrous characters manifest themselves as symbolic representatives of oppressive forces, as in the figure of the dictator, or as the dominant party and the social structure itself; finally, the fictional worlds materialized in these texts are always haunted by their past – actually the referential present, of which the imaginary future is a distorted projection (HILÁRIO, 2013; TALLY JR., 2019; CARDOSO, 2021).

Not surprisingly, contemporary Brazilian dystopias and apocalyptic narratives make extensive use of gothic tropes and imagery in their description of negative spaces:

In the beginning there was chaos and urgency; then came the weeks of fear, slowly sinking into a moribund silence; now peace reigns in the dead city. From the window of his hospital room, Mateus looks at São Paulo, thinking that, deep down, the city had been built to become a ruin. There is beauty in that.⁵ (GEISLER; FERRONI; POLESSO; MACHADO, 2020, p.7)

The opening lines of *Corpos secos* turn the Biblical account of creation into the inception of the end, invoking the image of the ruin not only as the inevitable destiny of the city of São Paulo, but also as its true purpose. In this description where the end is projected back to the beginning, the use of a vocabulary associated with death turns São Paulo into a corpse and into a spectral image of itself. Marcia Tiburi's dystopian *Sob os pés, meu corpo inteiro* (2018) is also dominated by the image of death – significantly, the starting point of the novel and of the main character's attempt to come to terms with her past is a cemetery – so that São Paulo is at the same time a moribund city and a labyrinth: “Before me, the city oppressed between endless walls is a labyrinth from which escape is impossible, unless it is to enter another labyrinth”⁶ (TIBURI, 2018, p. 142). Moreover, many of the similes employed in the novel derive from the gothic tradition, so that

⁵ “No princípio era o caos e a urgência; vieram então as semanas do medo, mergulhando aos poucos num silêncio moribundo; reina agora a paz na cidade morta. Da janela de seu quarto no hospital, Mateus olha São Paulo pensando que, no fundo, a cidade foi feita para se tornar ruína. Há beleza nisso.”

⁶ “À frente, a cidade opressa entre paredes infinitas é um labirinto do qual não se pode fugir senão para entrar em outro.”



revisiting the past is like “going back to a moldy archive, like opening a tomb and staring at the Hipocratic face of history”, while things that remain in the past, that “have disappeared and died because they have disappeared, return more alive than ever because whatever is in the past is never exactly dead” (TIBURI, 2018, p. 116, 137).⁷

These passages show how the gothic is an important rhetorical device in Brazilian dystopias e apocalyptic narratives, permeating their linguistic structure and playing a significant role in shaping their oppressive atmosphere. Part of the rhetorical effect of the gothic is to mark as objects of horror those elements that are the target of dystopian criticism, either because they are seen as a threat to the integrity of the social structure or because they are a manifestation of vaster environmental crises.⁸ But more than delimiting its objects, the gothic also structures the terms in which this criticism is conducted; in that sense, more than a rhetorical device, the gothic is a constitutive element of the worldview expressed by these narratives, helping shape their conception of history, their vision of the nation, and the functions they ascribe to fiction itself. In what follows, I will discuss in more detail the symbolic implications of the appropriation of gothic poetics by contemporary Brazilian narratives, paying special attention to the way they reveal a particular notion of history and try to work through specific anxieties about the image of the nation as an artificial construct whose validity is questioned as a foundational myth. Hopefully, in doing this, my analysis will also point to some ways Brazilian dystopian and apocalyptic fiction departs from the more hegemonic anglophone tradition.

The use of a gothic rhetoric associated with death and decay already points to a first departure. In Brazilian dystopias, the social fabric is usually unstable, and even when strong state apparatuses are present, they fail to impose a reliable sense of order. These are, then, dystopias of dissolution, virtually undistinguishable from the apocalyptic. In Ignácio de Loyola Brandão’s *Desta terra nada vai sobrar, a não ser o vento que sopra sobre ela* (2018) the national territory gets literally fragmented into small pieces of land

⁷ “[...] voltar a um arquivo cheio de mofo, como abrir um túmulo e olhar para a face hipocrática da história.”

⁸ For a characterization of the gothic as rhetorical effect, see Sá (2010, p. 19-20), who also calls attention to the use of gothic tropes in José de Alencar’s *O Guarani* as part of his effort to consolidate a national identity in the decades following Brazil’s political emancipation in 1822. As Sá points out, Alencar uses these tropes to delineate what was to be excluded from the desired image of the nation.



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floating on the Atlantic, while in Daniel Galera's novella "Tóquio" (2021) the relatively functional center of São Paulo coexists with the stark apocalyptic landscape that extends beyond its walls. The contrast between a self-enclosed protected zone and the chaos that prevails outside is a common feature of anglophone dystopian fiction, but in placing this visit to a degraded periphery in the last pages of "Tóquio", Galera symbolically reinforces the inexorable march towards the apocalypse that characterizes the society portrayed in the novella, as becomes obvious in the naked brutality of its concluding lines: "Near the gate that would open once my chip were scanned, a small pack of dogs fed on a woman's cadaver, while beside them, not very far, just a few meters away, a woman fed on the cadaver of a dog" (GALERA, 2021, p. 168-169).⁹ While functioning as a moment of revelation for the main character, who is now faced with the full extent of his own privilege, this horrifying tableau inscribes the whole of the social body in the category of the monstrous – a kind of indictment that becomes particularly clear if we consider that this last episode of the narrative reproduces the actual contrast between the center of São Paulo and its impoverished periphery.

Post-apocalyptic narratives describe the aftermath of a world-ending event in which most, if not all, social and political institutions are dissolved. In doing that, they recreate a state of nature from which it is possible to forge a new social contract to either reestablish preexisting social organizations or found new forms of community. Even in their most commercial manifestations, these narratives propose a kind of thought experiment in which it is possible to imagine the conditions under which the social contract is shaped:

The conditions from which the postapocalyptic account starts over is a kind of created state of nature from which and out of which we can think anew about where we are going if "we'll not go home again." Starting itself is the premise behind the social contract thinkers' imaginings about the state of nature. The "starting" of the state of nature theorists is always a backward looking justification for the present. Postapocalyptic fiction, on the other hand, can be a forward looking imagination of what might be (both as a warning and as a utopian impulse). (CURTIS, 2010, p. 4)

⁹ "Já bem perto do portão que se abriria com a leitura do meu chip, uma pequena matilha de cães se alimentava do cadáver de uma mulher, enquanto ao lado, não muito distante, a apenas alguns metros, uma mulher se alimentava do cadáver de um cão."



In contemporary Brazilian dystopias and apocalyptic fiction, however, there is little hope for the creation of a new social organization, and the idea of the social contract is virtually absent.¹⁰ Where the narrative does not conclude in a final, annihilating cataclysm, as in Joca Reiners Terron's *A morte e o metero* (2019), the process of decay and social unraveling continues with no end in sight. Rather than offering a new starting point, the apocalypse reproduces in more dramatic form the conditions that put it into motion in the first place. A sense of rupture is still present, but not as a radical transformation that unleashes the potential for change; instead, what these narratives stress in the catastrophic event is its violence and destructive power, which reveal – or concentrate – the tensions and contradictions inherent to social relations from the beginning. As in the last lines of “Tóquio” quoted above, the apocalypse is essentially gothic because it projects the shadow of its own monstrosity over the social body itself, while asserting itself as the ultimate manifestation of perverse social tensions that shaped the nation from the beginning.

Even though still located in the future, the apocalyptic event in contemporary Brazilian fiction is not future oriented, as its anglophone counterparts: it introduces a more complex temporality, in which the ghostly return of the past plays an essential part. While floating on one of the fragments of land that remain after the disintegration of the country, the protagonist of *Desta terra nada vai sobrar, a não ser o vento que sopra ela* meets Pedro Álvares Cabral, still on his voyage to take possession of the Brazilian territory. Thus, the dissolution of the end is brought into contact with the symbolic origins of the nation, as if these two moments, separated by more than five hundred years, were in fact indistinguishable. As in the opening lines of *Corpos secos*, the end is already contained in the beginning, which returns as a kind of spectral presence.

This process of conflation between the past and the present is the guiding principle of Terron's *O riso dos ratos* (2021), where the cataclysmic event of an unexplained epidemic (unexplained because a highly conventional narrative device, although also a

¹⁰ An exception is “Bugônia”, the novella that follows “Tóquio” in Daniel Galera's collection *O deus das avencas* (2021), where an equivalent of the social contract is established between a radically new kind of community and nature itself.



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reflection of the covid-19 pandemic) ushers in a reenactment of Brazilian history played in reverse, beginning with the period of industrialization and ending with the protagonist's voyage away from the country on a slave ship. The degeneration of the city (and once again this city is São Paulo) is, then, a regression through time, suggesting that the most modern – and wealthiest – city in Brazil is not only a site of oppressive social inequality, but also derives its prosperity from the exploitation of slave labor in the past – for most of the novel, it is divided into large plantations run by slaves, while the ironically named Futurama supermarket (one of the symbolic centers of the narrative) is turned into a slave market. Gothic techniques of estrangement, noticeable in the dreamlike quality of the ghostly return of the past, convey a sense of alienation from society and from the history of the nation, while the protagonist is forced into a recognition of his involvement in this process by being ascribed different social roles – but usually in a subaltern position – as the narrative progresses.

Towards the end of the novel, when the nameless protagonist is sold to a new master and is about to be sent overseas (reversing the usual slave trade route in colonial Brazil), he wanders through a transformed landscape from São Paulo to the coast, in yet another reversal of the process of colonization from the coast to the interior:

Through the fog it was possible to see that, beyond the boundaries traced by the rivers, the city lied in a heap of ruins. The woods had spread over the rubble from a great park whose name, despite all his efforts, he couldn't recall. As they passed by the monument that remained there, although eroded by the weather – an enormous statue in honor of the leaders and founders of the city –, he may have been the only one who noticed that their procession mimicked the monument: mounted men bearing guns led other men, in chains, traveling in its shadow.¹¹ (TERRON, 2021, p. 162)

The reference here is to the Monumento às Bandeiras in Ibirapuera park, built in homage to the *bandeirantes*, the first Portuguese explorers who penetrated the continent mainly in search of precious metals, expanding the Brazilian territory beyond the

¹¹ “A cerração permitia ver que, para além do perímetro delimitado pelos rios, a cidade se amontoava em ruínas. A mata encobriu o entulho a partir de um grande parque cujo nome, mesmo com esforço, não conseguiu lembrar. Ao ultrapassarem o monumento que persistia ali, ainda que carcomido pela erosão, uma estátua enorme em homenagem aos próceres e fundadores da cidade, talvez tenha sido o único a perceber que o séquito imitava o monumento: em montarias, homens armados conduziam outros homens, acorrentados, percorrendo sua sombra.”



Tordesilhas treaty, which split South America between Portugal and Spain in 1494, only a couple of years after Columbus' voyage to the New World. The gothic tropes of the fog and of the ruins set the tone for the rest of the passage, where the remembrance of the past is counterbalanced by the forgetfulness of the protagonist, who is unable to recall the name of one the visual trademarks of the city of São Paulo. In this rereading of the past, the Monumento às Bandeiras becomes a sinister gothic ruin in its own right, and is turned from an emblem of national pride into the symbol of the violent process of colonization. The memory of the past, however, remains blurred, since it is obscured by the allegorical fog that clouds the character's vision. The traditional post-apocalyptic trope of the cityscape reclaimed by nature is employed here not as a return to a bountiful prelapsarian state, or to a renewal of the social contract (the notion of the social contract makes no sense in a society structured on the foundations of slavery and exploitation), but to recreate a colonial landscape where history is reenacted as trauma.¹²

This excursion into national history is immediately followed by a personal recollection:

He found some consolation gazing at the circles made by the raindrops when they hit the surface of the muddy and infested lake. They had been more than once on the margins of that lake in the park, his daughter and himself, when she had decided to learn how to skate on the paved courtyard of the museum. After having fun, while they ate their lunch on the lawn, she asked what there was in the bottom of the lake, leaving him, as it always happened when her questions demanded the use of his imagination, without a prompt answer, at least for a little while, until he told her the first thing he managed to put together in his mind. The past, he answered, what's deep down in the bottom of the lake is the past, an old place that we should avoid. But sometimes, when it rains really hard, he continued, the lake overflows and the past returns, spilling from the bottom of the lake.¹³ (TERRON, 2021, p. 162)

¹² For a discussion of the gothic as a representation of historical trauma, see Faflak and Haslam (2016). Although Faflak and Haslam's discussion focuses specifically on the manifestations of the gothic in the United States, many of their arguments also apply to the Brazilian gothic, especially in its representation of the past.

¹³ "Ele se consolou um pouco, admirando círculos feitos pelas gotas da chuva ao atingirem a superfície do lago embarreado e coberto de pragas. Estiveram mais de uma vez ali nas margens do lago daquele parque, a filha e ele, quando ela decidiu aprender a patinar na calçada do museu. Depois de se divertirem, enquanto lanchavam no gramado, ela perguntou o que existia no fundo do lago, deixando-o, como sempre o deixava quando as perguntas exigiam imaginação, sem resposta ao menos por um instante, até esboçar a primeira coisa que lhe veio à cabeça. O passado, ele respondeu, o que tem lá bem no fundo do lago é o passado, um lugar antigo que a gente deve evitar. Mas às vezes, quando chove forte, ele prosseguiu, o lago transborda e o passado volta, entornando do fundo do lago."



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The text, then, creates a flow in which national history and individual memory are intertwined, culminating in an allegorization of history and of the past in general, in which the collective and the personal become indistinguishable. As Fernando Monteiro de Barros (2020) demonstrates, this allegorization and theatricalization of history, as well as its association with artificiality and falsification (in this case, with the dramatic reenactment of a monument that proves to be a fake in its celebration of a period of rapacious colonial expansion as a symbol of national pride), is a central aspect of gothic fiction. This gothic outlook shapes the representation of the past in most of the narratives I discuss here, establishing a chain of symbolic associations that points to a more or less coherent conception of history. In the recollections of the protagonist of *O riso dos ratos*, two ghostly images of the lake – its deteriorated state in the present and its more idealized version from the past – are superimposed to form an allegory in which history is connected to corruption, danger and interdiction. The past is already apocalyptic, and not even the innocent play of father and daughter near the lake can stop its mysterious bottom from overflowing in the form of mud and rot to contaminate the present. In this vision of history, there is little possibility of progress; instead, history manifests itself as regression and repetition, as disorienting and claustrophobic as a gothic labyrinth.

And yet, forgetting is even more dangerous:

A furtive metal rain fell over what was left of the city. Ash blew over streets where the asphalt was retreating, being replaced by tufts of grass that slowly covered ruined sidewalks and rubble, crumbling walls and cracked slabs, weeds covering marquees and bus stops, and the effluvia from the sewers rising with the rain irritated his eyes. If he closed them for a moment more than the necessary for a quick wink, when he opened them again the city that once was would have disappeared for good, leaving behind only its shadow and that of its former inhabitants, reduced to the organic matter circumnavigating the sewer galleries, retained in the intestines of the earth, and which now only spilled during a flood, as a gravedigger throwing the last spade of lime over the world's tomb.¹⁴ (TERRON, 2021, p. 134)

¹⁴ “Ruía uma sorradeira chuva de metal sobre o que restava da cidade. Cinzas se esparramavam nas ruas onde o asfalto se retraía, dando lugar a tufos de capim que iam encobrendo calçadas arruinadas e entulhos, muros arriados e rachaduras nas lajes, ervas daninhas revestindo marquises e pontos de ônibus, e os miasmas do esgoto subindo com a chuva irritavam os olhos. Caso os fechasse por um instante a mais do que o necessário para uma piscadela, ao reabri-los a cidade que um dia existiu certamente teria desaparecido de vez, restando somente sua sombra e a dos antigos habitantes, resumida à matéria orgânica circum-



The obliteration of the city entails the erasure of its memory – to throw a spade of lime (“jogar uma pá de cal”) is a traditional expression in Portuguese that means leaving an unpleasant subject behind and intentionally forgetting it. The reference to old burial practices that is at the origin of this expression leads to an image where forgetfulness is analogous to death and the world is compared to a corpse. This gothic rhetoric of death, so common in Brazilian dystopian and apocalyptic narratives, grounds the abstraction of the social structure on the physicality of a decaying body. The emphasis on bodily functions and organic matter conveys the sense of a whole, but also of sickness and contamination, rendering entropic deterioration more visceral and inescapable, since it is presented as a natural process. The traditional apocalyptic trope of the abandoned city gradually covered by vegetation is divested of its consolatory power as a sign of revitalization, remaining as a spatialized representation of history as a dystopian process of destruction.

But in *O riso dos ratos* burying this process in the past leads to oblivion, the ultimate manifestation of death, so that the whole novel is an attempt to revisit Brazilian history from the point of view of the disenfranchised. Again, this is a common trend in contemporary Brazilian fiction, where the apocalypse furnishes the opportunity to reread the dystopian aspects of the past, especially those that have an overarching influence on the present. The apocalypse, then, becomes a form of denunciation that is animated by the negative rhetoric of the gothic. The highly conventional aspect of this rhetoric and its overwrought melodramatic tone, however, call attention to its artificiality. As generic marks of a long-standing cultural tradition, they function as an emblem of fictionality, stressing the paradoxical nature of the narrative as an illusion that promotes disillusionment. Apocalyptic dissolution, indissociable from the concrete dystopia¹⁵ of the past, reveals the actual suffering behind the heroic myths of official historiography

navegando a tubulação dos esgotos, retida nos intestinos da terra e que agora vazava só nas enchentes, como um coveiro lançando a última pá de cal sobre o túmulo do mundo.”

¹⁵ I use this expression in accordance with Maria Varsam’s definition of concrete dystopias as those moments in the past when oppressive forms of social organization went into effect. Nazi Germany, the Stalinist regime, and the institution of slavery in the United States would be examples of concrete dystopias (see VARSAM, 2003).



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(and, by extension, denounces any resemblance of social harmony as a mystifying invention), at the same time it retains a sense of unreality grounded on its theatricality and rhetorical effect.

But while the past is a “dangerous place” that should be avoided, oblivion is an even greater danger, since it is part of the mechanism of subjugation:

In Brazil it was hard to find someone who knew any names before those of their grandparents. Sometimes not even that; sometimes not even their father’s. It was a land of genealogical trees as short as shrubs, of people who sprouted from the earth, almost. Like cassava. With no past, no memory, torn from the earth and then pared down with the strokes of a knife.¹⁶ (VALEK, 2020, p. 231)

In this passage from Aline Valek’s *Cidades afundam em dias normais*, the lack of awareness about one’s own family origins brings vulnerability and loss of personal value. Being deprived of the past is described as a kind of violence which leads to new assaults on the integrity of the individual. The absence of family traditions erodes any sense of belonging, obstructing the formation of collective bonds and undermining the notion of a social body. The whole novel, therefore, is structured around an allegory that concretizes the reemergence of the past: it tells the story of Alto do Oeste, a small town in the rural backlands that resurfaces during a severe draught after remaining submerged under a lake for sixteen years. More than an excavation of the past, *Cidades afundam em dias normais* engages in a discussion on the nature of memory as a construction that demands an emotional and political response.

The people who return after the waters retreat are obsessed with creating archives, gathering objects lost in the disaster as small testimonies of the past – while the town, in its restored physical presence, becomes a museum of itself. This salvaging is less an attempt to recreate the symbolic foundations of modern civilization,¹⁷ than an effort to give visibility to the past and, more importantly, to the people who lived it. As the waters

¹⁶ “Difícil no Brasil era haver quem soubesse de qualquer nome anterior ao dos seus avós. Às vezes nem isso; às vezes nem o do pai. Era uma terra de árvores genealógicas curtas feito arbustos, de gente que brotava da terra, quase. Como mandiocas. Sem passado, sem memória, arrancadas da terra e depois aparadas com golpes de facão.”

¹⁷ See Hicks (2016), who reads contemporary apocalyptic fiction as an attempt to interrogate or reinforce the project of modernity.



first begin to rise, one of the characters expresses the hope that this localized apocalypse will make the news, forcing others to finally see the inhabitants of the town (VALEK, 2020, p. 156). The novel oscillates between revelation and occultation, as the inundation and later reemergence of Alto do Oeste indicates. While the movement of the waters reveals social problems that went unnoticed as part of everyday life – such as violence, isolation, and discrimination – the exploration of the mud-covered ruins of the town raises doubts about the meaning of the vestiges left by its inhabitants as they fled, and about the possibility of creating a coherent narrative of the past. Ultimately, these doubts raise questions about the validity of memory itself:

Submerged for a long time, our recollections gain the consistence of dreams. Reality blurs, the logic of how and why slips away, motivations are lost. Reading the story the photographs tell, then, becomes the task of a drunkard trying to read a flacid and shapeless piece of paper that stayed too long under water.¹⁸ (VALEK, 2020, p. 123)

More than a civilizational rupture, the apocalypse causes a breach in reality, which becomes indistinguishable from dreams or illusions. The fact that this is described as a crisis of legibility inscribes memory and its relation to the present as a matter of endless interpretation, and points to the fundamental instability of notions such as visibility, meaning and historical truth.

One of the main functions of the gothic is, of course, to blur the distinction between reality and illusion, “to reveal something about the possibilities and depths of human misrecognition, something about the degree to which life is pursued ‘in the light of’ a certain degree of untruth, of misunderstanding, whether of ourselves or of others, or of the perceptions that govern our relations with others” (PUNTER; BYRON, 2004, p. 295-296). Or, as Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (2010, p. 2-3) puts it, the gothic “is almost a meta-fiction, frequently breaking the illusion of realism in order to explore the limits of narrative and stylistic possibilities”. For Monnet (2010, p. 20), the pleasures offered by a gothic text lie not primarily in the experience of fear, but in “contemplating dilemmas and

¹⁸ “Submersas por muito tempo, as memórias ganham a mesma consistência dos sonhos. / A realidade se borra, a lógica do como e dos porquês escorrega, as motivações se perdem. Ler a história que as fotografias contam, então, torna-se a tarefa de um bêbado tentando ler um papel amolecido e disforme que ficou tempo demais debaixo d’água.”



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having the luxury of not having to decide. They are the pleasures of exercising judgment, but also of suspending it”, in a kind of reading experience that promotes epistemological uncertainty. The gothic, then, would represent the crisis of judgement introduced by western modernity, when the monolithic authority of the Church – which offered a stable worldview and a firm base for the exercise of judgement – lost its hegemony, and epistemological authority was fragmented (MONNET, 2010, p. 20).

This epistemological uncertainty and the crisis of judgement that is its attendant is a frequent component of Brazilian dystopian and apocalyptic fiction. It is present in the sense of unreality that pervades Bruno Ribeiro’s *Porco de raça*, where explicit references to the Bolsonaro administration coexist with sudden eruptions of the fantastic (such as the apparition of a giant grasshopper or of an eyeless driver) that may be manifestations of the main character’s imagination. The seriousness of the dystopian vision presented in the novel is undermined by its unabashed reproduction of pop-culture clichés, even when it offers a bitter criticism of Brazilian society – “Brazil was founded on an Indian burial ground”, a character comments at one point in the narrative (RIBEIRO, 2021, p. 27). Similarly, the first section of Natalia Borges Polesso’s *A extinção das abelhas*, which presents a dystopian society that closely resembles our own, is followed by a second section where narrative breaks down and a succession of small chapters in different textual modes introduce an apocalyptic event whose extent is indeterminate, since it is distorted by the protagonist’s delirium, a result of past traumas, unmedicated diabetes and the cosmic disaster of Betelgeuse’s supernova explosion. When she is found by a friend in the opening pages of the third and last section of the novel, she sums up her situation: “The end happened, I saw. Everything’s over. This place here doesn’t exist” (POLESSO, 2021, p. 255). Finally, in Sheyla Smanioto’s *Meu corpo ainda quente*, the authoritarian regime that furnishes the background of the narrative echoes the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties. This historical reference, however, can only be glimpsed in the disorienting nightmare of misogyny and gender-related violence that dominates the novel.

Although I agree with Monnet’s assessment that the gothic is an expression of modernity’s crisis of judgement, I would like to argue that in the specific case of



contemporary Brazilian dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, the radical destabilization of reality and the overwhelming sense of epistemological doubt are related to anxieties concerning the role of Brazilian society within western modernity, whose dominant narratives and conceptual scaffolding – including notions such as the prevalence of rational thought,¹⁹ the founding principle of the social contract and the establishment of a civilizational project under the tutelage of the nation – seem to be perceived as insufficient to organize local reality into a meaningful whole. They also point to a dis-centered and disenchanting perspective from which this ideational structure is revealed to be largely fictional or even spurious, and whose condition as a fake is denounced by the artificiality that informs gothic poetics.

This entails another oscillation, that between realism and fantasy, or between referential notation and the use of narrative devices that call attention to the fictionality (or even absurdity) of the text.²⁰ Taken to its extreme, this creates tensions that put into question the possibility of representation itself. In Ana Paula Maia's *De cada quinhentos uma alma*, for example, references to the expansion of evangelical churches in Brazil and to the covid-19 pandemic are counterbalanced by an intense allegorization of the scenery and by set pieces in which the language of melodrama seems to feed upon itself: "The man keeps his eyes on the six-meter-long bridge, whose trajectory leads directly to the abyss, since it was never finished so as to reach the other side, where there's nothing anyway"; or "It's not possible to see the horizon because of the thick fog"²¹ (MAIA, 2021, p. 22, 46). These are, of course, ready-made images whose message is so blatantly obvious and so broad in its application that they point to an exhaustion of the apocalyptic imagination, contaminating the whole landscape of the novel with their abstraction and

¹⁹ Or at least of a single form of rationality that propounds itself as universal but whose origins are historically defined, and that partially asserts itself in the colonial contact with the American continent in the beginning of the modern era (see DAFLON, 2022, p. 52-59).

²⁰ A curious symptom of this oscillation is Aline Valek's statement that she believed she had written an unrealistic narrative in *Cidades afundam em dias normais*, but that since the publication of the novel she had received several accounts of cities that shared the same fate as her fictional Alto do Oeste (GABRIEL, 2022, p. 2).

²¹ "O homem mantém seus olhos sobre a ponte de seis metros, cujo percurso leva direto ao abismo, já que não foi concluída até o outro lado, que por sua vez não tem nada"; "Não é possível ver o horizonte por causa da neblina espessa".



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sense of unreality. On the other hand, the turn to non-realistic genres suggests that our perception of reality is largely based on cultural symbols and social fictions.

Joca Reiners Terron's *A morte e o meteoro* (2019) is a good example of how this oscillation is played out. Set in the near future, when the Amazon Forest is undergoing a rapid process of desertification, the novel has as its starting point the mediatic attempt to move the last remnants of the kaajapukugi tribe, who still lived in voluntary isolation in the region, to a safe haven in a Mexican preserve. This undertaking is led by the mysterious Boaventura, an anthropologist who had spent decades studying the kaajapukugi and protecting them from the encroachment of illegal loggers, farmers, and miners. However, this effort of ethnic preservation is doomed from the start: the fifty remaining kaajapukugi are all males who, deprived of their ancient territory and the beetles from which they extracted tinsáanhán, the hallucinogenic drug used in their religious rites, commit suicide shortly after arriving in Mexico.

This debacle is described as the “irrevocable epilogue of the colonial psychosis in the Americas”²² (TERRON, 2019, p. 11), and as such it encapsulates the historical process of colonization in the continent. This process is explored in more detail in Boaventura's account of his involvement with the kaajapukugi over the years, left as a videorecording to his government liaison in Mexico, who acts as narrator for the rest of the novel. In this account, Boaventura functions as a sort of historical chameleon, taking up the different guises assumed by white men in their contact with indigenous populations, from humanitarian advocate to scientific ethnographer and colonial exploiter – a career that earns him the epithet “Great Evil” (or “Hen-zaogao” in the kaajapukugi language). Boaventura's testimony makes it clear that all these roles are interconnected, and his shifting from one to the other bears the signs of historical necessity.

It turns out that Boaventura had first contacted the kaajapukugi out of scientific curiosity, after hearing rumors of their existence deep in the Amazon Forest. In his first approach, he is wounded, and in his second attempt his guide is killed, and Boaventura himself is captured. Although he is a prisoner of the kaajapukugi, he is kept in isolation,

²² “[...] epílogo irrevogável da psicose colonial nas Américas”.



being tended only by the last surviving female of the tribe, a young woman who is obviously pregnant. In his thirst to learn more about kaajapukugi culture, however, Boaventura kidnaps the young woman and takes her to a settlement downriver, causing her to miscarry while still on the boat and destroying the tribe's last hope for reproduction. This ushers in Boaventura's moral deterioration, so that he ends up raping his prisoner (mainly out of frustration at her refusal to acknowledge his presence and to provide him with information) and then prostitutes her to pay his debts with gamblers and drug dealers. His later return as protector of the kaajapukugi is, then, a search for atonement.

This short summary of Boaventura's story should be enough to give an idea of some of the textual tensions in the novel. On the one hand, it relies on the stylistic conventions of the confessional, whose rhetoric reinforces the illusion of verisimilitude and provides the kind of self-reflexive introspection we tend to associate with the modernist novel and psychological realism; on the other, it reads like the conventional plot of a nineteenth-century adventure novel, at least until the rape and subsequent prostitution of the young kaajapukugi. These, in turn, are a disenchanting version of the romantic liaison between a European colonizer and an indigenous woman that lays bare the sexual exploitation that has historically characterized this kind of encounter. In fact, this whole episode is a realistic – or even cruel – parody of José de Alencar's indigenist novel *Iracema*, a hallmark of Brazilian romantic nationalism. The novel ends with another reappropriation of Alencar's work. While the nameless Mexican anthropologist responsible for the frame narrative of *A morte e o meteoro* flies to Brazil with the bodies of the kaajapukugi, a meteor strikes the earth, turning the ground into a sea of molten rock. This is an echo of the last pages of Alencar's *O Guarani*, where a flood abruptly ends the narrative, leaving the protagonists – this time a European woman and a native man – floating towards the horizon on the top of an uprooted palm tree. While Terron's novel captures and amplifies the absurdity of the ending of *O Guarani*, it once again inverts the valence of its model: while the flood in Alencar's novel opens the possibility of a new beginning and points to miscegenation as the origin of the Brazilian people, the parodic rereading of this scene in *A morte e o meteoro* leaves little hope for the future.



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This playful appropriation of literary models pervades the whole novel, which once again relies on a self-conscious use of a gothic rhetoric in which literary allusions call attention to the artificiality of any account of the past, which consists – to the same degree – of actual events and cultural myths created around the notions of national identity, scientific progress and the process of colonization. Thus, the parodic rereading of *Iracema* and *O Guarani* stresses their ideological content while acknowledging their importance as foundational myths that must be addressed despite their fictionality. Part of the symbolic work carried out by *A morte e o meteoro* is to show that the fictional is an integral component of the real. Hence the haunting presence of the past, which exerts an overwhelming pressure on the two narrators of the novel, who function as doubles of each other. For both of them, memory is an object of horror that must be destroyed so that they can reach personal freedom. Crystallized in the house the Mexican anthropologist inherited from his parents, memory becomes a gothic *locus horribilis*, with echoes of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”: “[...] 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. The way things smelled was likely the same as that of my parent’s decomposing bodies”²³ (TERRON, 2019, p. 25).

The result, then, is a succession of instances in which the past is purged by fire: the Mexican anthropologist burns down his parents’ home, Boaventura accidentally incinerates a sacred kaajapukugi mummy, and finally the whole world is consumed in a cosmic fire. But although these conflagrations may bring the desired freedom, they are often followed by feelings of guilt, emptiness, and disorientation. More importantly, they offer no real escape from the textual mechanism that guarantees the spectral return of the past, for they are parodic reenactments of other instances of purification in the gothic tradition: the collapse of the ancestral home in “The Fall of the house of Usher”, the fire that obliterates the gothic mansion in *Jane Eyre*, the destruction of the vampire in its tomb. Even the spectacular catastrophe of the meteor, which could be read as a sudden

²³ “[...] 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.”



manifestation of uncontrollable natural forces, signals the absolute power of the writer who can chose to collapse his own narrative by introducing a completely arbitrary element (not to mention that it, too, has its literary precedent in Alencar's *O Guarani*, as pointed out above).

In the narrative logic of *A morte e o meteoro*, the tessiture of the real is inseparable from the network of cultural references that structure the pattern of its representation, so that even the rereading of the colonial past involves a blending of historical processes and the imaginary. It denounces the actual violence underneath the ideological constructs that justify colonization, while adopting as its model texts that consolidated the cultural image of colonization in the first place. Prevalent among these is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which furnishes the trope of the voyage up the river and its symbolic associations. The influence of Conrad's novella can also be felt in the use of the gothic sublime to describe nature, the association between otherness and monstrosity, and the representation of the native as essentially mysterious or even inscrutable.

Daflon (2022, p. 51-78) argues that European identity consolidated itself in the beginning of the modern era, with the colonization of the American continent. It relied on the postulation of the radical alterity of American peoples and their association with barbarism and the state of nature. It was based on its contrast with this "primitive" Other that Western culture could claim for itself the higher position in the progression from savagery to civilization, relegating indigenous populations to its lower stages. This involved the postulation of some of the fundamental dichotomies of modern thought, such as the opposition between human and non-human, culture and nature, reason and irrationality, subject and object. These distinctions, then, would be artificial constructs in that they provided the conceptual foundation for the establishment of Western modernity itself.

Nevertheless, discourses centered on the notions of alterity and authenticity were an important aspect of the effort to consolidate the Brazilian nation in the decades after political independence. Within the romantic movement, José de Alencar's work played a significant role in establishing a Brazilian cultural identity and in furnishing its



ideological legitimation.²⁴ In his indigenist novels, Alencar creates a foundational myth in which the amalgamation of indigenous people with indigenous nature is the guarantee for the nation's originality and its vitality as a new civilization, free from the burden of the historical past.

In its appropriation of *Iracema* and *O Guarani*, *A morte e o meteoro* addresses the fictionality of this image and problematizes the notion of authenticity both as a form of legitimation and as a site of resistance. For while the kaajapukugi can still be read as a symbol of national identity, they are also a symbol of falsification. Presented as the final victims of colonialism, the kaajapukugi are a reminder of the destructive exploitation of the environment and the indigenous population that fuels capitalist expansion. As the protagonists of “a collective escape from that continental prison complex that is South America”²⁵ (TERRON, 2019, p. 12), they also seem to function as an emblem of resistance, having survived more than a century of active persecution. Their refusal to communicate with white men implies that their culture remains free from the influence of Western civilization, being a rare example of a contemporary indigenous community that retains its authenticity and independence.

However, the reader soon learns that the name the tribe chose for themselves is not their own, the original kaajapukugi having been exterminated in the 1920s. The tribe itself is the result of the fusion of two distinct groups whose origins remain vague until the end of the novel. Taken together, these two facts turn the kaajapukugi into a kind of simulacrum, and the sense of unreality they convey is reinforced by their association with the spectacle. Their arrival in Mexico is a mediatic event, while their ceremonial self-immolation is described as a gothic scene which includes the obligatory tempestuous night and the apparition of ghosts. Thus, their inscrutability is both a function of their gothic characterization and an instantiation of the opacity of the spectacle as self-

²⁴ França and Nestarez (2022, p. 14-22) argue that Alencar advocated a literary project that became hegemonic program that influenced Brazilian literature well into the twentieth century. This program privileged the mimetic representation of Brazilian reality, mainly under the guise of “local color”, as the foundation on which an independent national identity could be forged. This focus on documental realism led Brazilian literary criticism to dismiss the gothic as aesthetically unsatisfactory and as a form of cultural alienation, ignoring the use of gothic tropes by Alencar himself (see also Sá, 2010).

²⁵ “[...] uma fuga conjunta daquele complexo penitenciário continental que é a América do Sul.”



referential image (DEBORD, 1992, p. 15-32). In fact, these two aspects are interconnected, for if mass media are the most powerful instruments of the society of spectacle (DEBORD, 1992, p. 26), then gothic fiction, which was seminal for the emergence of mass culture (CLERY, 1995), is one of its first manifestations.

Indeed, the kaajapukugi's status as simulacra emerges not only from their spectacular practices, but also from their creation out of literary references and pop-culture motifs. Boaventura's expedition up the river, which is represented as a movement away from civilization, is actually a journey into the collective imaginary. Through the mediation of Conrad's description of the jungle in *Heart of Darkness*, the Amazon Forest becomes a somber landscape, a projection of the gothic castle where the equivalent of the forbidden chamber is the kaajapukugi's sacred island. It is there that Boaventura finds the tomb where their ancestor is buried and discovers the secret behind their ceremonial drug – it is produced by blood-sucking beetles who feed on the bodies of the kaajapukugi who commit suicide on the island. For Punter and Byron (2004, p. 51), the gothic castle embodies “a past that goes back behind – or beneath – the ‘moment’ of the subject, that asserts a different kind of continuity, even if it is one that can be known only under the sign of the secret”, and its equivalent in *A morte e o meteoro* produces a similar effect in pointing to the kaajapukugi's true origins. As it turns out, they are the descendants of Chinese astronauts caught in a time loop probably caused by the approach of the meteor, which explains why the mummified remains of their ancestor were dressed in a space suit, and why their language (one of the marks of their alterity) sounds suspiciously like pidgin Chinese.

This unabashed plunge into the conventions of B-movies, cheap horror comics and Sci-Fi is disconcerting in that it raises serious doubts on the suitability of the novel as an object of interpretation, since it might be no more than an entertaining play with tried cultural formulas, an exercise in fancy for its own sake (and there is certainly a lot of that in *A morte e o meteoro*). On the other hand, these elements have significant symbolic resonances that go beyond the confines of this particular text, revealing some of the concerns behind the articulation of gothic motifs in contemporary dystopian and apocalyptic fiction in Brazil.



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For here, once again, the past is conflated with the future, this time in the reversal of the causal link between the two, so that the end paradoxically becomes the force that defines the beginning. The apocalyptic event condemns the past to an endless return upon itself. But while time is locked in a closed circuit, the suggestion of a non-linear temporality offers an escape from the demand for constant development and expansion implied in linear progression. This conception of time is the bedrock of the kaajapukugi's fictional cosmogony, and they embody other utopian desires in their anarchism and radical equalitarianism. These aspects, however, are inseparable from their monstrous alterity and their artificiality as the products of pop culture and gothic clichés (they combine traits of the vampire, the living dead, the ghost, and the morbid aristocrat). Their symbolic instability is yet another instance of epistemological uncertainty that Monnet identifies with the gothic, a suspension of judgement between conflicting perspectives and cultural values.

Brazilian negative predictive fiction is as much a literature of pain as a literature of doubt. Its dialogical other is the nation's foundational myths and its official historiography. More than the traditional models of national identity, however, what these narratives put into question are the processes that lead to the construction of these models in the first place, and the validity of some of the concepts that have served as the ideological basis for the constitution of western societies. The obscurity of the gothic, its blurring of categories, offers a formal solution for the problem of expressing the failure of these concepts as the means to understand – and justify – a social structure characterized more by its contradictions than by its consensus.

As Daflon (2022, p. 65) argues, this implies that political action and epistemological revision are indissociable. What is at stake is not only the search for suitable ways to write about the past and its connection to the present, but also the nature of representation itself. In this respect, the appropriation of some of the tropes of gothic fiction and pop culture points to the limitations of realism in conveying the contradictions of a social and cultural context that resists coherent representation. It also introduces, at the level of textual structure, a problematization of accepted hierarchies in terms of the contrast between high and low, seriousness and play or good and bad taste. The fact that



this is based on an often parodic process of appropriation points to a stance of skepticism in relation to traditional thought paradigms and ideological systems that try to make sense of reality. Perception is seen not as a function of rational thought or as a matter of personal perspective, but as a negotiation between individual point of view (and individual suffering) and the collective fictions that organize social life.

Despite their diversity in terms of style, literary ambition and critical prestige, these narratives are instances of the convergence of aesthetics and politics that Daflon (2022, p. 51) identifies as a current trend in contemporary Latin-American artistic productions. Even when they adhere to the conventions of popular entertainment, they include moments of explicit social criticism. Whatever the level of their social commitment or the nature of their political affiliation, their use of a gothic rhetoric demands an emotional response that implicitly prompts political action.

An atmosphere of degradation and civilizational collapse is a central feature of gothic fiction (FRANÇA, NESTAREZ, 2022, p. 13) that has been absorbed by the dystopian and apocalyptic tradition. However, contemporary Brazilian fiction departs from this tradition in that these are presented as part of a lived historical experience, instead of being only a projection of existing anxieties onto the future. Also, Brazilian dystopian and apocalyptic narratives pay more attention to inequality as a structural component of society than their anglophone equivalents usually do. If their vision of history seems to foreclose the future, this is due not to an inability to imagine an alternative to neoliberal capitalism or to an inherent aversion to radical change, but because the past has never been fully worked through. Or, as Joca Reiners Terron put it in an interview when *O riso dos ratos* was published: “The future of Brazil is in the past, in historical social debts yet to be paid, in the condemnation of torturers and of the military. Without this, new conceptions of the future will not appear”.²⁶

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²⁶ “O futuro do Brasil está no passado, nas dívidas sociais históricas a serem salgadas, na condenação de torturadores e militares. Sem isso, novas ideias de futuro não vão surgir.”



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