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Palomo | 2014 | *Berna Reale* (courtesy of the artist)

THE GULF BETWEEN TRUTH AND MEMORY

Fernanda Vilar

The dark times Brazil is going through make manifest our concerns about the fading of the news into fake news (1). The electoral strategy of turning lies into truths is not exclusive to modern social media. We need to know how to put the truth back into the truth. We need to know how to conjugate truth with memory in the making of history - especially in light of the recent (in)voluntary incineration of files in important Brazilian museums (2).



The fires at the *Museu da Língua Portuguesa* (São Paulo) in 2015 and at the *Museu Nacional do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro) in September 2018, whose collection of more than 20 million files went up in smoke, are a metaphor for the disregard for culture and history that has been palpable for years in Brazilian society. In Brazil, minorities try to speak, but their words are empty because they have no power. In the 1980s there was an outbreak of suicides amongst the Guarani Kayowá community. Deprived of the power of words, these indigenous peoples found in this brutal gesture a way of expressing the nation's indifference and their abandonment to *ruralista* attacks. Today neither words nor suicides shock the Brazilian public, who are anesthetized to the normalised and systematic murder of their black population. Museum archives and minority voices, which could offer ways of thinking the country differently, have gradually faded away. As the writer and journalist Nelson Rodrigues puts it: "underdevelopment is never improvised: it is the work of centuries".

I believe that Victor Hugo's *L'Année terrible* (3) will come true in 2019. His poem "À qui la faute" (Who's to blame?) is addressed to a person who sets a library on fire. The poem figures this act as a heinous and self-destructive crime because books can help societies escape from ignorance and darkness:

You turn the human spirit to smoke!
Have you forgotten that books
Can set you free? The book is there on high;
It gleams, it shines its light.
It destroys the scaffold, war, famine;
When it speaks there are no more slaves or outcasts [...] (4)

In this electoral period, the two main Brazilian political figures do not engage in dialogue: one because he is imprisoned and deprived of his power to speak, the other because he refuses to. The one who wants to speak cannot, whilst the other is hiding, preferring a digital guerrilla strategy in which his truth prevails unquestioned by his followers. Today the word 'follower' assumes its cruellest sense, allied to a faith that questions nothing, inserted in a Machiavellian dichotomy between good and evil.

As Eliane Brum has explained (5), Jair Bolsonaro won the election when we had to begin to explain the obvious. The worst thing is that these explanations do not dissuade his followers, who see in him a mythical figure- a messiah, as indeed his middle name proclaims. Records show Hitler's voters



claiming he was a funny character with not much patience and a lot of intolerance, but they didn't believe he would be able to put what he said into practice. You would hope that Timur Vermes' well-known book *He is Back* (6) (*Er ist wieder da*, 2015) could at least dissuade the most enlightened voters by illustrating the return of Hitler's ideas in the present. We know that history repeats itself. Thesis 5 of Walter Benjamin's 1940 *On the Concept of History* emphasises: "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."

When the archives of dictatorship remain closed, when torturers are granted amnesty, when culture is not invested in and when minority communities' sites of memory are treated with indifference, we fail to reckon with history. Brazil is condemning its present by not doing its duty of memory with the past. That history that has not been thought about, questioned and debated runs the risk of becoming a scratched disk, jumping, repeating itself. Along the path of oblivion and omission, symbolic actions affect individual and group subjectivity. Though in the last fifteen years there has been a small but significant improvement in the representation of minorities in education and political posts, now things seem to be regressing again. When Jair Bolsonaro states that "minorities have to shut up and bow to the majority" (7) we are one step away from the death of democracy through the democratic process. The path of oppression has a long history in Brazilian society, with attacks against minorities whose subjectivity is denied and who are not represented in the spheres of power. Electing a man like this only bolsters the politics of domination that has never disappeared in Brazil.

When history and duties to memory are ignored, truth can easily be thought of as a personal choice. Once accommodated in powerful discourse, these "truths" assume impunity: often disregarded and rarely condemned, even though they represent hate speech. Hatred has been normalized and has propelled a radicalism in which "good" struggles against "evil." In this dichotomy, evil is once again the 'other'. A discourse that does not humanize the 'other' authorizes barbarism – as we have seen in the post-election reactions (8).

Truth is constructed. Memory too. Therefore they can be manipulated. Truth is constituted by facts. We should be able to verify these facts, but without access to archives, these facts depend on memories. If minorities do not have their voices heard, and since their radical acts no longer have symbolic value, what remains of the struggle? Memories are transmitted, appropriated, and reused in the present. That is why memory reveals more about the present than about the past.



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TRUTH AND MEMORY

In the current Brazilian political conjuncture, where truth and memory have nothing to do with one another, what will remain of the 2018 elections?

Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

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- (1) The links between Cambridge Analytica and Bolsonaro's campaign are explained [here](#).
 - (2) [Eight cultural institutions have burnt down in the last decade](#).
 - (3) A poem by Victor Hugo, *A qui la faute?* From the book *L'Année Terrible, VIII, 1872*. The French text is available [here](#).
 - (4) Our translation.
 - (5) See [here](#).
 - (6) [The book has been made into a film](#).
 - (7) [See Bolsonaro's declaration](#).
 - (8) [Deaths resulting from the elections](#).
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