

Fiction as Testimony: Subversive Strategies in Renato Tapajós's *Em câmara lenta*
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In the years leading up to the general amnesty in Brazil, the slow and arduous process of political liberalization, or *descompressão*, far from being a normalizing social force, created a situation of national limbo that profoundly marked the country's cultural production—albeit in a somewhat paradoxical manner. Although the military regime of Médici and the hardliners continued to haunt collective memory, the expectation of a political opening stimulated a sentiment of dissidence and revitalized a general consciousness among writers and other intellectuals. In an attempt to stifle the growing protests against authoritarian rule, the State found itself forced to increase its interference in cultural affairs through censorship, which entered into its most rigorous and intolerant phase, particularly with respect to literature. The prohibition of books such as Rubem Fonseca's *Feliz ano novo* (1973) and Ignácio de Loyola Brandão's *Zero: romance pré-histórico* (1975), to cite but two of the most famous cases, and the pure arbitrariness of the censors provoked the indignation of the Brazilian intelligentsia, which duly responded with a petition to the Minister of Justice, Armando Falcão, in January of 1977. As was to be expected, Falcão and the Geisel regime, impervious to calls for freedom of expression, responded with a cursory statement justifying the State's intransigent position (Baden 98).

It was in this context that the Brazilian cinematographer Renato Tapajós published *Em câmara lenta* (1977), which boasts the dubious distinction of being the only important work

so-called *anos de chumbo*, or lead years (Baden 180).¹ The theme of the underground leftist resistance, the implicit criticism of the military regime, and the abundance of specific references to politically sensitive names and situations were, without a doubt, the most obvious motives for its prohibition.² Tapajós's narrative projects a particularly sympathetic attitude in relation to the plight of the urban militants and other dissidents. The author's stated aim in his introduction to the novel is, after all, to revise or reconstruct the negative image cast by the junta to stigmatize and discredit the leftist insurgency (Tapajós X). It is, moreover, important to point out the fact that Tapajós wrote at least part of *Em câmara lenta* while he was imprisoned for alleged acts of subversion, leading at least one critic to speculate on a possible autobiographical grounding for the novel (Johnson 186).

Still, perhaps the most persuasive and moving denunciation against the dictatorship lies in the portrait of psychological trauma and physical pain that deconstruct the nameless protagonist and his girlfriend in particular. The Chilean writer and critic Ariel Dorfman identifies the obliteration of the self as the most tragic legacy of authoritarianism: "[t]he essence of dictatorship is [. . .] in the psychic wound, the devastation of a man or a woman's identity, the twisting of the inner being in order to consolidate external economic and political power [. . .]" (168). More than simply a challenge to the discourse of power, *Em câmara lenta* insists on the importance of discovering, appropriating, and communicating the truth of the atrocities committed in the basements of the military barracks during the dictatorship, and of recognizing the patriotism of those who dared to defy the regime.

The search for the truth of the past logically implies a project to reconstruct collective memory in the present. *Em câmara lenta* is made up of several intertwining narrative threads, each representing a different perspective and time frame, and all related to the resistance movements of the Left. The sum artistic effect evokes not only the postmodern aesthetic and cinematographic *montage*, as both Randal Johnson and Mercedes Bertoli Martins point out, but also traumatic memory.³ The set of fragments that represents the protagonist's flow of consciousness constitutes the core of the plot, which in turn revolves around a central episode presented in the form of a series of flashbacks that gradually reveal the arrest, torture, and murder of his girlfriend, the character referred to only by the generic pronoun "ela."⁴ The need to know becomes, then, the *raison d'être* of both the narrator and the novel. The deconstruction of the world and self of "ela" is hidden not only by the members of the military who practice their violence in secret, but also by the inherent subjectivity of physical pain. In her study on the topic entitled *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry argues that the torturer objectifies the physical and psychological deterioration of the victim in order to create the illusion that the regime's power is legitimate. Paradoxically, institutionalized violence is necessary precisely because the position of those in power is so precarious (27). The State insists on the evil of the dissidents as a means of justifying to the public its own crimes against humanity. It is, therefore, significant that the incident in question is only revealed in the final pages of the novel and after a relatively full development of the characters, establishing almost from the beginning a

compassionate perspective with respect to the leftist guerrillas. Whereas the torturers, metonymical

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representatives of the military junta, manipulate the prisoner's pain in order to concretize a fantasy of power, Tapajós's novel re-dramatizes and inverts this same discourse on the level of the text through the description of the torture scene, the narrative structure of the novel in general, and the act of self-destruction by the protagonist. These three subversive strategies contribute to the demystification of the regime, a preliminary step in the process of rewriting the "official story."

Censorship is essential to upholding the illusion of a regime's legitimacy through the denial of freedom of expression. Similarly, intense pain possesses the singular capacity to simultaneously resist and destroy language. According to Scarry, the purpose of the interrogation in the torture process is not so much to extract information, but rather to externalize this linguistic disintegration: "Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes (objectifies in the external environment) this language destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is [. . .] visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (29). Although "ela" never confesses nor even speaks at any point during the interrogation, the torturers are still able to manipulate her voice through the application of intense physical pain, forcing her to break her silence: "Quando a levantaram para pendurá-la e o peso do corpo distendeu o braço quebrado, ela deu um grito de dor, um urro animal, prolongado, gutural, desmedidamente forte. Foi o único som que emituiu durante todo o tempo" (Tapajós 171). This "urro animal" externalizes the return to what Scarry refers to as "the pre-language of cries and groans" (6).

“Ela” uses her silence to communicate her scorn for her captors, but the enemy eventually manages to co-opt even this

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act of rebellion. After receiving beatings and electric shock treatments on the *pau-de-arara*, or parrot’s perch, her silence is no longer a function of her resistance, but rather of her defeat:

Os choques incessantes faziam o seu corpo tremer e se contrair, atravessavam-na com milhares de punhais e a dor era tanta que ela só tinha uma consciência muito tênue do que acontecia. Os policiais continuavam a bater-lhe no rosto, no estômago, no pescoço e nas costas, gritando palavrões entremeados por perguntas e *ela já não poderia responder mesmo que quisesse* [. . .]. (Tapajós 172, my emphasis)

Her tormentors exert total control over her voice as well as the movements of her body, which contorts involuntarily. Scarry notes that in the torture process, the obliteration of the voice is the corollary of the annihilation of the body: “The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it” (49). The prisoner’s silence in *Em câmara lenta* turns into an involuntary absence, a sign that she has succumbed both physically and psychologically to the brutality of her interrogators.

The narrator’s girlfriend ultimately becomes the victim of her own silence when the torturers objectify her self-agency, using her muteness as a pretext for more punishment: “O policial enfurecido sacou o revólver e apontou para ela, ameaçando atirar se continuasse calada. Ela continuou e ele atirou em seu braço” (Tapajós 171). Scarry points to confession as an

example of this phenomenon because of its close association with the betrayal of self and others, thus mirroring the prisoner's perception that her own body is the agent of her pain (47).

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In the case of “ela” in *Em câmara lenta*, however, it is not her confession, but rather her silence that is appropriated by her captors in order to justify their cruelty, which leads to her death by the *coroa-de-cristo*, or Christ's crown: “Eles esperaram que ela voltasse a si e disseram-lhe se não começasse a falar, ia morrer lentamente. Ela nada disse” (172).

The only information the police seek throughout the interrogation is her name, which she never reveals. Instead, the protagonist's girlfriend remains completely anonymous, reduced to the generic pronoun “ela.” The resulting depersonalization renders her indistinguishable from any other political prisoner, emphasizing the erasure of her identity, on one hand, and suggesting that she is part of a collectivity of victims, on the other. Tapajós refutes, furthermore, the regime's monopoly on language through the omission of the torturers' dialogue during the narration of this incident. In other words, he inverts the structure of power constructed by the dramatization of annihilated language. By incorporating the questions from the interrogation into the text, he effectively deprives the torturers themselves of the ability to articulate within a system in which the voice is emblematic of domination.

A crescendo of tension runs through *Em câmara lenta* and the account of the death of “ela” in particular. The narrator comments upon this phenomenon in a meta-textual reference: “Fragmentos: as peças do jogo de armar. E uma tênue ligação, um fio quase invisível capaz de organizar as peças—a tensão” (Tapajós 112). It is only in the final flashback that the progression gains its true momentum with the increasing barbarity of the techniques used to inflict pain, communicated mainly through

the agency of the torture instruments and the wounds on the body. The act of brandishing a weapon before
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a torture victim imposes it as an external referent for the physical punishment to be applied, representing the radicalization between the body and the consciousness of the sufferer, on one hand, and a display of the regime's power, on the other (Scarry 27). In purely quantitative terms, however, the anatomical descriptions prevail over the references to the actual implements of cruelty in the novel, clearly subordinating the latter to the former:

Eles puxaram-na pelo braço quebrado, obrigando-a a sentar-se. Amarram-lhe os pulsos e os tornozelos, espancando-a e obrigando-a a encolher as pernas. Passaram a vara cilíndrica do pau-de-arara entre seus braços e a curva interna dos joelhos e a levantaram, para pendurá-la no cavalete. (Tapajós 171)

The meticulous descriptions of her wounds and physical appearance dominate the narration and return the pain to its point of origin, the body of the victim. Both weapons and wounds become increasingly more horrific: the corner of her mouth torn during the beatings; the broken bone resulting from a gunshot in the arm; burns on her skin from the electric shock treatment; and, finally, her skull crushed by the *coroa-de cristo*. This emphasis on the relationship between pain and the body annuls the imaginary link between the torture instrument and power, thus revealing the actual impotence and cowardice of the dictatorship, dependent on the weapon and, by extension, the repression of civilians in order to impose its will upon the general population. To put it another way, every instrument of torture is double-ended, with the victim on the receiving end

opposite the torturer who wields it (Scarry 59). The torture implement comes to embody not only the victim's pain, but

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also, conversely, the regime's weakness, since the junta relies upon the weapon to enforce its domination in the first place. The tension culminates at the end of the torture scene with the graphic description of the murder of the protagonist's girlfriend:

[O policial] continuou a apertar os parafusos [da coroa-de-cristo] e um dos olhos dela saltou para fora da órbita devido à pressão do crânio. Quando os ossos do crânio estalaram e afundaram, ela já havia perdido a consciência, deslizando para a morte com o cérebro esmagado lentamente (Tapajós 172).

This image is so disturbing because the interior of the body is exposed with the empty eye-socket and the crushing of the brain, objectifying for the torturer another attribute of pain, the fusion of the public and private (Scarry 53). The novel also externalizes this characteristic, though on a radically different level, since the fictional testimony in *Em câmara lenta* reveals to the reading public the acts of inhumanity that were perpetrated inside the walls of the detention centers run by the military. Indeed, Tapajós spent a month in prison after the publication of his novel because the regime objected to its descriptions of torture and other forms of police violence, and “considered the book to be particularly dangerous because it mentioned guerrilla activities in Amazônia, a covert operation that the Brazilian government had not yet admitted to publicly” (Baden 110).

The repercussions of the atrocities committed, hidden,

and then denied by the dictatorship extend, of course, beyond those traditionally considered victims. The narrator suffers a psychological shock that results in the formation of a traumatic memory and that mirrors the deconstruction of his girlfriend.

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Indeed, the term *trauma* used to refer in the ancient Greek to a physical wound on the body or, in other words, “any injury where the skin is broken as a consequence of physical violence, and the effects of such an injury upon the organism as a whole” (Laplanche and Pontalis 465). It is, therefore, significant that the protagonist in Tapajós’s novel perceives his own psychological trauma in terms of images such as the razor blade, an agent of physical pain that has the capacity to perforate the skin:

[. . .] o familiar se tornara estranho porque reconhecer um contorno, uma forma, era ferir-se, cortar novamente a pele já cortada, retorcer a lâmina e sentir a dor aguda latejando interminavelmente [. . .]” (Tapajós 17).

His psychological condition mimics, then, the physical pain suffered by “ela,” since not only does it arise from traumatic memory (to recognize to is be wounded), but it also imitates his girlfriend’s perforated skin and, of course, the perception of time *em câmara lenta*, or in slow motion.

As suggested by the title *Em câmara lenta*, a strong cinematographic influence permeates Tapajós’s novel, and is particularly evident in the fragmented construction of the narrative and the resulting multiplicity of perspectives and time frames, a structure that Johnson likens to “cinematic cross-cutting” (187). Still, as a witness to at least part of the traumatic incident, the protagonist is vulnerable to a fragmented memory of it. Judith Lewis Herman remarks in *Trauma and Recovery* that

[i]t is very difficult for an observer [of a shocking event] to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together” (2).

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The continuous alternating of viewpoints between first and third persons reflects a subjective detachment and a depersonalization that characterize not only psychological shock, but also physical pain. Hermanavens that during a traumatic experience, the victim often suffers from a distorted sense of reality, and “may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing [it] from outside the body” (43). This dissociation is also communicated through the narrator’s flow of consciousness via the frequent omission of the first person pronoun and the dependency on the infinitive, gerund, and passive voice forms, effectively erasing the self: “Cuidado: a próxima esquina—fazer a curva, conduzir corretamente o carro. Cumprir a tarefa, ainda que haja um véu em frente aos olhos” (Tapajós 13). Indeed, Johnson describes the main thread as “narrated in the third person, [. . .] in an indirect free style reflecting the consciousness of the participant-narrator” (187). This argument seems to ignore, however, the use—albeit rare—of the first person pronoun: “[. . .] eu também morri, lá, naquele dia, no momento quê” (Tapajós 25). The preceding example demonstrates that fragmentation also occurs on a more basic level, since even sentences are frequently truncated, stopping short particularly where the traumatic incident is concerned.

In the final pages of the novel, when the police kill the protagonist with spray of machine-gunfire, the perspective passes from the first to third person, effectively marking his death:

Agora, perto do murro, acho que eles já me viram [. . .]. Os

dois revólveres na mão, disparando [. . .], agora eu corro atirando e acertei, ele caiu de cara dentro do carro e eu sinto alegria, a alegria verdadeira, a exaltação, e o da

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construção eu já acertei [. . .], o outro correu, o da carrocinha levantou a metralhadora, filho da puta, eu não vou nem me desviar porque vou acertá-lo primeiro, errei, mas de novo, é...

A rajada da metralhadora o atingiu no peito [. . .].

A deserção definitiva tinha sido realizada. (176)

The switch to the omniscient, third person perspective marks the figurative and literal obliteration of the protagonist's self. Pierre Janet attributes the fragmentation of traumatic memories to the inability of the human mind to integrate new information:

“Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences [. . .]. When that occurs, fragments of non-integrated experience may later manifest recollections or behavioral reenactments” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 160).

The disjointed, yet crystallized nature of the narrator's description of his girlfriend's fate at the hands of the torturers replicates the symptoms of traumatic memory, whereas his suicidal act in the final paragraphs of the novel is a behavioral reenactment. Like “ela,” the protagonist engages in an armed conflict with the police, and resists until his violent death.

The change in verb tenses from present to past in the final scene corresponds with the elimination of the narrator and marks the transformation of reality into memory. The juxtaposition of past and present throughout *Em câmara lenta* implies a fracture in the protagonist's consciousness, which

experiences two simultaneous realities, replicating the physical disintegration of his girlfriend during the torture session. In an article on traumatic memory, van der Kolk and van der Hart comment

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upon this same phenomenon:

“As the trauma is fixed at a certain moment in a person’s life, people live out their existence in two different stages of the life cycle, the traumatic past, and the bleached present” (177).

In addition, the title *Em câmara lenta* itself articulates a preoccupation with time and reality in the novel. Herman observes that the mind assumes a certain cinematographic objectivity during intense experiences:

“Time sense [during a traumatic event] may be altered, *often with a sense of slow motion*, and the experience may lose its quality of ordinary reality” (43, my emphasis).

The question of time is, moreover, intimately linked to that of repetition, a salient feature in *Em câmara lenta*’s textual construction. Each flashback in the novel repeats verbatim the description of the previous one, progressively adding new details without any other perceptible modification, and thus corresponds to the intrusiveness of traumatic memory. Cathy Caruth attributes this phenomenon to the fact that traumatic shock is surprising and disorienting by nature, causing a rupture in the mind’s perception of time:

It is not simply [. . .] the literal threatening to bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in *time*, it has not yet been fully known. (62, Caruth’s emphasis)

Due to this rupture in time, the mind is unable to integrate the traumatic memory and ends up fixating on it, as in the case

of narrator's description of his girlfriend's arrest, torture, and death.

The recurrence of certain sentences, phrases, and words also characterizes *Em câmara lenta's* narrative structure,

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including the repetition of the title itself in the beginning of each fragment describing how the military police brutally murdered "ela." The phrases "É muito tarde" and "Agora eu sei," for example, periodically interrupt the narrator's flow of consciousness.

Together, they suggest Caruth's argument that the intrusiveness of traumatic memories results in a delay in the experience of traumatic shock. The words *gesto* and *grito* recur so frequently that they effectively acquire an emblematic status in Tapajós's novel. On one hand, both assume a strongly political meaning and become associated with the leftist resistance: "o gesto é um movimento de milhões de mãos que sabem [. . .] para que serve o gesto e então tem a força necessária para derrubar, destruir, arrasar tudo e construir" (158). Similarly, the shout or cry represents "todos os calados: dos que não falam por medo e dos que não mais podem falar porque estão mortos" (140). On the other hand, *gesto* and *grito* also symbolize and become synonyms for the deconstruction of the protagonist and "ela," respectively. The narrator refers to his suicide as the definitive gesture, whereas his girlfriend's only reaction to the various acts of torture is a single, inhuman scream.

The act of self-annihilation committed by the protagonist constitutes, paradoxically, a continuation in his search for the truth, as well as an inversion of the structure of power dominated by the military regime. The final flashback reveals the last moments of his girlfriend's life and the tragic circumstances of her death. The narrator decides to recreate the

original traumatic episode, voluntarily engaging in an armed confrontation with the police that ultimately leads to his own violent death and fulfills the Freudian postulate of the death instinct. For many theorists, this suicidal impulse represents an effort of

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reconciliation not only with the traumatic event itself, but also with one's own survival, or, in other words, "a spontaneous, unsuccessful attempt at healing" (Herman 41). Caruth, for example, states that "[r]epetition [. . .] is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to *claim one's survival*" (64, Caruth's emphasis). In addition, the reenactment is a manifestation of the repetition compulsion, which obliges the victim to confront again and again the traumatic incident in order to know and experience it fully. This symbolic return by the protagonist thus represents another means of replicating his girlfriend's deconstruction in the torture chamber.

Referring to this final scene and also to the polemic surrounding the leftist resistance movements during the late sixties and seventies, Johnson interprets *Em câmara lenta* as "in many ways an extremely pessimistic novel of disenchantment, disillusion, and despair, an expression of anguish at the personal destruction and pain that was all too common in Brazil's recent political history" (190). On the other hand, Janet explains the death instinct in terms of a refusal to remain helpless, as well as an affirmation of power (Herman 41). The narrator himself declares that his act of violence is a challenge to the authoritarian system when he directs his speech to the repressors: "vocês vão ver agora, de frente, alguém que não está amarrado, que não está

indefeso, alguém que pode mostrar a vocês o que é coragem, o que é um homem de pé e vocês terão medo [. . .]” (Tapajós 173). From this point of view, Tapajós’s novel does not proffer a pessimistic vision of the Brazilian predicament, as Johnson argues, but rather opts

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for hope, arguing in favor of the reconstruction of collective memory as a necessary step in exposing the masquerade of power maintained by the military junta through state-sponsored violence. In any case, this final scene appears to be designed to provoke thought with respect to the raging debate at the time about whether leftist violence constituted a plausible response to repression in the Brazilian context.

In many ways, *Em câmara lenta* is a precursor to the political testimonies and memoirs, such as Fernando Gabeira’s *O que é isso, companheiro?* (1979), that inundated Brazil between 1979 and 1984 (Johnson 186). Although a work of fiction, Tapajós’s novel is, as Johnson points out, at least somewhat autobiographical in nature, recounting “what must seem to many to be a ‘political fiction,’ but one that the author and many of his contemporaries experienced” (186). John Beverly defines, moreover, the testimonial narrator as one who “speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group” (95). The anonymity of the narrator and his girlfriend certainly conforms to this standard. The novel manages to attain a difficult equilibrium between the necessity of personalizing the guerrilla movement, making it more concrete for the reading public, and the importance of communicating the true proportions of the crisis and portraying a collective rather than

individual suffering.

Dorfman points out that many political testimonies insist upon the dignity of the repressed in response to the dictatorship, which presents itself as guardian and protector of the nation and stigmatizes its enemies in order to justify its repressive

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measure in the name of God and the Fatherland (140). In the preface to *Em câmara lenta*, Tapajós emphasizes the “ingênuo generosidade” of those who participated in the armed struggle, in what appears to be a dedication of the book to “[aqueles] que jogaram tudo, inclusive a vida, na tentativa de mudar o mundo” (XI). In addition, *Em câmara lenta*’s fragmented narrative and multiple perspectives and time frames are all consistent with the structural features identified by Dorfman as being characteristic of the testimonial genre (153). These peculiarities reflect the image of the jigsaw puzzle, which recurs throughout Tapajós’s novel as a metaphor for the protagonist’s endless quest for the truth of the past.

Raising the issue of how to recover and tell the truth about the barbaric acts perpetrated by the military dictatorship and the patriotism of the dissidents who resisted, Tapajós proposes the testimonial narrative as a possible solution. Not only do such texts record an alternative version of the past, they also help to dissipate the existing climate of fear and, by extension, strengthen resistance to repression. In the same way, *Em câmara lenta* fulfills the role of counterpropaganda vis-à-vis the military regime and its discourse of power.

Notes

¹ Baden explains that, for the most part, censorship of fiction in Brazil during the authoritarian rule was justified, at least officially, on moral grounds. For a more detailed discussion of censorship and literature during the dictatorship, see Baden 87-114.

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² For a list of the most important political references in Tapajós's novel, see Johnson, 187.

³ Janete Gaspar Machado even suggests that *Em câmara lenta*'s narrative structure "parece ser ditada por uma impossibilidade ideológica força da censura [. . .]" (77), but gives little or no evidence to support such a conclusion.

⁴ It is important to emphasize that the protagonist is not an eye-witness to his girlfriend's torture and murder, but rather mentally reconstructs the traumatic incident based on information he receives via second-hand accounts.

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