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The Consuming Self

In the best-selling self-help book *The Secret* (2006) by Australian Rhonda Byrne, self-described teachers with credentials that include “personal coach,” “moneymaking expert,” and “visionary,” ask the reader: “What kind of a house do you want to live in? Do you want to be a millionaire? What kind of a business do you want to have? Do you want more success? What do you really want?” A few pages later, they explain:

Why do you think that 1 percent of the population earns around 96 percent of all the money that’s being earned? Do you think that’s an accident? It’s designed that way. They understand something. They understand The Secret, and now you are being introduced to The Secret.

The book’s contributors affirm categorically that the secret to success is within you, that all you need to do to achieve what you want is to think positively. According to them, this is the law of attraction, which is “as impartial and impersonal as the law of gravity is. It is precise, and it is exact” (27). In other words, if you do not get what you want, it is because you did not picture yourself enough as a successful person. The book and the homonymous film were certainly successful, for, combined, they generated $300 million dollars in revenue just three years after the initial release of the film in 2006 (Lidner).

The rhetoric of self-help books such as *The Secret* taps into one’s wish to be visible, desired, talked about. It promises you the secret to unlock success in all areas of your life. As the quotes above illustrate, this success often entails owning commodities. The book’s rhetoric goes hand in hand with what Bauman calls the commodification of the self, that is, the attempt to sell oneself as desirable
by displaying commodities that make one look more socially attractive (*Consuming Life* 6). The process of commodification of the self is characteristic of what Bauman calls liquid modernity (*Liquid Modernity* 1), a term that he uses to refer to the current stage of capitalism. This stage is characterized by a liquid quality, which permeates all spheres of social life. Bauman contrasts this “liquid” society to that of “solid” Fordism. In the latter, capital was fixed, individuals started and ended their careers in the same job, and had a clear idea of what personal success meant and how to achieve it. In contrast, in the liquid society, job security and ideals of personal success float along with capital, generating a race toward a blurry future of instability and uncertainty (58). This instability calls for a search for anchors, one of which is the commodification of the self. In order to stay in the race, individuals are pushed to turn themselves into attractive and efficient products. In this process, we are led to turn even our behavior and our personality traits into commodities, often quite literally, as our electronic footprint allows corporations to profit on our personal data, which covers anything from our taste in music to our political leanings (Pariser 45).

In contemporary Brazilian fiction, the work of Lísias and B. Carvalho in *O livro dos mandarins* (*The Book of Mandarins*) and *Reprodução* (*Reproduction*), respectively, helps us think through this process of commodification. These narratives look into how the commodification of the self translates into everyday practices, criticizing its potential consequences, and reflecting on literature’s role as a possible antidote to this commodifying process. *O livro dos mandarins* tells the story of Paulo, who works for an international bank. He is obsessed with professional success, which he measures by criteria such as how much networking one is capable of doing, or how closely one follows the model of his idol, former president of Brazil, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2003). The title of the novel references Paulo’s homonymous book, which is written by his ghost writer, named *poeta* (poet) Paulo, based on Paulo’s scattered notes about how to be successful in the corporate world through strategies that he develops as he attempts to climb the corporate ladder. As described early on in the narrative, the book is “uma espécie de guia para jovens executivos com análises financeiras, geopolíticas e dicas de gerenciamento” (“a kind of guide for young executives, with financial and geopolitical analyses...
and tips on management”; Lírias 72). Reprodução, in turn, follows a man, who is simply identified as “o estudante de chinês” (“the student of Chinese”), as he is stopped and interrogated by the police when trying to check in for a flight to China. The goal of the interrogation seems to be to catch the student’s teacher of Chinese, who was supposed to take the same flight to China and is suspected of being involved in some kind of international trafficking scheme. As we follow the interrogation, we learn about the protagonist’s arrogant and prejudiced personality, which is built on the less than reliable sources of information that he consumes online.

Both novels denounce their protagonists’ failure to be the successful individuals that they believe themselves to be. We find out that instead of smart, well informed, and highly successful, Paulo and the student of Chinese are actually misinformed prejudiced men, who have achieved nothing but delusional views of themselves and of the world around them. By unveiling the failure behind the narratives of only apparent success that their protagonists attempt to tell, the novels in question ultimately denounce the pitfalls of the neoliberal thought that shapes the protagonists’ experiences, while unveiling the subtle ways in which this thought permeates daily life in the twenty-first century. Through a language of excess, which piles up clichés, disconnected information, and often just plain nonsense, the novels expose the empty promises of the capitalist utopia and caution against the dangers of self-commodification, the most troubling of which, the novels suggest, is the breakdown of democracy. These novels’ critique of authoritarian figures relying on superficial knowledge acquired within their bubbles—corporate culture, in the case of Lírias’s protagonist; the blog sphere and social media, in the case of B. Carvalho’s—conveys to us the urgency with which these issues need to be addressed.

From this perspective, consumption appears in the novels as an alienating force that blinds characters to social injustices and turns them into oppressors. Both characters are so immersed in consumer culture, so mesmerized by it, that there seems to be no way out of this alienated state for them. Nevertheless, unlike Bonassi’s and Sant’Anna’s take on the alienating powers of consumption, Lírias and B. Carvalho contemplate a possible solution, one that appears rather difficult to be achieved in their
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narratives: the reading of literature. I call this representation of existing in consumer culture utopic reinvention, for it is only in a realm beyond everyday life—one which these writers’ protagonists are not capable of achieving—that change seems possible in the narratives in question.

Lísias’s *O livro dos mandarins*: What Is in a Name?

The name of the protagonist of *O livro dos mandarins* is one of the most striking features of the novel. It takes reading no more than a few pages of the narrative to realize that almost every character holds a name that is in some way a variation of Paulo’s. For example, his mother is Dona Paula; his secretary is Paula; her nephew is Paulo; her father is Seu Paulo. One of the bank employees from Scotland is Paul; the director of the bank’s London branch is Paulson; a vice president of the Chilean branch is Paulino; an Irish employee of the corporation is Pauling. An Eastern European waitress who helps Paulo in London is Paulina; a Swedish woman that Paulo encounters in Sudan is Paulina; Pauline is married to a Paul; the “passport controller” in Sudan is Pauli; Paulo’s ghost writer is known as “poeta Paulo”; and several other employees of the bank where Paulo works are also named either Paulo or Paula. Therefore, from the start, the reader learns that this novel revolves around one person and one person only, Paulo.

This repetition of names reflects consumer culture’s subjectivity fetishism, which Bauman defines as a process by which consumers are dissolved into a sea of commodities and are imposed the task of “lifting themselves out of the grey and flat invisibility and insubstantiality making themselves stand out from the mass of indistinguishable objects” (*Consuming Life* 12). Read from this perspective, Lísias’s choice to name almost everyone a version of the name Paulo not only points to the self-centered nature of the protagonist, but also emphasizes his commodity status and amplifies his need to stand out in a sea of “Paulos.” In response to this need to make the character stand out, Paulo’s name will change fifty times throughout the novel, with a unique identity—oftentimes based on his supposedly distinguished abilities—assigned to him with every name change. These identities, albeit specific to each context in which they are assigned in the narrative, are yet generic, for they could technically apply to anyone else with the same
characteristics. Many of these names are noun phrases that replace Paulo's name as the subject or object of several sentences, for paragraphs or even multiple pages, until he earns another designation, which will then become the new name used by the narrator to refer to Paulo. In this way, Paulo is named “o profissional brilhante” (“the brilliant professional”), “Versati” (a reference to the brand of clothes that he wears), “o samurai chinês” (“the Chinese samurai”), “homem feito” (“distinguished man”), “muito detalhista e metódico” (“very detailed and methodical”), “o homem realizado” (“the accomplished man”), and “o homem mais inteligente do mundo” (“the most intelligent man in the world”), among others. However, as the narrative constantly creates tension between the image of the perfect man that Paulo has of himself and how others actually see him, some of his names point to quite the opposite of success. This is the case, for example, of the derogative nickname he receives in Sudan “branquelo” (“whitey”), and other names by which his colleagues call him, such as “o torto” (“the warped”), “seu bobo” (“you fool”), or simply “aquele cara que foi pra China” (“that dude who went to China”). Paulo’s name changes mark the oscillation of his identity between a generic unimportant or even worthless object and a commodity to which certain positive values are attached in order to make it more marketable.

Paulo’s name changes convey his value to the bank specifically as, according to the narrator, Paulson’s impression of the protagonist becomes progressively positive while he reads his application to participate in the company’s “China Project,” of which Paulo hoped to be the leader. As Paulson reads the application documents, he replaces each letter of Paulo’s name with a star supposedly to indicate Paulo’s outstanding qualities. The main criteria for using the stars seems to be Paulo’s degree of loyalty to the bank. He receives the first star when Paulson reads Paulo’s note that a company’s employee “jamais [deve revelar] os segredos de uma empresa, [e sim levá-los] para o túmulo” (“must never reveal a company’s secrets, but rather take them to the grave”; Lisias 47). Paulson adds two more stars to Paulo’s name after a preliminary interview, as he notices more signs of Paulo’s loyalty to the bank. A fourth star is added when Paulson decides that Paulo deserves to move on to the second phase of the competition after he shows absolute fidelity to the bank by firing his own girlfriend for what they claim to be good cause. Finally, the last letter of Paulo’s name
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is replaced by a star after he impresses Paulson while giving a presentation in London. This presentation prompts the director to designate Paulo as the leader of the China project in what is supposedly a secret mission. While the stars are meant to represent Paulo’s excellence—only to the extent to which he puts the bank above everything else in his life—they also represent the increasing effacement of Paulo’s identity as an individual and his reification, that is, his transformation into a tool completely at the service of the company.

In the neoliberal environment in which Paulo lives, his quest for perfection translates into an obsession with cultivating an image of strength and success that aligns with consumer society’s values. One of these values is the same idea that some of Sant’Anna’s short stories criticize, which is that one’s success or failure is entirely up to them. Paulo’s book, titled *O livro dos mandarins*, like the homonymous narrative in which he is a character, reproduces these values of self-entrepreneurship, like self-help books such as the aforementioned best seller *The Secret*, as well as the tenets of prosperity theology that we addressed in Chapter 1. According to him, his book intends to help readers avoid falling short of a successful life by “taking control of their own destiny.”

Among the many ways in which this operation must take place, Paulo notes that networking is essential. He explicitly says that if you do not make as much money as you deserve, it is your fault because it is the result of you not networking properly. His comment references the Chinese practice of *guanxi*, which is the use of personal ties for economic purposes that is part of China’s current capitalist practices (Pinheiro-Machado, “Fazendo guanxi” 99). On the other hand, his comment also evokes the philosophy of Multilevel Marketing companies (MLMs). These companies have recently acquired much visibility in Brazil. Like their American counterparts (“Multilevel Marketing”), they focus heavily on a rhetoric of consumption in order to convince people to join in the business. For instance, they bring in members who have achieved success to tell the stories of how they were able to afford the house and the car(s) of their dreams. Hashtags on social media such as #anovaeconomia (#theneweconomy) encapsulate the branding of these MLMs in Brazil as the most promising way to reach financial stability in the twenty-first century. The use of other hashtags such as #lawofattraction (a reference to Byrne’s book, *The Secret*)
on social media by members of MLMs both in the United States and Brazil, along with their comments attributing their financial prosperity to God, indicates a close connection between MLMs and the tenets of the prosperity gospel.

Drawing on a rhetoric similar to that of these organizations about one’s responsibility for their own success, Lísiás’s protagonist later on blames employees again for being fired, saying that only idiots lose their jobs because they do not manage the situation well, thus making themselves unemployable. The “unemployment paradox,” he says, explains that if people who lose their jobs knew how to manage challenging situations through networking, they would not have lost their jobs in the first place (Lísiás 158). Likewise, it is imperative for one to be self-confident because someone who lacks confidence will never be promoted (63). As an indication of the spread of the ideas of success propagated by Paulo, his book is said to be intended for “um público mais amplo, simplesmente todas as pessoas que estão atrás de exemplos de sucesso, inspirações para uma postura diária mais enriquecedora ou um pouco de filosofia que sirva para a vida” (“a broader audience, simply anyone who is looking for examples of success, inspiration for a more enriching everyday behavior and a little bit of philosophy that is useful for life”; 207). Paulo’s description of his book’s target audience, which encompasses virtually everyone, points to the pervasiveness of neoliberal principles in twenty-first century Brazilian society. These principles, the novel suggests, apply to individuals’ lives from the very moment they are born, as exemplified by Paulo’s secretary’s family’s plans for her nephew’s future. When the child is born, the first thing that everyone in the family agrees on is that the best way to start building a future of success for him is to make sure that he will have his own business (42). In the novel, one’s identity is thus inescapably shaped by neoliberal capital.

Of Great Leaders and Neoliberal Thought

Much of Paulo’s philosophy comes from a, to say the least, questionable appropriation of Confucian thought, as evidenced by the protagonist’s multiple references to the Chinese philosopher in question. Confucius, who was also a teacher and a politician, developed ideas of personal growth through morality.
Confucius’s China, of around 500 BC, bore some resemblance to the context of consumer culture in which Lísias’s novel takes place. That was a period of conspicuous consumption, displayed by nobles’ and rulers’ way of life. China was steeped in war, treason, passion for money, and self-interest. After the breakdown of feudalism, as a consequence of the end of the Zhou dynasty, the rules regarding the right to be a lord became complex because there was no longer one single way in which someone could claim political power. Consequently, several plots to claim the possession of land were set in motion within and across families, resulting in the reduction of the number of feudal states from one hundred twenty to only seven in a span of about five hundred years (Rainey 3). Given such a context of violence and selfishness, Confucius considered it necessary to develop through education virtues such as filial piety, honesty and sincerity, dutifulness, loyalty, and rightness, which would in turn lead to what he called Humanity, an umbrella term for all virtues, which was understood as the opposite of self-interest. For the philosopher, Humanity is to be expressed through rituals as a way to achieve a state of Gentleman. The latter term is defined by Confucius as an example of moral behavior, and is presented in contrast to the petty man, whom Confucius characterizes as arrogant, but never grand (42).

Paulo’s version of Confucius’s ideas are to be spread with the publication of his book, which reads like a cross between Byrne’s *The Secret* and Confucius’s *Analects*: decontextualized rules of behavior that, if followed, are supposed to guarantee the achievement of success. However, in spite of his seeking inspiration in Confucius, Paulo’s behavior, as well as the behavior that he encourages in his teachings about corporate culture, actually coincide, for the most part, with that of Confucius’s notion of the petty man. Unlike Confucius’s *Analects*, which strongly opposed “greed for money, possessions, and power … [as well as being] desperate to be famous and to indulge in sensual pleasure” (Rainey 35), the fictitious *O livro dos mandarins* values quite the opposite. The latter is meant to be a kind of bible of corporate culture, that is, a set of guidelines whose goal is to help alleviate the uncertainties of everyday life and to build employees’ identities within the company, so that they will work more, better, and be more competitive. Paulo’s book, therefore, reinforces corporate culture
values such as ambition, efficiency, profitability, the creation of wealth, and, indirectly, the transformation of each individual's life into a mini-business in itself, generating stress and contaminating social relations (L. Barbosa). These values clash in many ways with Confucius’s ideals, thus transforming Paulo’s book into a guide to commodifying oneself in order to (supposedly) thrive in consumer capitalism.

Confucius’s work “inspires” not only Paulo’s book, but also a business of his own, which he claims to be a consulting firm for executives. He names the firm Confucius and describes it as:

Paulo thus chooses a name for his firm as homage to someone who, in fact, would likely be very much against many of the precepts of consumer culture that the protagonist’s company means to emphasize. Indeed, a closer look at Paulo’s philosophy reveals that it is more in line with a more recent version of Confucianism. This version, which was established in 1958 and named New Confucianism, supports capitalism and intends to combine traditional Chinese values with a modernizing Western mentality (Rainey 188). However, while New Confucians argue that bringing Confucius’s ideas back—which had been practically extinguished since Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution—would prevent some of the negative consequences of capitalism, such as individualism, selfishness, and materialism, Paulo finds inspiration
in Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s policies in line with neoliberal thought, which is at the heart of some of these very consequences.

Paulo develops an obsession with ex-president of Brazil Fernando Henrique Cardoso, commonly known by his initials, FHC. He refers to Cardoso countless times throughout the novel as a model for those who want to achieve professional and personal success. He describes President Cardoso as “o cara que mudou a história do país” (“the guy who changed the country’s history”; Lísias 36), the one who had a “governo insuperável” (“insurmountable administration”; 65), and who was responsible for a “transformação histórica” (“historical transformation”; 53) of the country.

The historical transformation to which the protagonist refers is Cardoso’s success in turning Brazil into a neoliberal state. Cardoso believed that Brazil would achieve economic growth through the privatization of industries, the cutting of regulations, and the opening of the market to foreign investment (Goertzel 128). During his first term, he significantly expanded the privatization process that had started with his predecessor, impeached President Fernando Collor de Melo (1990–92), in order to include utility companies, railways, and banks. He then used part of the revenue to pay short-term government debts (131). In addition, he increased taxes, cut government spending, particularly retirement benefits, in response to the business sector’s complaints that government regulations that guaranteed benefits such as pensions and leaves made national businesses less competitive in the international scene. FHC also pushed for subcontracting to nongovernmental agencies in order to increase efficiency. In other words, despite his reluctance to admit it, FHC closely followed the tenets of neoliberal thought, which Harvey defines as

a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices … if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action, if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture … Neoliberalism has … pervasive effects on ways of thought to
The point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world. ("Introduction," *A Brief History*)

Lísias’s protagonist exemplifies this (extreme, in his case) incorporation of neoliberal thought as common sense, for his life, both professionally and personally, is guided by these neoliberal principles. It is no surprise, then, that FHC becomes such an idol for Paulo, to the point of a simple glance at a picture of the ex-president—which Paulo carries with him like many Brazilians would carry a picture of a saint in their pockets or wallets—gives him strength to continue to pursue his corporate career. The picture even has the power to nearly bring the protagonist to tears. Repeating the discourse of those who defended FHC’s candidacy against former union leader Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, who was painted as unprepared to become president allegedly due to, among other reasons, his lack of formal higher education, Paulo considers FHC a “verdadeiro intelectual” (“true intellectual”; Lísias 87) and a “verdadeiro conhecedor da alma humana” (“true expert in the human soul”; 94). For Paulo, FHC has a “espécie de luz que emana das pessoas que se acham importantes e torna seus olhos meio opacos, o rosto cheio de nuances e o corpo um pouco mais alto” (“a kind of light that emanates from those people who consider themselves important and that makes their eyes look somewhat opaque, the face filled with nuances and the body a bit taller”; 135). This description shows a god-like FHC, a savior. Indeed, Cardoso ascended to power mainly thanks to his ability to do what seemed impossible at the time: pull the country out of a deep recession. His success in the elections stemmed, in part, from the creation of the *Real* Plan, developed when he was Minister of Finance during the Itamar Franco administration (1993–94). Strategically, the plan was launched with the goal of bringing inflation down just at the time when voters, feeling its positive effects, would be compelled to vote for Cardoso in the upcoming presidential elections. With the help of communications giant Globo Television’s massive publicity on the success of the plan, Cardoso was elected president in 1995 and reelected in 1999 (Goertz 119).

Although Paulo does not refer to the Cardoso campaign’s use of marketing strategies, FHC appears in the novel as a model for anyone concerned about their own image and the value that this
image projects. Besides their neoliberal perspectives, Lísias’s protagonist and President Cardoso share some of the same physical traits and business-oriented mindset. For example, it has been pointed out that FHC, similar to Paulo, often appears stiff and formal, an image that had to be softened when he was running for president because he “usually dresses like a corporate executive” (Goertzel 113). In addition, FHC had close ties to the business sector during his academic career as a sociologist. For instance, he secured funding from a businessman, Fernando Gasparian, for his research about business people in the 1950s, when he co-created and directed the Centro de Estudos de Sociologia Industrial e do Trabalho (CESIT—Center for the Studies on the Sociology of Industry and Work) (Sorj and Fausto 36). He also founded Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (CEBRAP—Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning) with the financial support of the Ford Foundation, which his colleagues were hesitant to accept, given the symbolic meaning of surrendering to North American capitalism (46).

Beneath the protagonist’s portrayal of FHC’s tremendous success, however, lies a narrative of shortcomings. Paulo admires the former president for having been able to consolidate the banking system in Brazil and having led the best administration in the history of the country (Lísias 132), but a closer look at the banking crisis of 1996 reveals some of the shortcomings of the Real Plan and, ultimately, of neoliberal practices in general. As Edmund Amann and Werner Baer note in their article “A ilusão da estabilidade: A economia brasileira no governo FHC” (“The Illusion of Stability: The Brazilian Economy in the FHC Administration”), although initially successful, the effectiveness of the Real Plan depended on controversial long-term reforms that could only come to be partially implemented in 1998 when the IMF (International Monetary Fund) intervened. The banking crisis was set in motion in great part by the waning of the consumption expansion that the Real Plan initially granted the working class, when inflation and high interest rates made it more difficult for private debt to be paid off (Amann and Baer 152–53). To respond to the crisis, the government created a series of measures that resulted in the consolidations to which Paulo refers, with private banks buying public ones. While the crisis was tamed and the banking system became more efficient, once again it was the low-income population who
paid the price: popular sectors considered less attractive to private banks were left unassisted when some of the public banks that used to serve them were wiped out (154).

Lísias’s novel mocks the Cardoso administration, making the former president the idol of a pathetic businessperson who only *appears* to be successful—as we will see in the next section—, thus suggesting that FHC was a flawed and unsustainable model of a leader. By tracing a parallel between the protagonist’s story of apparent success and that of FHC’s, the novel hints at narratives of failure underlying both of these individuals and, ultimately, points to the distance between neoliberal discourse and neoliberal practice. In other words, the novel unveils the fiction of the neoliberal narrative, which promises a chance of prosperity to all, but in practice delivers prosperity to some at the expense of others (Harvey, *A Brief History* ch. 3).

Lísias continues to question apparent narratives of success that have points of convergence with neoliberal thought by referencing another political figure that Paulo considers a good example for those who want to understand the corporate world and attain success in it (127). That second “icon” is Chinese dictator Mao Zedong. For Paulo, Mao was a great leader, who made sure that the country was ready for the implementation of a market economy by his successors (44). China is for Paulo a “great country” for having adapted so well to a market economy, thanks, according to him, to Mao’s leadership, which prepared the Chinese for this economic transition, in the protagonist’s view. Paulo believes that Mao’s successful model comes from the “absolute trust” that the Chinese have in their government, which has aided the country in “straightening itself up” while “benefiting the entire population” (66). Paulo’s recipe for success in the corporate world includes modeling within one’s business the Chinese attitude of “absolute trust and loyalty” toward leaders such as Mao.

Yet again, what Paulo’s opinion of Mao ignores is the fact that many of Mao’s policies led China into a massive crisis that impacted the population to varying degrees, resulting in starvation in certain rural areas (Teiwes 138). Thanks to political propaganda, Mao’s image maintained some degree of positivity until his death. Close Mao followers saw him as wise, gifted, masterful, history itself. They approached him in awe and admired his persona for combining “the talents of a political thinker, philosopher, general,
poet, and perhaps a Chinese sage, someone with grand vision and practical skills that held out hope for achieving the promised land of a new China” (31–32). Others credited Mao with overcoming issues such as corruption, unemployment, and inflation (32). This description resembles Paulo’s view of FHC, thus creating a parallel between Mao and the Brazilian former president. Paulo elevates FHC to the level of myth that Mao acquired. Of course, there are more differences than similarities between these two historical figures, although the changes in their political paths have in common the moving away from certain socio-political values. Mao was a communist leader who turned into a bloody dictator, whereas FHC was a leftist sociologist who pushed neoliberal policies during his time as a democratically elected president. However, by approximating these two figures, Lísias’s novel suggests that there are some rather not so visible points of convergence between these models of leadership. These points of convergence lie in the authoritarian qualities that neoliberalism shares with dictatorial regimes. Neoliberalism tends to use authoritarian state power while claiming to be acting in the name of democracy. In the words of Harvey:

To guard against their greatest fears—fascism, communism, socialism, authoritarian populism, and even majority rule—the neoliberals have to put strong limits on democratic governance, relying instead upon undemocratic and unaccountable institutions (such as the Federal Reserve or the IMF) to make intense state interventions and government by elites and “experts” in a world where the state is supposed not to be interventionist … Faced with social movements that seek collective interventions, therefore, the neoliberal state is itself forced to intervene, sometimes repressively, thus denying the very freedoms it is supposed to uphold. (A Brief History ch. 3)

For Harvey, the neoliberal state is authoritarian when it comes to market enforcement. Furthermore, neoliberalism can lead to the revival of authoritarian forms such as fascism and nationalism, as a response to the loss of social order that results from the destruction of social solidarity, unstoppable commodification, and excessive individual freedoms (A Brief History ch. 3). By putting Mao and FHC side by side as myths of communism and neoliberalism respectively, Lísias prompts readers to reflect on the hidden contradictions and dangers of neoliberal thought.
Like Mao’s China and FHC’s Brazil, Sudan appears in the novel as a deceivingly prosperous country, thanks to the work of another leader that Paulo comes to admire, the country’s seventh president, Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir (1989–2019). According to the protagonist, “no Sudão as coisas funcionam direito porque o governo está atento a tudo o que acontece. Muitos países por aí, inclusive na África, têm políticos desleixados, o que acaba prejudicando os interesses do próprio povo” (“in Sudan, things work well because the government is aware of everything. Many countries out there, including African countries, have lazy politicians, which ends up jeopardizing the interests of their own people”; Lírias 134). Paulo admires al-Bashir because, in his view, the Sudanese leader was able to govern effectively without resorting to terrorism. Furthermore, Paulo affirms that the Janjaweed—actual armed militia supported by al-Bashir—are the government’s secret agents, who are in charge of border control to ensure that foreigners do not destabilize the area. Paulo believes that, if the president were to send the army, that action would stain the country’s image of an orderly nation.

Obviously, Paulo’s portrayal of Sudan is far from accurate. In reality, al-Bashir took over power after a military coup ousted the previous democratically elected government. He was elected president three times in allegedly corrupt elections and was indicted in 2010 by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for genocide (Lynch and Hamilton). The Janjaweed systematically raped, slaughtered, starved, and displaced the population of Darfur. An estimate of over 400,000 people died because of the government’s and the militia’s actions in Sudan (Prendergast).

In spite of all of Paulo’s praising for Sudan and its government, the narrator points out that the country is not perfect and that the protagonist comes in as the foreigner who, according to a taxi driver that takes the protagonist through Khartoum, will help make Sudan the first African nation of the developed world (Lírias 146). The taxi driver’s comment, along with the supposed financial intention of Paulo’s mission, hints at foreign influence in Sudan’s economy, namely that of the IMF and the World Bank. Sudan’s negotiations with the IMF first started in 1978, aiming, as elsewhere, at the acceleration of economic growth and the reduction of poverty. However, as Lírias’s novel suggests, behind the promises of neoliberal development lie international interests that bring violence rather than positive change to the majority of the
population. In Sudan’s case, John Prendergast shows in his 1989 assessment of the consequences of the IMF’s policies, following the usual neoliberal recommendations—which included currency devaluation, liberalization of trade, cuts to social spending, and increasing privatization of the economy—Sudan was driven into starvation, increased deficit and instability, and redistribution of income that favored the rich (47).

Paulo’s role as a representative of a Westerner posing as a foreign savior suggests that, as has tended to be the case with neoliberalism, international pressures justify themselves, even if their justification clashes with basic neoliberal principles, that is, even if it means supporting an authoritarian regime in the name of “individual freedom” (Harvey, A Brief History ch. 1). Lírias’s novel suggests that these international interests have little regard for the drastic consequences they leave behind when Paulo dismisses the possible involvement of his bank in facilitating the Iran-Contra affair and funding the IRA (Irish Republican Army) as “alguns deslizes involuntários” (“some involuntary slips”; Lírias 91).

Lírias’s protagonist aspires to become the intersection of these three political figures, that is, FHC, Mao, and al-Bashir, a combination that is depicted in the novel as not just pathetic but also dangerous. As the analysis has shown thus far, Paulo serves as an example of neoliberal thought run amok. His obsession with corporate success leads him into extreme competition, isolation, an unhealthy fast-paced routine, and even paranoia. His everyday life is completely overtaken by the neoliberal vision of individual entrepreneurial freedom in the sense that anything that can help him climb the corporate ladder is fair game for him, regardless of the consequences for others or even for himself. His idea of relaxation is the feeling of having finished a project for the bank. He does not worry about having friends, but rather about building a network of people whom he can use to achieve his professional goals. One of his rituals is to make lists of what he calls “magic words,” which include words from the language of capital such as “enriquecer” (“to become rich”) and “produzir” (“to produce/be productive”; Lírias 135), painting mental pictures of a successful future, much in the way that Byrne advises in The Secret.

The way that Paulo treats those who work for him at Confucius is also revealing of the exploitative quality of the neoliberal practices he stands for. The company, which is advertised as a space
that provides training for businessmen, with special services for high-end executives who need to de-stress, is in practice a brothel in which women live in quasi-slavery conditions. The main employees at Confucius are women taken by Paulo to Brazil from Sudan, who have undergone genital mutilation. Their services are described as massages and, according to Paulo, are meant to respond to his clients’ needs. As Paulo himself puts it, “a Confucius … não pode deixar de ouvir as críticas dos clientes e tentar se ajustar aos anseios deles” (“Confucius cannot ignore its clients’ criticism and [must] attempt to adapt to their desires”; Lísiás 315). After all, in consumer capitalism, the (powerful) consumer is always right. It is in order to respond to his clients’ “needs” that Paulo forces one of his female employees, who is actually Brazilian, to undergo a mutilation operation by a doctor who engages in illegal medical practices. The novel ends with the woman going into the clinic for her operation. This scene immediately follows the narrator’s report on Paulo’s success, thus suggesting the link between the two events. Paulo’s success, as well as that of the doctor himself, who proclaims “se cheguei aqui onde estou hoje, foi depois de muita seriedade e esforço” (“if I got where I am today it was because of much commitment and effort”; 324), depends on the exploitation of these women. Paulo’s company’s foundation, thus, lies on human trafficking, exploitation of labor, a total lack of regulation thanks to the bribery of politicians and police, and marketing that aims to hide the real goal of the business. The company, run by an individual who defends neoliberal principles with such fervor, and who has leaders that range from elected democratic supporters of neoliberalism to bloody dictators, stands for the possible extremes that private interests can reach in today’s world.

**Failure: The Narrative Behind the Narrative**

As we have seen, while being evaluated by the bank, the letters in Paulo’s name are changed into stars, in a process that is meant to indicate his ascension in the company at the same time as his transformation into a mere object that exists at the service of the bank. This transformation casts doubt on his status within the corporation, which is further emphasized by several signs that the bank, rather than promoting him, appears to be relieving him of his duties.
One of such signs is the fact that, later on in the novel, the reader finds out that Paulo is actually never sent to China, but rather to Sudan. At the same time, the bank severs Paulo’s ties with it, in a move vaguely justified by the narrator as a way to keep Paulo’s trip somewhat a secret for reasons that are unclear in the novel. There is also a sense that Paulo may have psychological issues such as compulsion and paranoia, both expressed in terms of his socio-economic ambitions, and potentially linked to his apparent dismissal from the bank. These psychological issues manifest themselves, for example, in rituals that Paulo creates, such as retracing President Cardoso’s official trip to China or mentally repeating mantras associated with corporate culture, as ways to soothe himself when he cannot sleep at night. Some of his behavior also indicates that he believes people are persecuting him in an attempt to impede his professional ascension.

Although there is little information about his childhood, Paulo’s disorders seem to be connected to his quest to be the perfect child, which turns later on into his quest to be the best employee in the bank. Acceptance during his childhood comes from his imaginary friend, the extraterrestrial Rincão, whose name is phonetically similar to the augmentative form of the Portuguese word *rico* (“rich”). The friend comes to visit him and promises to take him to his planet, where he would find the cure to the back pain that will plague Paulo his entire life as a kind of somatization of his emotional challenges (Lísias 113). Paulo’s obsession with a Chinese piece of equipment that, according to what he has heard, would finally cure him, suggests that China takes the place, psychologically, of Rincão’s planet in the protagonist’s adulthood. In the meantime, Paulo’s efforts to learn Chinese in order to achieve success mirror his earlier learning of *rinconês*. As a word derived from the name of the imaginary friend, *rinconês* sounds like a neologism for “the language of the rich.” Perhaps here lies a psychological (and metaphorical) explanation for why Paulo’s trip to China is associated with professional and personal success.

In light of Paulo’s apparent failure to go to China, the narrator’s obsessive insistence on Paulo’s brilliance throughout the entire narrative comes across as an attempt to mask the protagonist’s probable career failure. There is a sense of pathological anxiety in much of the language of the novel, which goes hand in hand with Paulo’s apparent psychological issues. As the narrative progresses,
it becomes evident that the protagonist inhabits a world of appearances. It is a world of simulacra, that is, a world that Baudrillard defines as filled with signs, images of an absence, of a non-existing reality that one desires and projects onto objects meant to represent this reality (6). By revealing this world of simulacra, the narrative of success turns into a narrative of failure, in the sense that everything that the protagonist conquers is much more modest than what he tries to make it seem or, at best, it is achieved through questionable means.

The importance of appearances in Paulo’s life is evident even in the most banal aspects of his job, such as the strategically crafted emails that he sends out to all employees with the purpose of portraying himself as a “tolerant man,” completely dedicated to increasing productivity, “a big concern” for all (Lírias 29). However, his lack of tolerance is evident when the narrator reveals his opinion about the secretary’s reaction to him firing her, an instance in which he even convinces the secretary that he was actually doing her a favor. As she cries over being fired, he thinks:

Pois então, é por isso que esses funcionários nunca conseguem nada na vida. Diante de uma pequenina dificuldade, em vez de se reerguer, começam a chorar. Por que essa retardada, por exemplo, não pergunta os seus defeitos, pede algumas dicas e, quem sabe, até não admite os problemas e diz que está disposta, na próxima oportunidade, a fazer melhor? (79)

So, that is why these employees never get ahead in life. In the face of a small obstacle, instead of overcoming it, they start to cry. Why doesn’t this retard, for example, ask about her weaknesses, ask for tips [on how to improve], and, maybe, acknowledge the problems and say that she is willing to, on the next opportunity, do better?

Examples of mismatch between appearance and reality such as the one above abound in the narrative. The passage above, in particular, unveils the weakness of systems of protection in the workplace such as the bank’s Human Resources, which is described in the novel as not playing any actual role in the bank, but rather just being an annoyance to the directors (Lírias 82).

Paulo’s excellent sense of style—or rather a sense of style perceived as such—provides another contrast between appearances and reality. Due to his polished look, the government of Sudan
invites him to give a presentation on male elegance so that the attendees would “fazer bonito” (“impress/look good”) at the next summit of African countries (Lísias 185). However, this sense of style is actually shaped by Paula, Paulo’s girlfriend, who takes the back seat in the protagonist’s sexist world. Upon receiving the invitation, Paulo immediately calls Paula for advice, reminding us of her earlier intervention before he leaves for London. On that occasion, she points out that his clothes are embarrassing for such an important training. She subsequently takes Paulo shopping for “quatro ternos, dois Armani e dois Ralph Lauren, alguns paletós Ermenegildo Zegna e um sobretudo da mesma marca … [doze gravatas], todas Bulgari ou Hermès … três pares de sapato Bally …” (“four suits, two Armani and two Ralph Lauren, a couple of Ermenegildo Zegna jackets and a coat of the same brand … [twelve ties], all Bulgari or Hermès … three pairs of Bally shoes”; 70). Paula’s advice to Paulo clearly reflects an understanding of the language of success in Paulo’s business world, which is expressed by the branded items that he acquires. A Sudanese taxi driver’s response to Paulo after being given the latter’s Ermenegildo Zegna’s coat attests to the international standing of this language. The driver is happy because he is sure that everyone will bow down to him when he wears his new garment. He even becomes emotional when people compliment him on his new clothes and thinks that they will make him the king of Port Sudan one day (148).

Paulo’s time abroad is riddled with signs that the experiences that he describes do not quite correspond to reality. His experiences are often narrated in ways that collapse Sudan and China into one space. When Paulo arrives in the destination of his mission, the narrator underlines the hyperreal quality of the trip by describing the foreign space where Paulo is as both China and Sudan, often within the same sentence, stating that the Hilton where Paulo would stay in China was very close to the Nile (Lísias 115). In the hotel, Paulo builds a stereotypical mini-China, with bedding, spades, kimonos, and other items. This mini-China, a simulacrum, can be read as a representation of his professional shortcomings; a hyperreality that replaces the reality of failure to have the successful career that he so vigorously pursues. His time in China (actually Sudan), as the business trip for which he worked so hard, represents his greatest success
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so far. Yet, the fact that he actually spends time in Sudan rather than in China serves as evidence of his failure to achieve his goal.

The most significant simulacrum in the novel is Paulo’s first book, whose title coincides with that of Lísias’s novel itself: *O livro dos mandarins* (*The Book of Mandarins*). As the narrator notes, in spite of being such a great intellectual, who can express himself remarkably well both in spoken and written language (Lísias 37), Paulo hires a ghostwriter, *poeta* Paulo, to put the protagonist’s brilliant ideas in writing. According to the narrator, Paulo needs this “assistance” because he lacks the adequate amount of time to do it himself due to his busy life as a businessperson.

*Poeta* Paulo, in turn, is described as a frustrated writer whose poetry fails to catch the attention of literature professors (Lísias 176). Tired of the petty disputes that he considers characteristic of the academic and literary circles, *poeta* Paulo accepts Paulo’s offer and becomes his ghostwriter. As a character, *poeta* Paulo serves as a vehicle of criticism to the commodity nature of literary writing in twenty-first century Brazil. From the perspective of the novel, becoming a professional writer of what one would consider “good quality” literature is not an easy task, for one has to deal with the requirements of consumer appeal and taste expectations that do not always coincide with what is at least assumed to be appealing to a rather large group of readers/consumers. Similarly, *poeta* Paulo’s comment about literature professors suggests his disapproval of the power of an elite to determine what is deserving of becoming canonical.

The fictional *O livro dos mandarins* represents Paulo’s achievement of ultimate personal and professional success, a goal he has long visualized achieving. However, as the product of someone else’s writing, Paulo’s book is like Paulo’s mini-China in Sudan: a sign replacing an absence; the absence of what it claims to represent, that is, actual success. Furthermore, it can be argued that Paulo, as the persona that the protagonist projects to his peers in the business world, is a simulacrum himself. Behind the strong, bright, highly accomplished image, lies a physically weak and psychologically disturbed victim—and at the same time perpetrator—of corporate culture. The latter image is what the other *O livro dos mandarins*, the one written by Lísias, reveals. It peels off the layers of Paulo’s rhetoric of success in order to reveal its emptiness. Lísias accomplishes much of this work through narrative
techniques that indicate disruption, superficiality, and breakdown, such as the use of fragmented sentences (e.g. “o governo acha que a imagem do Sudão no exterior e por isso” [“the government thinks that Sudan’s image abroad and because of this”] 219); clichés (“a soma dos valores é o que traz o verdadeiro sucesso” [“the sum of one’s values is what results in true success”]; 23); and repetitions that eventually become empty of meaning. These repetitions stall the narrative several times while also expressing the obsessive-compulsive nature of the character’s behavior and, by extension, the obsessive-compulsive nature of our times. As Bauman notes, we live in a world in which “the hunt [for anything that makes us successful, famous] turns into a compulsion, an addiction, and obsession” (Liquid Times 107). Expressions used ad nauseam in the novel, such as “a bem da verdade” (“the truth is”), contrast with the character’s misguided interpretation of the reality around him. Together, these stylistic choices, which Lísias uses elsewhere for similar purposes, result in a long 339-page book that conveys the excess and the waste of consumer society, leaving the reader with the impression, at first glance, that she has perhaps wasted time on a rather unsubstantial narrative. Words, sentences, paragraphs accumulate into a pile of what often looks like mere nonsense, such as chapter XXVI, which is a two-page list of random words separated by commas. This chapter illustrates the protagonist’s habit of “collecting words” as he routinely starts his day with a fifteen-minute “meditation” session, in which he repeats five words that he believes to be capable of bringing inspiration into his day ahead (Lísias 289). Nevertheless, as the present analysis has shown, Lísias’s narrative is quite the opposite of this apparently empty novel. It presents substantial critical reflections on consumer culture, corporate culture, neoliberal thought, and the liquid nature of the time in which the narrative is written and which it addresses.

**Bernardo Carvalho’s Reprodução: Information in the Era of Reproduction**

In Reprodução, B. Carvalho addresses the shifts in communications that have deeply marked the first decades of the twenty-first century, suggesting that they can lead to the reproduction of oversimplified and potentially dangerous ideas. The novel’s protagonist,
like Lísiass’s Paulo, attempts to build an image of self-confidence by boasting pridefully not only of having a large number of followers on social media, but also, and especially, of the “wisdom” he displays via less than well-informed views of the world. The knowledge that he claims to have accumulated comes from the Internet, especially blogs that he follows religiously. The result of this consumption of information is prejudice and ignorance, as Reprodução shows in its representation of a rather bleak world.

This world resembles that which media scholar Postman describes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985). Departing from Marshal McLuhan’s argument that the medium is the message, Postman asserts that media transform not only our perceptions of reality, but also a society’s intellectual and social preoccupations (9). Studying the shift from print to electronic culture, Postman argues that public discourse has become progressively simplified, as new, fast, and segmented forms of communication such as television have become part of our daily lives. For him, the everydayness of television, in particular, has made us expect discourse in general to be packaged as entertainment, thus changing the way in which we talk about spheres of social life such as religion, politics, and education. In other words, both the production and reception of discourse within these spheres has come to reflect an epistemology made possible by the advent of a fragmented culture of entertainment. For Postman, the epistemology of a rational public conversation encouraged by print media has been replaced with one that favors simple, shallow ways of thinking, and that has changed our notions of truth and intelligence (43).

This transformation, Postman notes, began with the invention of the telegraph, which exposed us to information about distant realities, thus creating a sense of disengagement by changing the relationship between information and action (68). Once decontextualized, information became increasingly conveyed through the language of headlines, which Postman characterizes as sensational, fragmented, and impersonal. While the amount of information increased, its depth was progressively reduced, creating an atomized world, in which “there is only a present and it need not be part of any story that can be told” (74). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, we can see this world, for instance, in many complexity-reducing memes about political issues on social media, in the popularity of reality television epitomized by the
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Kardashians and their empire, in the marketing of products as providers of “experiences,” and in pedagogical expectations that content be delivered in a fun way.

The commodification of information that began with the invention of technologies such as the telegraph has reached new heights since the advent of the Internet, as activist Eli Pariser shows in *The Filter Bubble. How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think*. A few years ahead of the public debate that was ignited in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election in the U.S., Pariser argues that, while algorithms help us sift through ever-increasing amounts of online data, they create a filter bubble that is changing our culture. Through personalization, that is, through the tailoring of content to one’s likes and dislikes, algorithms restrict access to certain ideas as they end up determining our preferences, reducing exposure to opposing views and thus limiting our understanding of the complexity of real life. Their capacity to determine individual preferences is also changing the economy of the production of content in the sense that the latter is becoming increasingly more targeted as a means to expand sales of any given product. In other words, personalization “is changing the economics that determine what stories get produced” (69). Personalization, Pariser argues, is restricting serendipity, which poses a threat to human creativity, given that, once in the bubble, an individual is unlikely to be confronted with knowledge from different areas, an encounter that has made possible some of the biggest inventions of humankind (96). Furthermore, personalization threatens democracy, given that, as Pariser notes,

> democracy requires citizens to see things from one another’s point of view, but instead we’re more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead, we’re being offered parallel but separate universes. (5)

The filter bubble becomes particularly dangerous when coupled with authoritarian responses to neoliberalism. The promotion of individual liberties and the devaluing of societal solidarity have produced a return to older political ideologies such as nationalism and fascism (Harvey, *A Brief History* ch. 3). These ideologies have advanced in Europe and in the United States recently, as evi-
denced, for instance, by Brexit and Donald Trump’s election, two events fueled by, among other issues, xenophobia.

In the case of Brazil, neoconservative ideas have become more prominent since at least the 2013 protests, which started a long and complex process of expression of discontent that ended with the controversial impeachment of Brazil’s first female president, Dilma Rousseff. As Pinheiro-Machado summarizes in a piece published in the Brazilian newsmagazine *Carta Capital* in 2014 titled “O Reich tropical: a onda fascista no Brasil” (“The Tropical Reich: The Fascist Wave in Brazil”): “o germe do ódio está à solta no Brasil pronto para linchar física e moralmente todo aquele que não se enquadra no establishment masculino, branco, heterossexual, rico, bem-sucedido e cheio de bens de consumo” (“the seed of hatred has found fertile soil in Brazil, and is ready to lynch, both physically and morally, anyone who does not fit into the male, white, heterosexual, rich, well-accomplished, consumerist establishment”). A demonstration of the affirmation of the establishment to which Pinheiro-Machado refers is the fact that Rousseff’s successor, Michel Temer, chose an overwhelmingly white and male cabinet of ministers and secretaries, while proposing a myriad of controversial measures that directly affected the strides that Brazil had made toward inclusion and diverse representation. The power of conservatism became even clearer in Brazil after the 2016 local election, which put the administration of cities like Rio de Janeiro in the hands of conservatives such as Marcelo Crivella, bishop of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. The church in question was founded in the 1970s by his uncle, billionaire Edir Macedo, who envisioned the advancement of his church into Brazil’s political scene, with the goal of implementing a “project of nation,” which he describes in his book *Plano de poder: Deus, os crístãos e a política* (*Power Plan: God, Christians and Politics*). The ascension of ultra-conservatism culminates in 2018 with the election of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro to the highest office in the nation.

An important factor in the rise of neoconservative ideas worldwide is the Internet, which has provided a platform for far-right speech to spread rapidly. The medium in question allowed this kind of speech “to circumvent national prohibitions on anti-Semitic materials, and to inspire right-wing revolutionaries” (Berlet and Mason 30). In Brazil, according to Adriana Silva et
al., research shows that between 2002 and 2009, the number of websites that contain neo-Nazi content increased 170%, while the number of comments on the content in question in online forums increased 42.585% during the same time. The number of blogs dealing with the issue, in turn, grew more than 550% (431). For A. Silva et al.,

A mídia patronal e alguns agentes “independentes” cumprem um papel funcional à reprodução de visões que alimentam o campo ideológico da extrema-direita. O poder de comunicação—a fala fácil, direta, pouco aprofundada, parcial e saturada de sensacionalismo explorador das mazelas cotidianas—tem grande receptividade num contexto social despolitizado e cindido entre os projetos de aspirações individuais e genéricas. (442)

Mainstream media and some “independent” agents play an essential role in the reproduction of views that feed far-right ideology. The power of communication—a discourse that is easy, direct, shallow, partial, and saturated with sensationalism that exploits everyday social ills—is well received in a social context that is depoliticized and split between projects of individual and generic aspirations.

Published in 2013, Reprodução by B. Carvalho, as the title itself suggests, tackles this reproduction of conservative discourse online and its potential impact on the shaping of individuals’ perceptions of social reality. The novel’s structure conveys the challenges in communication in the twenty-first century created by the abundance of information and the decreasing reliability of news sources. B. Carvalho’s linguistic explorations present a reflection on the pitfalls of communication in general and the challenges posed by the commodification of information in the twenty-first century, specifically. By consuming increasingly targeted content, Internet users such as the protagonist inadvertently allow their personal preferences and online behavior to become a commodity, which is, in turn, shaped by an algorithmic culture that contributes to divert the focus away from larger social issues and/or to reinforce segregationist behavior. Attempting to go beyond denouncing the problem, Reprodução provides some insights on the role of literature in the face of these challenges.
Talking to Oneself

B. Carvalho’s Reprodução is divided into three parts: “The language of the future,” “The language of the past,” and “The language of the present.” Each part consists of a long dialogue, in which the words of only one of the interlocutors are “transcribed” onto the pages of the novel, thus mirroring the disjunctures of communication that the novel addresses. Without having access to what the other interlocutor said, the reader is left with an incomplete and often incoherent version of the conversation that took place. Moreover, the reader is led to question whether the interlocutor even exists.

According to the characters, these dialogues supposedly allude to the structure of Incan comedies, which “baseavam-se no diálogo. Mas em um diálogo no qual só um dos lados tinha o direito de falar. Era uma comédia do massacre das outras línguas” (“were based on dialogue. However, a dialogue in which only one person had the right to speak. It was a comedy of the massacre of other languages”; B. Carvalho 114). This characterization signals the novel’s intent to speak about a contemporary “massacre” of communication, in the terms proposed by Pariser. The technique used by B. Carvalho shrinks the characters’ bubbles to a minimum, in that their monologues read as if they are talking to themselves, regurgitating random pieces of information that cannot be verified.

The first dialogue in the novel takes place between the protagonist and a police officer. The second dialogue involves, supposedly, a female police officer and the first officer who interrogates the protagonist in the first dialogue. The third and last dialogue has the protagonist and the first officer again as participants. A third-person omniscient narrator remains mostly silent throughout the narrative, giving us direct access to the dialogues, which are, however, filtered by the perception of the protagonist. The latter is a middle-class man, whom the narrator simply calls “o estudante de chinês” (“the student of Chinese”). We find him at the beginning of the novel being stopped by the police while standing in line to check in for a flight to China. The police interrogate him regarding his links to a Chinese woman named Liuli and referred to in the novel simply as “the teacher of Chinese,” who was also checking in for the same flight as her former student, the protagonist.
From this opening scene on, the reader learns pieces of disconnected information about the characters’ past and their personal relationships. In order to piece the story together, it is necessary to deal with frequent ambiguity, repetition, false starts, in addition to irrelevant and mostly untrustworthy information filtered by the protagonist. The structure of the novel therefore places the reader in the uncomfortable position of having to not only sift through an insurmountable amount of chaotic data, but also to doubt everything she reads, for the protagonist mostly narrates what he imagines to have happened, as the narrator points out. Among the data made available by the protagonist are numerous references to news and random pieces of information, ranging from the discovery of the God particle to the television coverage of the birth of the grandson of a famous member of a sertanejo duo. By creating a narrative that reads like a chaotic and inconclusive assembly of pieces of information, mostly taken from various media, Reprodução reproduces, so to speak, the information overload that characterizes communication in the twenty-first century, highlighting the fragmentation and oversimplification that can stem from the way in which we consume information today.

The novel’s characters live in a world that Postman would characterize as Huxleyan: where individuals become alienated not because their access to information is restricted—in the sense of being scarce—but rather because it is widened and, in the process, made simplistic and non-contextual (141). While the protagonist claims to be “um cara hiperinformado” (“a hyper-well-informed guy”; B. Carvalho 53), his rather superficial statements on various issues paint him as highly prejudiced, racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic. For instance, he defends torture as a way to protect democracy, he mocks Jewish children’s looks, and supports the extermination of the elderly. He feels uneasy when he sees a woman in a burka and insulted when the police officer insinuates that he might be gay, to which he reacts by saying that he would rather be black. He claims to be objective, and states that he is not judgmental, but rather that he simply describes what he sees (40). In other words, to use a phrase often repeated these days, “he tells it like it is.”

His compulsive insistence on prejudiced opinions demonstrates the result of the sort of “invisible auto propaganda” that characterizes the filter bubble. This propaganda makes it harder for him
to deviate from his cognitive path as it reinforces his schemata, that is, concepts that result from the compression of information that one hears and sees and that tend to be strengthened once acquired (Pariser 15). His incapacity to learn anything in depth is evidenced, for instance, by his inability to communicate minimally in Chinese even after six years of studying the language (B. Carvalho 12). He also expresses superficiality by repeating, out of context, sayings and clichés that are common in Brazilian culture, such as “Não deixe pra amanhã o que pode fazer hoje” (“don’t leave for tomorrow what you can do today”; 15) and “Na Arábia Saudita, ladrão é amputado; aqui é deputado” (“in Saudi Arabia, thieves are amputated, here they are made representatives of the people”; 19). In addition, his superficiality becomes evident when he expresses his belief that concerns about global warming are mere manipulation of facts aimed at impeding the economic growth of countries such as Brazil and China, a view espoused, for instance, by Donald Trump with respect to the U.S. (Wong).

The protagonist’s enclosure in his bubble leads him to live in a kind of schizophrenic state, in which he talks to nobody but himself. As he himself notes, in an allusion to the progressive loss of common ground necessary for public debate that we have experienced in recent years: “[n]ão tem interlocutor. Ninguém sabe nada” (“[t]here is no interlocutor. No one knows anything”; 37). At times, characters’ responses to “ghost” comments and questions by their interlocutors read as episodes of mental breakdown, as the passage below illustrates:


You should get better informed, Sir. The elephants are dying. The Talmud is behind drug trafficking. And do you think that I look like a jihadist? Not me. The vice-president of Iran, the one that bought the Koran that was missing a page. It had to be the page in which Allah says that Israel was the land of the Jews. I liked it. And where do you think the money made in the international drug trafficking goes? Where to? To the banks!
Passages such as the one above also resemble the fragmentation of online news or even of comment sessions available on social media, when users talk past each other or when account owners delete parts of conversations, leaving behind only the responses to absent statements or questions. Furthermore, these passages allude to how our consumption of information today may affect our notion of what constitutes a fact. The protagonist’s bias and incoherence denounce the information that he consumes—and by extension the reader’s own consumption of information—as distorted, and its dissemination as normalizing of this incoherence. This normalization, the protagonist suggests, is characteristic of what he calls the language of the future: “Nenhuma contradição. Está aí uma palavra que não vai existir na língua do futuro. Coerência também não. Na língua do futuro, o senhor vai poder dizer o que quiser, sem consequência, nem responsabilidade, nem contradição” (“No contradiction. That’s a word that will not exist in the language of the future. Neither will coherence. In the language of the future you will be able to say whatever you want, without consequences, responsibility, or contradiction”; 52). The protagonist’s behavior is telling of Postman’s prediction of the results of television culture. According to him,

embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anticommunication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. In aesthetics, I believe the name given to this theory is Dadaism; in philosophy, nihilism; in psychiatry, schizophrenia. In the parlance of the theater, it is known as vaudeville. (105)

In fact, the protagonist’s response to the officer’s comment on his mental health references the link between information overload and psychiatric imbalances that Postman mentions: “É claro que estou louco. E o senhor queria o quê? Muita informação. Ninguém aguentar” (“Of course I am crazy. What did you expect, Sir? Too much information. No one can handle it”; B. Carvalho 49). Later on, he affirms once again: “E o senhor me pergunta se eu estou louco? É claro que estou. Completamente louco. Porque o que está acontecendo comigo não passaria pela cabeça de nenhuma pessoa normal. Só posso estar delirando” (“And you ask me if I am crazy? Of course I am. Completely crazy. Because what is happening to me wouldn’t occur to any normal person. I must be delirious”; 150).
Mental breakdown also seems to characterize the behavior of the female officer, whose conversation with another officer the protagonist supposedly overhears. Her mental health is called into question when the existence of a report to which she repeatedly refers is denied. Her interlocutor seems to suggest that her impression of its existence must be the result of the effects of antidepressants (B. Carvalho 73), thus suggesting that she suffers from a mental illness. An explicit reference to schizophrenia appears in the novel when a question is raised regarding an officer who is supposedly on the run with the teacher of Chinese: “Você não concorda, então, que o agente é fruto da loucura? Mesmo se esquizofrenia não for hereditária, ele não é fruto da loucura dela?” (“Don’t you agree, then, that the agent is the fruit of madness? Even if schizophrenia is not hereditary, isn’t he the fruit of his [mother’s] madness?”; 90). As these examples demonstrate, not only the protagonist, but others of B. Carvalho’s characters are immersed in a world that seems to have ceased to make sense; where a schizophrenic state becomes a metaphor for the breakdown of dialogue.

The (Dis)Information Era

In _Reprodução_, B. Carvalho questions the possibility of an objective account of reality in an information era when individuals are sold the promise of impartial reporting, but instead tend to consume chaotic unreliable piles of disconnected information. Mirroring this social reality, the novel constantly questions its own plot, leading the reader to wonder about how much to trust what she reads or whether to trust it at all. B. Carvalho’s novel represents the role of language in conjuring up realities, whether through the misunderstandings that its precariousness in communicating meaning may cause, or through its manipulation by certain individuals to gain and/or maintain power.

Revisiting an issue that philosophers and linguists have grappled with for centuries (Taylor 4), namely, what it is exactly that explains how we communicate effectively, B. Carvalho’s novel puts into question the very idea that we ordinarily understand each other when we communicate, especially given the current context of information dissemination and linguistic exchange in the virtual world. Part Two of _Reprodução_ highlights everyday
communication challenges by providing, on nearly every page, examples of linguistic mechanisms that indicate breakdown in communication between the characters. These mechanisms include:

a. Rewording: “Você sempre contou com o meu apoio—apoio não é a palavra—, com a minha discreção” (“You have always counted on my support—support is not the right word—with my discretion”; B. Carvalho 59)


c. Comments on linguistic differences between interlocutors: “Você tem um vocabulário engraçado! Minha avó falava assim” (“You have a funny vocabulary! My grandmother used to talk like that”; 66)

d. Corrections: “é isso que ele está querendo dizer” (“that is what he was trying to say”; 78), “Não foi isso que você me disse” (“That was not what you told me”; 87)

e. Verbs that indicate vagueness and uncertainty such as “alegar” (“to allege”)

f. Imprecisions: “Eu não disse própria, eu disse uma família” (“I didn’t say [his/her] own [family], I said a family”; 95)

g. Ambiguity: “Vai se foder! Não o senhor. Vai se foder, em geral, sem sujeito” (“Fuck you! No, not you. Fuck you in general, without a subject”; 138)

h. Failure to account for tonality (in Chinese) appropriately: “Eu já disse. Depende do tom. Pode ser um monte de coisa” (“I have already said it. It depends on the tonality. It can mean a bunch of different things”; 139)

i. Lack of cohesiveness: the female officer jumps from one random subject to the next, talking about how long it has been since it rained, then the percentage of trash produced in the entire world that ends up in the oceans, and language death rates today. She explicitly says: “Eu sei que não tem nada a ver uma coisa com a outra” (“I know that one thing doesn’t have anything to do with the other”; 99)
The Consuming Self

j. Inadequate translations: the student of Chinese doubts his translation of Chinese proverbs, which appears indeed inaccurate, for different parts of the proverbs do not seem to relate. For instance: “Enquanto passam as nuvens, os irmãos vão à igreja. Nem eu. Talvez não seja exatamente assim. Não faz sentido, né?” (“While the clouds go by, the brothers and sisters go to church. Neither do I. Maybe it is not quite like that. It doesn’t make sense, does it?”; 152)

k. Polysemy: play with the various meanings of the word reprodução (reproduction) in Portuguese. These meanings include, for instance, the idea of procreation, in reference both to humans and living organisms of different types. Here reproduction is equated with both destruction, on one hand, and resistance, on the other hand. The protagonist notes that humans are the only animals that continue to procreate even though they understand that this act will ultimately lead to their extinction. He also points out that just like the bacteria that reproduce in our throats, we reinvent ourselves through our speech. Like bacteria, ideas become more resistant as they reproduce (97).

The two meanings of the word reprodução in the last example are particularly important in the novel because they point to the unbalanced attention given to different points of view within an information bubble. This reinforcement of some ideas over others, in turn, may ultimately extinguish not only entire ways of conceptualizing reality, but humanity itself. The many examples of linguistic barriers in Reprodução suggest that the information era is, ironically, also the miscommunication era. With these various examples of contradiction, imprecision, and linguistic precariousness, B. Carvalho’s novel turns into a confusing, convoluted text that often frustrates the reader, who is lost in translation, as she is likely to be in the real world when attempting to follow the various news cycles that bombard her daily.

The veracity of the chaotic assembly of “facts” presented to the reader in Part Two, in particular, is in the end questioned by the female officer, who asks her interlocutor, regarding rumors pertaining to her: “E você acreditou?” (“And you believed [it]?”; 132). Her question, placed emphatically as the last line of Part Two, casts doubt onto everything that she said up to that point, which will be even further disputed in Part Three, when the very existence of the female officer is denied by her interlocutor.
during the latter’s interaction with the student of Chinese. The female officer’s last words in the novel, thus, reinforce the sense of distrust in the entire narrative. Earlier on, in a complex play with the limits between reality and fiction, she triggers this sense of distrust when she states: “Eu imito. Não sou personagem de romance” (“I imitate. I am not a character in a novel”; 69). Her words paradoxically both confirm and deny her realness in the fictional world of Reprodução. On one hand, is she real in the fictional world of the novel, or is she created by the protagonist’s imagination? On the other hand, she points out that her realness in the novel depends on the imitation of something else, in a reference to both other characters in her fictional world and to her shared traits with real-life individuals from the world of the reader, which would have inspired her creation by B. Carvalho. In an intricate puzzle condensed in two short sentences, B. Carvalho both affirms and denies the reader’s reality, as if asking “what can you trust, not just in the novel that you are reading right now, but also in the real world around you?”

The novel further confronts communication challenges by commenting on the human desire to communicate perfectly through artificial languages that would be, in principle, capable of conveying what culturally constructed languages cannot. The female officer describes such an ideal language as one in which

Every everything would have been said and there would not be room neither for the imagination nor for misunderstandings. No one would need to explain anything. All you’d have to do is read. In my language, you would understand everything that you read. If I wanted to be ironic, I would just need to say *irony* after a sentence and you would understand. Irony! That’s it.

In her reflections about communicating via a perfect language, the female officer references twelfth century abbess Hildegard von Bingen’s *lingua ignota*, which is considered the first artificial language and would have been capable of expressing precise meanings in the way that the officer envisions it. It is said that von Bingen’s
purpose was to create an ideal universal language. However, it appears that she never shared this language with anyone else, thus failing to accomplish the alleged purpose of the language. By referencing this apparent failure—interestingly enough, one that cannot be confirmed, much like the facts presented by his characters—B. Carvalho suggests the impossibility of achieving transparent communication.

A Time of Crisis

The world of B. Carvalho’s protagonist is, thus, a world in crisis. This crisis extends to the notion of time as well, which is embedded in the very title of each one of the three parts of the novel: “A língua do futuro” (“The Language of the Future”), “A língua do passado” (“The Language of the Past”), and “A língua do presente” (“The Language of the Present”). The parts appear in this particular order, with past, present, and future out of a chronological sequence. In this way, the novel opens with a reference to the future and ends referencing the present, with the past filling the majority of the pages in between. This particular sequence mirrors our anxiety about an uncertain future and our sense of living in an eternal present, while stressing the importance of remembering our past.

The first part, “A língua do futuro,” starts with an epigraph that alludes to twentieth century English poet and novelist Malcolm Lowry’s short story “China.” In this short story, the narrator speaks of his experience as a traveler to the eastern part of the world. He notes that to him China seemed unreal, a dream, “a muddle,” even after he finally arrived there (Lowry 21). The closer he got to the country, the less he believed in its existence. Language fails him when he tries to convey his experience and his feelings about China:

What I want to convey to you is that to me it was not China at all but right here, on this wharf. But that’s not quite what I wanted to say. What I mean is what it was not was China: somewhere far away. What it was here, something solid, tactile, impenetrable. But perhaps neither one thing nor the other. (Lowry 25)

B. Carvalho quotes one of the first lines of this short story by Lowry: “I don’t believe in China” (8). His reference to Lowry’s China evokes
the intangible, uncertain, questionable nature of the reality of the world in which B. Carvalho’s protagonist lives. This intangibility translates into what the protagonist calls the language of the future, which is characterized, as he states, by its ability to avoid any kind of contradiction. He notes that “no fundo, o que vai dizer é outra coisa, o contrário, na língua do futuro. Uma palavra pela outra, na língua do futuro. A língua do futuro vai dizer sempre o contrário” (“ultimately, what one says means something else, the opposite, in the language of the future. One word in place of another word, in the language of the future. The language of the future will always state the opposite [of what one means to say]”; 52). Immediately following this statement, the protagonist goes on to tell his interlocutor that everything that he just said about being of Chinese heritage is false (53), thus proving to be a proficient speaker of the language of the future, which is, ultimately, a language that cannot be trusted; one that goes in the opposite direction of the precision that artificial languages have sought to achieve.

This language, the protagonist suggests, is rooted in capitalist culture. For him, the language of the future can be learned in any MBA course, that is, it is the language of business, of commodification. Racing toward the future, much like Lísias’s protagonist, B. Carvalho’s “estudante de chinês” believes that “[o] passado não existe. Só o futuro” (“the past does not exist. Only the future does”; 53). On one hand, this comment underscores the importance of chasing unattainable goals in capitalist culture because there is always more to be wanted and achieved. On the other hand, the comment in question, which appears on the last page of Part One, signals a postmodern disregard for the past.

The next part of the novel, titled “A língua do passado,” signaling a desire to negate the aforementioned culture of capitalist accumulation, rescues the past by telling the story of a native Brazilian, to which I will return in the next section of this chapter. This part opens with a quote by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, which serves as an epigraph: “Todo povo cala uma coisa para dizer outra. Porque tudo seria indizível” (“Every people silences something in order to say something else. Because saying everything would be impossible”; B. Carvalho 55). This attempt to make the past speak—in what is the longest part of the novel—brings to the fore a time of domination through physical and cultural violence that repeatedly emerges throughout history
in different cultures and different geographies. At the same time, this attempt calls the attention of the reader to the fact that the past exists as the constructed narrative that is memory, in which the possibility of silencing and/or being silenced is always present, for better or for worse.

The last part of the novel, “A língua do presente,” reinforces the idea of uncertainty developed in Part Two, portraying the present as eternal alienation, as suggested by the narrator’s characterization of today’s world as a “mundo de crentes” (“world of believers”), a reference to a (sometimes blind) faith in this or that perspective of reality (B. Carvalho 167). For him, today, individuals are easily manipulated by those who hold the power of language, such as religious leaders (167). The idea of an eternal present is further emphasized by the protagonist’s allusion to the developmentalist discourse of the 1950s that imagined Brazil as “the country of the future.”

He asks his interlocutor: “Sabe o que é viver no país e na cidade da possibilidade? … Quer pior horror do que viver onde ainda parece possível mesmo se já não é possível há muito tempo?” (“Do you know what it is like to live in the country and the city of possibility? … What could be worse than the horror of living where things still seem possible even if they haven’t been so for a long time?”; 141–42). Like Lowry’s character, the narrator pronounces his profound disbelief in the reality around him and in this promised future that has never arrived for Brazil. From this perspective, the country remains in an eternal present that expects a never-attainable future of prosperity.

B. Carvalho’s portrayal of time, with its alteration of the temporal order between past, present, and future, its characterization of the future as disbelief, the past as extermination, and the present as eternal alienation, signals a contemporary response to what Andreas Huyssen characterizes as a crisis of the temporality that was predominant in the age of modernity (Twilight Memories 6). For Huyssen, the jumble of the non-synchronous, the recognition of temporal difference in the real world thus clashes dramatically with the draining of time in the world of information and data banks. But the borders between real world and its construction in information systems are of course fluid and porous. The more we live with the new technologies of communication and information cyber-space, the more our sense of temporality will be affected. (Twilight Memories 9)
The temporality of B. Carvalho’s novel establishes a link between the crisis of modernity with its promise of a linear move toward progress, and the chaos of information overload that we experience today, which negates this promise.

**Language and Power**

In *Reprodução*, B. Carvalho reflects about the power of language to both create and burst an information bubble. The novel establishes that language is power(ful). It is both creation and destruction. These two facets are addressed by B. Carvalho in an episode involving the encounter between a young officer and a native Brazilian from some remote tribe. According to the female officer, this native Brazilian would have been killed by a missionary because the latter would have wanted to become the only person in the world capable of speaking a language that could express “God.” This language would have been the one spoken by the native Brazilian’s tribe, and would have been exterminated with his death. The episode in question, which alludes to the colonization process of the Americas, characterized by the decimation of peoples, languages, and cultures, serves as a metaphor for the destructive power of language, when the power to speak allows one to also silence others.

The story of the native Brazilian can be linked to communication in the twenty-first century via a comment by one of the characters, who points out that “God” in Hebrew is “The Word,” thus evoking the idea that God would have created the universe by bringing things into existence through utterances. Curiously, this relationship between God and The Word also evokes a programmer’s first experience when learning how to code. According to Pariser, the first sentence that programmers ever code is “Hello, world!” This gesture suggests a power of creation similar to that of God’s: a sense that one can create entire universes on the screen. For Pariser, that is the moment when one senses that “if you’re clever enough, you can make and manipulate anything you can imagine” (166). The story of the native Brazilian and that of the protagonist, albeit radically different, evoke the relationship between language and power throughout history. Just as the missionary conquers a sense of power by eliminating the other, the protagonist feels empowered by a process of information
consumption that is highly excluding, for it leads to the disregard of the complexity of reality by restricting access to points of view that would challenge his perspective. Both of them acquire power by silencing others. Language, therefore, is seen in the novel as an extraordinarily potent and potentially dangerous tool.

A proof of this danger is the fairly narrow-minded and superficial nature of the protagonist’s statements that we have seen so far, which raises questions about the early belief that the Internet would open up channels of democratic expression by decentralizing the power of information dissemination. As B. Carvalho himself notes in an interview by Raquel Cozer published in the Brazilian newspaper Folha de São Paulo in 2013, Reprodução presents an account of the only apparent freedom of the online world, in which users exchange free access for information that corporations gather about their everyday lives, without realizing the degree of asymmetry involved in this exchange. Indeed, we have witnessed an increase in the concentration of power in the hands of a few companies operating without much regulation (Pariser 141).

In Reprodução, the very acquisition of a language appears as the first step toward becoming enclosed in an information bubble: “quando a gente se conecta com uma língua e passa a usar os dez por cento de sons correspondentes a essa língua, perde a capacidade de ouvir os noventa por cento restantes” (“when we connect with a language and start using only ten percent of all the sounds that we can produce, we lose the capacity to hear the remaining ninety percent”; B. Carvalho 116). The acquisition of one linguistic code to the detriment of our capacity to speak other languages, viewed from this perspective, is paradoxically akin to language death, at an individual level, in that it restricts our linguistic expression, which in turn results in the withering of possible ways of conceiving reality, as well as in the silencing of other worldviews. By drawing a parallel between language extinction and the shrinking of the protagonist’s filter bubble, B. Carvalho cautions readers about the troubling consequences of consuming information like his protagonist does. The most serious of such consequences, according to Pariser, is the end of democracy itself:

Ultimately, democracy works only if we citizens are capable of thinking beyond our narrow self-interest. But to do so, we need a shared view of the world we cohabitate. We need to come into
contact with other peoples’ lives and needs and desires. The filter bubble pushes us in the opposite direction—it creates the impression that our narrow self-interest is all that exists. And while this is great for getting people to shop online, it’s not great for getting people to make better decisions together. (164)

A possible answer to this rather dystopic future, B. Carvalho’s novel suggests, lies in language itself, specifically, literary language. In fact, some of the same linguistic features used in Reprodução to represent the shrinking of our filter bubbles are also some of the novel’s main strategies for potentially expanding our information horizon as readers. Let us take, for instance, B. Carvalho’s use of monologues. While his strategy of giving us access to only one side of a dialogue represents our progressively single-minded views and somewhat schizophrenic reproduction of the information that we consume, it also challenges us to move in quite the opposite direction. On one hand, the limited access to the content of the conversations in the novel creates confusion. On the other hand, it also creates curiosity. As readers, we are prompted to wonder about what was left out, that is, the utterance to which a character is responding. The novel creates a knowledge gap that pushes us to inquire, to question, to want to learn more, and to be able to “listen” to the other interlocutor, whose words are missing from the text. In other words, it creates the kind of gap that can push someone like the protagonist out of his or her bubble.

Literature is explicitly mentioned in the novel several times when characters emphasize that they do not read novels because they “não pass[am] a vida fora da realidade” (“do not spend their lives outside of reality”; B. Carvalho 77). This statement is another of the many playful ways in which B. Carvalho juxtaposes reality and fiction. On one hand, the statement calls our attention to the fact that we are reading fiction that, nevertheless, so much resembles reality. On the other hand, the novel provides a good dose of the reality experienced by B. Carvalho’s readers, as it cautions them about the dangers of said reality.

The novel references literature in a less explicit way when it introduces us to a character about whom we barely hear in the novel: escrivã Márcia. An escrivã, as the root of the Portuguese word indicates, is someone who escreve, that is, writes or records legal documents in courts. Márcia’s job is in many ways the opposite of the job of a writer of fiction: rather than creating with language, she is
expected to simply transcribe, in the most accurate and objective way possible. Nevertheless, Márcia is the only character who seems to be interested in literature, for she is the only one in the novel who reads fiction. Interestingly, she is also the only one who has a name, signaling her uniqueness in a story filled with characters named after generic descriptions of their attributes (the student of Chinese, the teacher of Chinese, the female officer, etc.). This uniqueness implies that literature serves as a kind of escape from the information bubble, to which Márcia is the only one who has access. Her wisdom comes across in a statement that she would have made, according to the female officer, that “os escritores procuram uma palavra mais forte que a morte” (“writers seek words that are stronger than death”; B. Carvalho 98). Her statement suggests the power of literature to make a profound, earth shattering even, impact on individuals. While Márcia reproduces speech in her reports, B. Carvalho creates speech in his novel, which is seemingly “transcribed” onto the pages that we read. The parallel between Márcia’s work and that of her creator hints at the documentary nature of B. Carvalho’s novel. In other words, the novel is, in a way, a (fictional) reproduction of behaviors and beliefs that we see in real life. Unfortunately, Márcia never really appears in the novel, but is rather spoken of by unreliable characters. This fact makes her existence questionable, casting doubt, by extension, on the possibility of the concrete realization of the power of literature that her character represents.

The novel suggests that other art forms besides literature can function as antidotes to the world of appearances and uncertainties that it portrays. It does so by referencing Brazilian singer and song writer Caetano Veloso’s “Um índio” (“A Native”; Bicho). According to B. Carvalho’s narrator, the power of the word will be delivered by a futuristic, science-fiction type of character, who will announce potentially life-altering perceptions of reality. This is a reference to Veloso’s indigenous figure, who is expected to descend upon Earth in a shiny object, in the “heart of the Southern hemisphere” in Latin America. The song predicts that this indigenous figure will come after the last indigenous nation has been exterminated, to make revelations that will astonish humankind: “E aquilo que nesse momento se revelará aos povos / Surpreenderá a todos não por ser exótico / Mas pelo fato de poder ter sempre estado oculto / Quando terá sido o óbvio” (“And that which at
Chapter Two

this moment will be revealed to the peoples of the world / Will astonish all not for being something exotic / But for having always been able to stay hidden / While it will have been obvious”). Like B. Carvalho’s indigenous character, Veloso’s speaks a language that has a unique power: that of expressing the astonishingly obvious. This is, in fact, what B. Carvalho’s novel itself does: it defamiliarizes the prejudiced and harmful discourses that permeate contemporary society, which are proclaimed by some as unquestionable truth, spreading daily in different types of media. In this way, the novel’s message, like that of Veloso’s futuristic indigenous figure, is quite simple. The novel shakes its readers by pointing out the pervasiveness and problematic nature of discourses that may hide behind their mindless repetition within the bubbles that we inhabit.

Of Utopic Futures

Both O livro dos mandarins and Reprodução depict what Bauman calls the “society of hunters,” characterized by the end of utopia in the modern sense, that is, the end of utopia as an imagined future prosperity that we aim to reach through progress. For Bauman, “instead of living towards utopia, hunters are living inside utopia” (Liquid Modernity 109; italics in original). In other words, in a society of hunters, there is no future common goal to be reached, but rather an individual rush to stay in the race.

In their eternal quest for more, Lírias’s and B. Carvalho’s protagonists embody this very feeling of living in an endless utopia of a dystopic world. This quest is expressed in O livro dos mandarins, for instance, by Paulo’s plans after the publication of his book: “… aquele é apenas o começo. Não tem por que parar agora. Só com outro, um verdadeiro escritor como ele preenche o vácuo que um livro deixa” (“… this is just the beginning. There is no reason to stop now. Only with another [book] can a true writer like him fill the void that a [finished] book leaves”; Lírias 337). As he repeatedly advises his customers and readers, it is essential to continue to succeed and to overcome more “challenges.” In Reprodução, the never-ending nature of the quest for more is conveyed by the protagonist’s obsessions with learning Chinese in order to stay ahead of everyone else. Paulo and “the student of Chinese” can both be described as hunters in Bauman’s sense (Liquid Times 107). Hunting—for a promotion, fame,
recognition, etc.—demands their full attention and much energy, leaving time for virtually nothing else.

Structural elements of both novels convey this end of the modern utopia as well. As we have seen, B. Carvalho’s novel reflects about the crisis of the modern notion of time. In the case of *O livro dos mandarins*, this crisis is conveyed by the narrative’s constant switches between past and future tenses, as in the following passage: “Ele ainda não sabe, mas a sua transferência para a China além de tudo ainda vai fazer com que ele conheça a cama Ceragem” (“He doesn’t know yet, but his transfer to China, on top of everything, will allow him to find out about the Ceragem massage table”; Lísias 57). Many of these predictions presented as facts of which the character is yet unaware, actually do not come true. Paulo never travels to China, as we have seen, and, as the narrator indicates later on, he never really finds this massage table (183). The narrations in the future, while highlighting the race to stay ahead in today’s liquid society, point to the challenges of such a culture of accumulation, hinting at the impossibility of sustaining such a state of utopia.

With this endless utopia, the novels suggest, comes not only an obsession with success, but polarization and lock down as authoritarian thought seems to become the norm, as the possibility of civil and rational democratic debate appears to fade away and as every corner of our lives becomes commodified. The kind of self produced in this world of apparently boundless commodification is one characterized by pettiness, selfishness, lack of empathy, and a dangerous sense of knowing everything without actually understanding much at all. Both *O livro dos mandarins* and *Reprodução* depict characters that are, like many individuals today, at the same time the embodiment and victims of consumer culture’s values. While Paulo desperately tries to market himself as a successful man, “the student of Chinese” becomes a commodity to the companies that own information about him and sell him news as entertainment, shrinking his perspective rather than expanding his participation in the public sphere. The hyperreal conditions of these characters represent the hyperreality of consumer capitalism itself, in which success is often measured based on appearances. Like those who reproduce the neoliberal narrative, with its justifications to legitimize anything deemed necessary to achieve the restoration of class power that hides behind a promise of progress (Harvey, *A Brief History* ch. 1), Lísias’s and B. Carvalho’s protagonists
reproduce discourses used to justify almost anything in the name of reaching a goal other than the one promised at the surface.

Both *O livro dos mandarins* and *Reprodução* propose a critique of this world reproduced by their protagonists. Caricatures portrayed via unreliable narratives, the novels’ protagonists turn out to be flawed, pathetic, and delusional, yet they seem so real in so many ways. As the novels reveal the stories of failure that lie beneath an appearance of success, they make a case for the power of fiction in a world where ultra-conservatism has hijacked the criticism to mainstream media and turned it against those very sources of criticism, labeling everything that goes against its narratives “fake news.”

Both novels also make the case that fiction can serve as an antidote to the deep alienation of the world they portray. In the case of Lísias, *O livro dos mandarins* is at once the book of neoliberal norms (Paulo’s version) and the critique to neoliberal thought (Lísias’s novel). With respect to B. Carvalho, *Reprodução* both reproduces the information overload that leads to the oversimplification of social reality by electronic media, and combats this oversimplification by posing a highly challenging linguistic exercise to the reader. Paradoxically, the way out of the new utopia that the novels denounce seems to be what is ultimately another utopia in the context of the novels: these characters’ engagement with art. This solution seems utopic because, within their fictional worlds, these characters seem far from being open to ever reading the narratives in which they are protagonists. The only one who has potential, Márcia, has her existence questioned by the fact that all we know about her comes from unreliable characters, as we have seen.

According to contemporary Brazilian fiction that deals with consumer culture, is there hope for transformation within rather than beyond the everyday? Or is it all lost? Have we reached a point of no return? Has capitalism already “swallowed humanity” (Brown 44)? The narratives analyzed in the following chapters of this book paint a different picture. They point to the possibility of breaking away from the forces of consumer culture that target us every day. Albeit momentary, the very possibility of this break renews the hope that there is still a chance to do things differently. In the next chapter, I discuss Ana Paula Maia’s representation of working-class consumers in three of her narratives. I show that these narratives, albeit still relatively bleak, envision the possibility of change in the realm of everyday life under consumer capitalism.