Everyday Consumption in Twenty-First-Century Brazilian Fiction

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Chapter Four

A Consumer’s Dreams and Nightmares

For those who grew up during the 1980s and the 1990s in Brazil, a time when the country more strongly embraced neoliberalism, and commercials for all sorts of products abounded in various television shows, it is common to think of their childhood and teenage years in terms of the products that they consumed or desired. A quick search for “anos 1980” on google.com.br produces images of popular television shows for children such as Xou da Xuxa, cartoons, toys, comic books, Brazilian and North American actors and the most famous characters that they played during that time, pop icons such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Cindy Lauper, and many other references to consumer culture. Likewise, a search for “anos 1990” yields a collection of images that are relevant for children and teenagers of the decade in question, including the typical grunge “uniform” of the time: jeans and plaid wool shirts. This collective consumer memory also manifests itself on social media. On Facebook, for example, one can encounter groups such as “Revivendo os anos 80 e 90” (“Reliving the 1980s and 1990s”), which gathers, as of the writing of this book, over 600,000 followers and features posts as disparate a photo of an old toothpaste brand and a video of Tina Turner singing her 1991 hit “(Simply) The Best.” Twenty-first century Brazilian literature that deals with consumer culture has also incorporated this imagery. Two examples of fiction that do so are the object of our analysis in this chapter: Daniel Galera’s Mãos de cavalo (Horse Hands) and Michel Laub’s A maçã envenenada (The Poison Apple).

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Maia’s representation of the everyday life of workers who remain largely invisible in today’s world unveils some of the collateral damage of consumer culture. As argued, unlike Bonassi and Sant’Anna—who represent consumer culture as totalizing—, and unlike Lísias and
B. Carvalho—whose only possible way out of a dystopic world of consumption is to be found in the realm of arts—, Maia takes a step further and suggests the possibility of a radical change, albeit temporary, within the realm of the everyday proper. In this chapter, I propose that Galera’s and Laub’s novels under analysis, like Maia’s, represent everyday life in consumer capitalism as open to change. This change, however, rather than punctual and radical, is depicted as an insistent oscillation between moments of surrender to the potentially alienating powers of consumer culture, and moments of self-awareness and self-criticism. Amidst their protagonists’ obsession with troubling past experiences mediated by commodities that seem to define the rest of their lives, there are moments that signal possibilities to start anew. This new start is not to be understood as a complete break from everyday life, but rather as movements between alienation and disalienation in the terms proposed by Lefebvre (Critique 340). According to Lefebvre, neither of these two movements is absolute, that is, they are not points in a structured continuum toward which one decidedly progresses. Rather, they are in a dialectical relationship to one another. In this way, a disalienation can lead to deeper forms of alienation. Conversely, an alienation can be disalienating. These movements are always defined “within concrete, changing situations” (208). Lefebvre further notes that awareness of an alienation is already disalienation itself, pointing out that

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\text{no self-consciousness can close up upon itself. Man is a conscious being, conscious of what he is (of his being), but only in, by and through what he is not, otherness and action upon otherness, confrontation with otherness, want, privation, desire, work on external material, works (products or works in the strict sense of the term), and finally, what is possible. (214)}
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In this movement between alienation and disalienation, we might experience what Lefebvre calls the “moment,” which can be understood as a point in the individual’s history when “he recognizes himself within it, even if it is in a confused way” (344). In the analysis that follows, I will focus on moments of this nature experienced by the protagonists of the novels in question. In both cases, characters are pushed in and out of their everyday experiences of consuming cultural products. Moreover, at times it is consumer
culture itself that triggers the protagonists’ awareness of their fears and anxieties, leading to critical reflection about their behavior.

In Galera’s novel, we follow the story of teenager Hermano and the impact on his life as an adult of his friend’s accidental murder, for which he feels responsible after having hidden away while his friend was beaten to death by other kids. In Laub’s narrative, we become acquainted with a similar case, experienced by the unnamed protagonist-narrator, who attempts to redeem himself for his guilt toward his girlfriend’s suicide. In both stories, we encounter men in their thirties and forties who grew up immersed in consumer culture and whose perceptions of themselves and relationships with others are shaped by their experiences with commodities, particularly action movies and comic books in the case of Mãos and grunge music in the case of A maçã. Nonetheless, if there are moments when they seem to have become selfish individuals captivated by the alienating allure of consumer culture, their experiences are not totalizing. Consequently, instead of reading these novels as narratives of dystopia and alienation (Lehnen, “O fruto”; Cunha), I propose to read them as what I call narratives of ambivalent awareness. In these novels, characters are indeed confronted with situations of despair and do struggle to overcome them, but they attempt to work through these situations by reflecting on how their consumption mediates their personal relationships. In the process of attempting to work through, they construct a narrative of existence within consumer culture that, however tortured, opens itself up for change on several opportunities.

**Galera’s Mãos de cavalo: A Mass-Mediated Sensibility**

Samoa sandals, Caloi bikes, Carlton cigarettes, a Mitsubishi car, the Canadian magazine *Gripped*: these are just a few examples of brands that appear throughout Mãos de cavalo. They surround characters and mediate relationships, connecting them in solidarity and in competition, as do Hollywood films, Brazilian television shows, and imported video games. The consumption of many of these products shapes the protagonist’s and his friends’ view of masculinity (Takeda 159). Growing up, Hermano learns what it means to be a man from comic books, action movies such as *Mad Max*, and cartoons such as *He-Man*, which paint a picture
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of physical prowess and invincibility (Galera 40). In real life, the hero that the protagonist aspires to be is Bonobo, a neighborhood kid who is known for being the toughest one around, with whom Hermano dreams of being friends.

In his quest for this masculinity embodied by Bonobo, Hermano develops a kind of mass-mediated sensibility, represented by a camera that follows him in the most banal moments of his daily life. At times this camera transforms his perception of reality, leading him to see himself as a hero when there is only a regular boy who fails, falls down, and sometimes gets seriously injured. The narrative signals the importance of this camera as a filter of Hermano’s perception starting with the epigraph that opens the book. The epigraph is a quote attributed to North American actor Nicolas Cage: “I would walk to school and actually have crane shots worked out in my mind where the crane would be pulling up and looking down at me as a tiny object in the street walking to school” (Galera 7).

The reader gets a first glimpse of the power of this camera in the first chapter, titled “O ciclista urbano” (“The Urban Biker”). Here, a third person omniscient narrator juxtaposes the fantasy of Hermano’s camera, which captures an invincible biker overcoming dangerous obstacles in the streets of Porto Alegre, Brazil, with the reality of a little boy falling hard from his bike and injuring himself. This first chapter sets the tone of the narrative’s representation of the influence of consumer culture on the way that the protagonist experiences reality: as a movement between alienation and disalienation. Hermano experiences this push-and-pull throughout his life. There is neither absolute awareness nor absolute oblivion, but rather a series of dialectic movements between surrendering to the discourse on masculinity that the cultural products he consumes emphasize and questioning this masculinity as unattainable and this discourse as misguided.

Such questioning emerges during one of the downhill championships in which Hermano and his friends participate. Inspired by what the kids read in mountain bike magazines, the championships consist of competitions in which the boys go downhill with their bikes and judge each other’s performance not on speed and technique but on the impression that the performance makes on the spectators. This criterion evidences a collective sensibility imbued by the aesthetic of action movies, for instance, in which...
special effects create strong sensations by amplifying the drama of a scene that would otherwise come across as rather unexciting.

When it is Hermano’s turn to go downhill, the narrator leads us into his thoughts, revealing his desire to impress everyone as well as his questioning of this desire. As he pushes his bike uphill, Hermano feels lonely, and starts wondering whether being part of the championship makes sense. He thinks about leaving and joining his friend Morsa at his house instead. The mention of Morsa is important because he represents another possibility of masculinity; a private one which, albeit still problematically tied to the world of consumer culture via his like for videogames and his later consumption of imported cars as an adult, differs, however, from Bonobo’s public demonstrations of power through physical strength. Likely because of his preference for not engaging in activities such as the downhill championship, Morsa is bullied by the other kids, who only seem to seek his company when wanting to play with his videogames. While climbing the hill, Hermano reflects on who he really is and pictures the comfort of not having to prove anything to anyone when he is with Morsa:

[Hermano] pensou em voltar para a casa do Morsa e dizer que somente ele prestava naquele bairro. Somente o Morsa merecia consideração. Com ele não era necessário conversar. Podiam ficar vendo jogos de computador e tomando Coca em mamutas copos de vidro esverdeado, e os minutos iam se sucedendo e fazendo sentido. Sabido era o Morsa, que estava em casa jogando computador. (Galera 90)

[Hermano] thought about going back to Morsa’s house and saying that only he was worth a damn in the neighborhood. Only Morsa deserved his respect. With him, it wasn’t necessary to talk. They could play computer games and drink Coke in huge greenish glasses all day long; the minutes following one another and everything making sense. Morsa knew better than us: he was at home playing computer games [instead of competing in the championship].

This questioning, however, does not dissuade him from going downhill. Hermano falls deep into the fantasies of the media that he consumes, purposely losing control of his bike, in the hopes that the fall will result in him cutting, breaking, scratching, fracturing, perforating, and smashing his body (91). The injuries
that indeed result from this fall make him proud of himself as he imagines that he is Mad Max after a terrible accident in the desert, his perception again filtered by the presence of the camera. In this instance, Hermano imagines the kids going down the hill to check on him as either Mad Max’s enemies running toward him to see if he is still alive or as the spectators running toward the movie hero to help him: “[o] seu filme. A cena ficou perfeita. A maquiagem não podia ter sido mais realista. Como o sangue é uma coisa bonita, pensou antes de desmaiar” (“his movie. The scene turned out perfect. The makeup could not have been more realistic. What a beautiful thing blood is, he thought before passing out”; 92). Fiction and reality blend in his imagination to the point that real blood is perceived as make-up.

Conversely, in an earlier instance, makeup is taken as real blood when Hermano, using red pencils and water, draws on his face to make it look like he is bleeding. When he looks at himself in the mirror, he concludes that his “makeup” reminds him of super heroes such as Veto Skreemer, from the comic book series *Skreemer* (1989), and Mad Max covered in blood after a crash in the homonymous 1979 movie. Hermano’s camera is then switched on, as the image of his face appears in “slow motion” in the mirror, and the “makeup” is now described by the narrator as blood (Galera 45). As a fight between him and Bonobo proceeds in his imagination—a reenactment of a fight from which he ran away earlier during a soccer match—he is “beaten up” and “bleeds” to his defeat. Returning to reality, Hermano feels ashamed of having lost even in an imaginary fight. If on one hand, his shame indicates that he is still immersed in the ideal of masculinity that he has not been able to attain, his awareness of his defeat indicates a movement toward disalienation from his mass-mediated sensibility, as he is forced to confront the reality that he is not the superhero that he pictures in his mind.

A similar movement between disalienation and alienation leads Hermano to hesitate about joining everyone on the dance floor at a party, as he wonders about the reasons why he feels the need to do things he does not like. This reflection reveals some level of awareness of the societal expectations that weigh heavy on him, for he recognizes the influence on his actions of what he thinks others want to see him do (Galera 115). As with the downhill championship described above, Hermano’s pondering is interrupted again by the fantasy of being a superhero after he takes a sip of alcohol.
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from Bonobo’s drink and feels that now something has changed because he is no longer “someone who has never had a drink” (121). Against the background of the world of superheroes, the sip functions as a kind of “spider bite,” the banal incident that might change his life forever by giving him some kind of superpower. That same night, the imagination of the camera leads Hermano to picture himself and Bonobo as protagonists of a road movie:

… percorrendo planícies pardas da Patagônia, com cadeias de montanhas nevadas no horizonte, deixando marcas nos povoados e lembranças nas pessoas que encontrassem pelo caminho, rumo ao extremo sul, a algo imenso e inominável, o climax de uma jornada. (122)

… roaming on the brown plains of Patagonia, with snowy mountain ranges on the horizon, leaving marks on the villages they visited and making memories with the people they met along the way, toward the far-south, toward something immense and unnamable, the climax of a journey.

The future here is depicted as a romanticized narrative of progress toward something great. However, the fantasy of this narrative will be interrupted in reality by the tragic death of Bonobo. His death represents a turning point for Hermano, symbolizing his impossible achievement of the masculinity that he pursues. Devastated by feelings of guilt and shame for having remained hidden away while a group of kids gave Bonobo a fatal beating, Hermano decides to stop watching movies and reading comic books, in order to dedicate himself to becoming a doctor. While this decision entails the elimination of contact with the cultural products that infused in him his problematic perceptions of masculinity, it is clear that the hero narrative still drives him. As the narrator points out, Hermano’s goal is to dedicate himself completely to studying so that he can emerge, years later, as the superhero whose superpower is self-control (126). During this time, however, we learn that Hermano puts his camera away, so to speak, and does not imagine its presence again until he is an adult. Although the state of awareness that he manages to achieve in this phase of his life has setbacks, there is an attempt to break away from the influence of the media that he consumes, which he comes to perceive as toxic.

As an adult, Hermano seems to have, at least to some extent, followed the promise made by his young self to “put the camera
away,” stay focused, and become a doctor. However, he continues to be influenced by consumer culture in other ways, as his driving a sports utility vehicle, his international mountain climbing, and his choice of professional specialization (plastic surgery) indicate.

The narrator leads us into this phase of the protagonist’s life in chapters that capture a couple of hours of the day when Hermano is supposed to embark on a trip with a friend in order to climb an unexplored hill. Each chapter is titled after a precise time within these two hours and the main action is narrated in the present so as to convey the impression of a live coverage of him driving in the streets of Porto Alegre. This point of view foreshadows the return of Hermano’s old habit of imagining that a camera follows him, thus mirroring the narration of the first chapter, in which we learn about the “Urban Biker.”

The return of the camera coincides with Hermano’s opportunity to redeem himself for Bonobo’s death when he sees a group of teenagers attacking another kid. The language of the narrative in this passage conveys the presence of the camera. The scene in question unfolds as in an action movie, with tension and drama, expressed by adjectives such as “enormous” and “sanguinary,” and in verbs such as “tear apart.” This fantasy gives Hermano the courage to drive back and face the kids:

[v]ê a cena toda do alto, como se o Pajero estivesse sendo acompanhado por uma grua, o carro se aproximando em alta velocidade do cenário do combate. A desvantagem numérica é gritante, mas dessa vez não vai se esconder. Vinte metros. Lembra do V8 propulsionado pelo nitro em Mad Max 2, rasgando o deserto da terra devastada enquanto é perseguido de perto pela gangue de piratas sanguinários sobre rodas. Dez metros. Não está somente imaginando cenas do filme. Agora ele é Mad Max, incorporou o guerreiro da estrada. (Galera 149)

[h]e sees the whole scene from above, as if the [Mitsubishi] Pajero were being followed by a crane; the car speeding toward the combat scene. The numeric disadvantage is huge, but this time he will not hide. Twenty meters. He remembers the nitro-propelled V8 in Mad Max 2, tearing through the desolate desert while being followed by the gang of bloody pirates on wheels. Ten meters. He is no longer just imagining the movie scenes. Now he is Mad Max, he has incorporated the road warrior.
As the passage above indicates, the imaginary camera captures the chase in an aerial shot, rendering the passage fast, dynamic, and dramatic: the street is the place of combat, and the fight is a display of the courage of one against the fury of many. Soon Hermano is not just imagining Mad Max; he believes he is Mad Max. He yells, batters the kids, and, when he gets hurt, the blood in his mouth does not taste like cowardice. Instead, he describes it as having the far better taste of bravery (151). The camera, thus, collapses fiction and reality, mirroring the previously mentioned moment when Hermano goes downhill on his bike. After the attackers flee, Hermano takes the injured kid to the hospital. He realizes that he has repressed his imagination about cartoons and movies for a long time. Referring to the moment of rescuing the child, Hermano concludes that it was

\[o\] momento dos filmes, das histórias em quadrinhos e dos livros de aventura em que um homem descobre sua verdadeira natureza e se torna um herói. Está completamente embevecido por essa fantasia, tanto que a frase “Eu sou médico” lhe soa artificial, totalmente alheia a quem de fato é e ao que está acontecendo naquela manhã de domingo. (155)

\[t\]he moment in movies, in comics and adventure narratives in which a man discovers his true nature and becomes a hero. He is completely delighted by this fantasy, so much so that the sentence “I’m a doctor” sounds artificial to him; completely foreign to who he in fact is and to what is happening that Sunday morning.

Soon, however, the fantasy fades away, and Hermano is flooded with a sense of reality that undoes his heroism, returning him to a state of disalienation from the world of goods that he consumes. He realizes that living the fantasy of his cartoons and movies was often dangerous or, at the very least, pointless. His unattainable expectations of courage and strength made him struggle with the fact that he is not an invincible superhero, but rather a human being with fears and doubts. Hermano perceives that his life has not been heroic, that it has been, instead, a rehearsal for heroism he never attained. He comes to see his condition as being in a state of limbo, between reality and fantasy, somewhere between distorted perceptions of who he in fact is, who he would like to have been, and who he, as a child, had wanted to be when he grew up. He looks in the mirror of
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his car and realizes that he is not “o herói na sua imaginação” (“the hero in his imagination”; 156). At this point, Hermano retracts back to being careful and controlled, as evidenced by his driving, which changes from shifting gears aggressively and screeching tires on curves (153) to being careful to drive so as to not block other vehicles that need to go by (156). In this way, the novel conveys that the camera is now gone again, in a similar way to how it indicates Hermano’s movement from alienation to disalienation in the first chapter. In the chapter in question, after he falls off the bike, the narrator indicates that the camera is “switched off” by describing the protagonist’s surroundings as mere banality: people come and go, hurrying up to get to work and “ele não é mais o Ciclista Urbano. Agora é apenas um guri de dez anos” (“he is no longer an Urban Biker. Now he is only a ten-year-old kid”; 16).

The novel further complicates totalizing views of consumer culture as an alienating phenomenon also by suggesting that Hermano’s camera can actually even trigger his self-awareness. As a teenager, when Naiara tries to seduce him in her bedroom, the imaginary camera shows him the awkwardness of the scene, making him feel embarrassed. According to the narrator:

Naiara estava interagindo com um autômato, ambos sendo observados pela verdadeira consciência de Hermano que fluía-tuava como um espectro cínico pela bagunça vermelha de um quartinho, buscando os melhores ângulos e luzes para enaltecer as tristes e solitárias peripécias de um protagonista. E o que a câmera via agora era uma menina de treze anos fazendo tudo que lhe era possível, aplicando todo o seu precoce repertório de técnicas para tentar soprar vida em um boneco cenográfico. (140)

Naiara was interacting with an automaton, both being observed by Hermano’s true conscience, which fluctuated as a cynical spectrum over the red mess of a little bedroom, searching for the best angles and the best light to exalt the sad and lonely adventures of a protagonist. And what the camera saw now was a thirteen-year-old girl doing everything she could, using all of her precocious repertoire of techniques to try to breathe life into a doll prop.

In an inversion, the camera fails to depict the romanticized reality of the movie. Rather, it makes the couple’s experience seem far less glamorous. This moment marks Hermano’s realization that he
and Naiara are only attempting to perform roles for which they may never be prepared. In other words, in this particular instance, the camera makes Hermano realize the fiction of his social performance. The role of the camera here, as in the moment in which it returns later on when he is an adult, suggests that, while consumer culture endlessly presents Hermano with unreasonable promises of heroism, it may also present him with opportunities for self-reflection about the performativity of his life. From this perspective, Galera’s narrative shows that, as French philosopher Lefebvre points out, “[repetitive practice] never attains the definitive, automatic balance, a balance without contradiction” (Critique 239).

Indeed, contradiction is present in Hermano’s life in various other ways. One of them is his wife, Adri, who is at the same time the seductress that matches hypersexualized views of women as commonly seen in the media and the artist who serves as (an ambiguous) counterpoint to consumer culture in the novel.

As the hypersexualized woman, she appears in the novel seducing Hermano in his car, at a moment when Pink Floyd’s 1971 song “Fearless” comes on the radio (Galera 52). This song is very symbolic of consumer culture’s continued influence on Hermano, for it depicts an individual who, like him, has a desire to impress others. The soundtrack of this amorous encounter with Adri echoes Hermano’s desire to feel strong, visible, noted. In the song, the image of climbing—“You say you like to see me try / Climbing! / You pick the place and I’ll choose the time / And I’ll climb / The hill in my own way”—alludes to Hermano’s later plan to climb the Bonete hill, while connecting the scene in the car to Hermano’s first sexual experience with Bonobo’s sister, Naiara. The latter occurs when he goes to her house to return the album Houses of the Holy (1973) by Led Zeppelin, that he had borrowed from Bonobo. The album cover, as the narrator notes, features a montage of naked children climbing a rocky formation in Ireland (Galera 134). Climbing and sex are thus connected, via the references to music, by the idea of masculinity that Bonete hill, whose name is curiously similar to that of Bonobo’s, comes to represent in the novel: the masculinity that Hermano so wants to achieve. Nevertheless, climbing, according to the narrator, also takes on the more mundane function of providing an escape from work. As “um exercício prazeroso de resistência muscular e concentração, praticado com disciplina e regularidade” (“a pleasurable exercise
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...of muscle endurance and concentration, practiced regularly and with discipline”), climbing contrasts with his earlier biking, in which he would deliberately lose control (24).

As the artist, Adri is particularly symbolic of the push-and-pull that Hermano experiences as he struggles with the negative effects that consumer culture has on him. The peak of her career is an exhibit in which she has a tree surgically removed from the ground and transplanted to the ceiling of a large empty shed. This specific tree, the narrator points out, grows extensively, destroying any pavement or wall that stands in its way. This project follows another one, in which Adri builds an ensemble of pieces of trees mixed with artificial objects such as the bumper of a car, pieces of tile, concrete, and glass signs (Galera 53). On one hand, Adri’s work can be read as criticism to the destructive power of consumer culture, in the form of pieces of former commodities. On the other hand, her work also highlights nature’s capacity to fight back.

The narrator describes her plastic installations as readymades, referring to a concept created by French artist Marcel Duchamp. The readymade is the product of the transformation of everyday objects into art by removing them from their everyday context and re-signifying them in an exhibition by associating them to a specific concept. By exploring the conditions of production of Adri’s work, the novel suggests consumer capitalism’s emptying of the power of art to intervene in everyday life. As reviews of her installation point out, some critics read the extraction of the tree as an environmental crime disguised as art in exchange for fame, given the secrecy of the project, which created much anticipation in the media (Galera 55). The criticism that Adri receives reflects the challenges of making art in an age where the quest for the new pursued by avant-garde artists such as Duchamp has long been absorbed by consumer culture. Adri’s work and what it communicates to its audience, therefore, can be read as a parallel to Hermano’s inner struggle: standing between the forces that surrender to and resist consumer culture. From this perspective, the choice of an image of interwoven roots of a tree for the book’s cover, even though the mention to Adri’s work appears as a relatively small detail in the narrative, is very symbolic. The cover can be seen as a symbol of the forces that resist and surrender to consumer culture within the protagonist, as several of his actions and thoughts demonstrate.
Hermano marries Adri with the intention of making her feel as happy as she did at the moment of their first encounter, but they end up living each in their own way: he continues to be focused on his studies and work while she concentrates on her art. Thus, the initial thrill of the relationship represented by the amorous scene in the car to which I previously referred does not last very long, with Hermano again returning to his quiet, banal life; a life that is much less impressive than the one portrayed in “Fearless.” If the influence of the image of fearlessness in the song has a limited effect on Hermano’s life, so does art in Adri’s, for she abandons it to pursue projects such as opening a clothing store or working as an art director of a film, both of which she eventually also leaves behind (Galera 55). In this way, art falls short of having the power to completely overcome the supposed degradation of consumer culture. Pop culture, in turn, also falls short of enacting its expected ability to swallow individuals’ capacity for self-awareness completely. The parallel between Adri and Hermano, therefore, questions both art’s freeing capability and consumer culture’s alleged power to sustain illusions. The potential for change is located in neither art nor consumption, but rather in the push-and-pull between awareness and oblivion experienced in everyday life proper.

Another source of ambivalence in Hermano’s life is his profession. While he makes a living primarily by "fixing" bodies that “só precisavam de concerto se opostos a padrões de beleza tão fictícios quanto onipresentes” (“only needed fixing if compared to beauty standards that were as fictitious as they were omnipotent”; Galera 128), he tries to educate his patients on the risks involved in plastic surgery. He attempts to show them that no matter how much beauty magazines try to portray these procedures as routine, they still involve serious risks. He recognizes the harmful impact of the culture of plastic surgery especially in the case of young women, who undergo the risk of breast augmentation surgery mainly to conform to an artificial standard. He sees these patients’ view of plastic surgery as a kind of problematic psychological treatment, aimed at solving “de uma vez só um vasto repertório de anseios e problemas” (“once and for all a variety of problems and sources of anxiety”; 128). He acknowledges the necessity of plastic surgery in some cases and its illusory nature in others:
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Rhinoplasties and otoplasties aimed at correcting deformities or forms that are too distant from the anatomic standard were one thing, but he disapproved of the artificiality of a breast supplanted by a prosthesis and he knew that to lipoaspirate someone’s belly was, in the majority of cases, like putting a Band-Aid on a stab wound.

In this way, he once again demonstrates his capacity to distance himself from discourses on consumption, albeit doing so from within his contradictory position as someone who contributes to the perpetuation of said discourses by performing procedures that he knows to be only flawed solutions to his patients’ problems.

The wavering nature of Hermano’s position with respect to the images of masculinity that consumer culture presents to him manifests itself in a symbolic dream that he has the night before he is supposed to leave to Bonete. The memory of the dream is triggered by a song by Brazilian musician Elomar, “A meu Deus um canto novo” (“To God, a new hymn”; 

Elomar em Concerto 1989). The narrator cites the lines “Bem de longe na grande viagem, sobrecarregado para a descansar” (“Very far into the long journey, overtired I stop to rest”; Galera 100, emphasis in the original). Elomar’s song depicts a man in search for a new beginning, who feels like he has seen everything and who is tired of his journey in life. On one hand, the tiredness mentioned in the song can be read as Hermano’s desire to abandon the strong control with which he has lived his life since Bonobo’s death. On the other hand, it can be seen as a desire to free himself from the influence of media’s models of success and masculinity once and for all.

The dream that he remembers after listening to the song has a similarly ambiguous meaning. In the dream, he is kidnapped and taken to a house where televisions emit a very bright light. While he senses that he must stay away from the televisions because they are “uma ameaça indescritível” (“an indescribable threat”), he ends up joining everyone else in the place as they, all mutilated, rappel down a cliff (Galera 104). The dream speaks of both the pressure of consumer culture values on him—the rappel down the cliff
evokes his desire to climb the challenging Bonete; the threatening television sets reference his media consumption as a kid; the mutilated people mirror the self-harm that he caused when he was younger—as well as his awareness of the negative impact of such values and his attempts to break away from them. Both the song and the dream signal the possibility that Hermano either surrender to these values or, tired of the “long journey,” abandon them. According to the narrator, when reflecting upon the significance of the dream, Hermano is not sure what it means, but he knows that “o seu significado já está incorporado à sua consciência, diluído em seu fluxo mental” (“its meaning is already incorporated into his conscience, diluted in his mind stream”; 104). In this way, the narrator indicates that, even though Hermano proceeds to pursue the hero narrative of his childhood, there lies in the back of his mind a critical view of this narrative, which indeed surfaces later, after he saves the kid’s life and appears to find no redemption in this act.

Similarly ambiguous is Hermano’s encounter with Naiara after the episode with the kid he helps as an adult. This encounter is foreshadowed by Elomar’s previously mentioned song, which the protagonist continues to listen to as he drives away from the hospital. This time, the lines quoted are “Ó lua nova, quem me dera, eu me encontrar com ela, no pispei de tudo, na quadra” (“Oh new moon, if only I could meet with her, in the beginning of it all, in the [neighborhood] block”; Galera 106, emphasis in the original). The chapter in which he meets Naiara again is, chronologically, the last one. It ends with him abruptly breaking off their conversation without any indication of where he is headed or what he plans to do next: “Ela pergunta se ele queria tomar chimarrão, mas ele não responde. Apenas levanta da cadeira. Está na hora de ir” (“She asks if he wanted to have some chimarrão, but he doesn’t reply. He just gets up. It’s time to go”; 179). This particular episode precedes the last chapter of the novel, which concludes with Hermano still a teenager. As he returns home after Bonobo’s funeral, he decides to change his life: “Agora ele sabia exatamente o que fazer. Não seria necessário fingir nunca mais” (“Now he knew exactly what to do. Never again would it be necessary to pretend”; 188).

By the time we reach the end of this chapter, we know that Hermano could never completely follow through with his plan of never needing to pretend again, given that he still longed for an opportunity for redemption. When presented to him, this
opportunity brings back the sensibility of the camera that he had tried to repress for so many years. However, the openness of the scene at Naiara’s house suggests that there is here an opportunity for a new beginning. This new beginning may entail new repetitions and alienations, but of a different kind, after the linearity of his daily life has been interrupted by the deeper alienation brought up by the camera and followed by the profound questioning of himself yet again. Foreshadowed by Elomar’s song, which alludes to the non-cumulative, non-capitalist cyclic rhythms of nature (Lefebvre, Critique 340)—the new moon—, a new phase of Hermano’s life is thus potentially inaugurated at the chronological end of the narrative.

The oscillation between alienation and awareness shown throughout the novel indicates that semi-conscious, potentially uncritical repetition, on one hand, and change motivated by conscious critical impulse, on the other hand, may continue to alternate in the protagonist’s future. It is significant that a novel that depicts the banalities of everyday life to such a large extent ends with the juxtaposition of two scenes that represent returns and attempts to start anew. These scenes mark “moments” in Hermano’s life in the sense Lefebvre proposes. The French philosopher defines “moment” as “a function of a history, the history of the individual” (Critique 344). In each of these moments, both as an adolescent and as an adult, Hermano has the opportunity to change the course of his life, though not in the sense of total disalienation from potentially harmful repetition. As Lefebvre stresses, repetition organizes and gives meaning and stability to our daily experiences. The moment is limited and partial. It reveals the everyday to be uncertain and transitory, but also solid and real (Critique 349). What Hermano can do is to start a new cycle that, within the same world of consumer culture, may inaugurate a new phase that will consist of new kinds of routinizations.

Laub’s *A maçã envenenada*: Between Kurt Cobain and Imaculée Ilibagiza

The contrast between repetition and change in an everyday of uncertainty and transience mediated by commodities is key to the narrative structure of *A maçã envenenada*. Like Hermano, Laub’s
unnamed protagonist has an intrinsic connection with consumer culture. Specifically, the song “Drain You” by the North American band Nirvana functions as a trigger that repeatedly confronts him with his past. Also like Hermano, the protagonist of *A maçã* undergoes the push-and-pull of a dialectical movement between alienation and disalienation. He experiences alienation both toward his girlfriend, Valéria, as he becomes emotionally subordinate to her, and toward himself, in the form of a sense of guilt and failure. There is much disillusionment and crisis in both the protagonist’s personal experience and that of his generation in the novel (Lehnen, “O fruto” 100). However, there is also push back, reflection, self-awareness, and above all, an important attempt at coming to terms with the past through writing. The novel, narrated by the protagonist himself, can be read as his exercise in reflecting about the past, attempting to rid himself of the blame that he feels for Valéria’s death, acknowledging his self-absorbed ways, and confronting the image of his generation as disengaged from social reality and his own discomfort with having partaken in this lack of engagement. Therefore, I propose that *A maçã* be read, like *Mãos*, as a narrative of the dialectic passing between alienation and disalienation that Lefebvre postulates as essential to prevent the halt of totality that stagnating in either state would entail (*Critique* 216). In this passing, the protagonist goes back and forth between reflecting about his relationship with his girlfriend and immersing himself in everyday routines. Nirvana’s music and the suicide of its lead singer, Kurt Cobain, its contrast with the Rwanda genocide, and the protagonist’s survival from a car accident after Valéria’s death provide him with the pull out of everyday life that leads him into reflection and, ultimately, into the very act of writing the narrative. In other words, these triggers lead the protagonist into “moments,” in the sense proposed by Lefebvre described in the previous section of this chapter: recognitions of himself, however confused, within his own history.

Nirvana’s music and the band’s history play a central role in *A maçã*. The protagonist’s age indicates that he belongs to Generation X, of which Kurt Cobain became an icon. Cobain, an idol of grunge, wrestled with the guilt of selling out to capitalism. He turned into a kind of myth—constructed by the media, critics, and fans—after taking his own life in 1994 at the age of twenty-seven. As the protagonist of *A maçã envenenada* states, after Cobain’s death,
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todo mundo tinha um veredito sobre Kurt Cobain, uma tese
sobre como ele incorporou o espírito de uma época esmagada
peço das utopias, sobre como uma geração pouco educada
devolvia a raiva ao emergir no fim dos anos Reagan, sobre o
que era ser jovem numa América tomada por corporações, in-
dividualismo e falta de perspectivas, e como isso estava ligado à
via-crúcis pessoal do cantor … (Laub 18)

everyone had a verdict on Kurt Cobain, a thesis about how he
incorporated the spirit of a time crushed by the end of utopia;
about how a generation that had little education paid back with
anger at the moment it emerged at the end of the Reagan years;
about what it meant to be young in an America taken over by
corporations, individualism, and lack of opportunities; and
how this was tied to Cobain’s Via Crucis …

The protagonist looks for answers to Valéria’s death much in the
same way that the media and the fans try to understand Cobain’s
suicide, reading everything that she wrote, said, or did, as a series
of events that only after the fact seem to lead up to a tragic end-
ing that left him with survivor’s guilt (Laub 7). This perspective
is also the one that the protagonist entices readers to take as they
process the meaning of his own words, the actual novel, when he
asks “o que a aparência, a sintaxe e o estilo de um texto diz sobre
quem o escreveu?” (“what do the appearance, the syntax, and the
style of a text say about the person who wrote it?”; 90). This ques-
tion, meant to refer to a postcard that Valéria sent him, is also
about his own writing—which is ultimately A maçã—and about
what his narration tells us, readers, about him. As the protagonist
revisits his memories in a tone that mixes journalistic account with
memoir, it becomes evident that his “reality,” that is, the internal
reality of Laub’s fictional world in A maçã, much like Hermano’s,
lies somewhere between what happened, what the protagonist as-
sumes to have happened, and projections of his own insecurities.
Expressions of doubt (“não sei se” [“I don’t know if”], “como se”
[“as if”], “talvez” [“maybe/perhaps”]), conjunctions that indicate
other possibilities (“ou” [“or”]), and verbs in the conditional
indicating hypotheses are widely used throughout the narrative,
conveying this state of uncertainty.

Memory in A maçã, therefore, appears as process, the time of
the “durante” (“during”; Gondar 23). The protagonist reconstructs
his past from the questions that he poses to himself in the present,
and the (limited) answers that he is able to provide now, years later, when he is more mature and has learned more about Valéria, about himself, and about life. In this process, his memories are constantly put into question as he admits the existence of gaps in what he says. These nebulous accounts contrast with incredibly detailed descriptions that highlight banalities—such as the clothes that Unha, a former member of the protagonist’s band, wore the day he met with the protagonist after Valéria’s death, or even what Unha drank and ate during that meeting (95)—conveying an impression of a supposedly objective journalistic account and at times coming across as an attempt to normalize a life that has been shaken by tragedy.

As he tells us his account of the past, linguistic mechanisms suggest the protagonist’s fusion with Valéria, symbolizing his alienation toward her. This fusion is conveyed by the ambiguity of many sentences in which the protagonist appears to refer to Valéria but could be referring to himself. For example, fragment ninety-eight is a monologue directed to an interlocutor named “você” (“you”), uttered by an “eu” (“I”), who could be either Valéria addressing the protagonist or vice-versa: “De qual parte minha você mais vai sentir falta? Que parte sua faz com que eu goste de você?” (“Which part of you are you going to miss the most? What part of yours makes me like you?”; Laub 115). The protagonist also undergoes a kind of split of the self, such as in the passage below, which shows his account of when he cheated on Valéria with a girl named Tati:

Eu não cheguei nem a completar o que deveria ter feito com ela, porque tinha bebido e o banheiro era apertado e a minha cara no espelho começou a parecer estranha na luz branca, um tanto deformada, um tanto triste, e basta reparar nisso para que a empolgação dê lugar a algo próximo ao horror, e você pede desculpas e veste a calça e quando se prepara para ir embora sem lavar as mãos ouve os gritos e batidas de Valéria na porta. (Laub 79)

I didn’t even get to finish what I should have done with her because I had been drinking alcohol; and the bathroom was tight; and my face in the mirror started to look strange in the white light: somewhat deformed, somewhat sad; and noticing this is enough to replace excitement with something close to horror; and you apologize; and put your pants on; and as you get ready to leave without washing your hands, you hear Valéria’s screaming and pounding on the door.
In the passage above, the narration changes from first person singular (“eu” [“I”]) to a second person singular (“você” [“you”]) used in generic terms as the protagonist’s seeing his face in the mirror appears to trigger a critical awareness of what he is doing or is about to do, leading him to regret his actions. These linguistic shifts mark the separation between the “I” that does the action and an “I” that reflects about it, perhaps as the same 18-year-old of the past or as the 40-year-old of the present judging the behavior of his younger self, thus indicating a movement between alienation and disalienation throughout his life.

One of these movements concerns his belonging to Generation X. The latter is commonly viewed as apathetic and lost.\(^2\) Nirvana’s music, grunge, was considered the main cultural expression of this generation. While meant to be a critical response to neoliberalism, grunge was deemed a highly commercial version of punk, with the music video of Nirvana’s song “Smells like Teen Spirit,” a highly successful commercial formula that opens the album *Nevermind* (1991), becoming a kind of anthem of the Generation X and its apathy. Nevertheless, the protagonist’s critical perspective toward himself as a Generation X-er can be perceived from the beginning of the narrative in his comments about several banal aspects of his youth. He acknowledges, for example, the pathetic reason why he decided to become a lawyer: because he liked movies about lawyers. Mocking his expectations of reality molded by the fantasy of Hollywood, he comments that he “achava que era possível correr atrás de criminosos sem suar ou amassar o terno” (“thought it was possible to chase criminals down without sweating or wrinkling one’s suit”; Laub 45). He also confesses that the rock band in which he played with Valéria, along with his close friend Unha, had nothing original about it. Their attempt to convey the rebellion of their generation against capitalism was expressed by repetitive lyrics and the mere recycling of the basic features of *Nevermind*, thus producing music, ironically, as if in an assembly line (11). He further recognizes his illusion, as he calls it, of feeling as if he were effecting any change in the world by listening to rock and grunge bands that spoke up against capitalism, while attending a private school and having a maid who served him a grilled cheese sandwich and a milk shake every afternoon (35–36).
But before achieving the awareness of the problematic nature of the situations in the examples above, the protagonist goes through a series of movements between alienation and disalienation regarding his individual existence, experiencing several “moments,” in Lefebvre’s sense. These moments disrupt the repetition of daily life, to which the protagonist alludes several times throughout the novel. These routines are tied to spaces of control and limitation: the military headquarters, the hospital, and the snack bar in England where he worked without legal permission. Albeit not necessarily pleasant, these repetitions serve to ground his existence and help him cope with his obsessions: the doubt about Valéria possibly having cheated on him with Unha, the uncertainty surrounding the reason for her death, and his wondering about his future if he had not survived a car accident without long-term complications.

The first of these moments of disruption is the arrival of a postcard two months after Valéria’s death, which had been sent by her from São Paulo before she attended the 1993 Nirvana concert in the city. In the postcard, Valeria quotes lines from “Drain You,” which potentially imply that the protagonist ruined her life, leading her to commit suicide. The original lines read as follows:

One baby to another says
I’m lucky to have met you
I don’t care what you think
Unless it is about me

With eyes so dilated
I’ve become your pupil
You’ve taught me everything
Without a poison apple (Nirvana)

These lines appear translated into Portuguese in fragment 78 of the novel. In the postcard, the quote appears mistranslated, with the preposition *sem* (without) in the original translated into the preposition *ao*, so that the quote reads “[v]ocê me ensinou tudo ao me dar a maçã envenenada,” literally, “[y]ou taught me everything when you gave me/by giving me the poison apple.” The protagonist spends the following several years wondering whether the mistranslation was intentional and the postcard was part of Valéria’s plan to take her own life by inhaling *lança-perfume* during the
Nirvana concert, as a response to his breaking up with her. A parallel the protagonist creates between his cleaning a weapon at the military headquarters where he serves and her mailing the postcard in question encapsulates his potential responsibility for her passing:

This parallel, although likely not necessarily corresponding to what happened in reality, given that the protagonist can only imagine what actually took place, suggests the potential mutual destruction between the two characters that the lyrics of “Drain You” represents. This song becomes a metaphor for Valéria’s and the protagonist’s relationship. In this sense, their relationship resulted in them “draining” each other: if the protagonist’s actions may have led Valéria to commit suicide, the message on the postcard haunts him as he lives the uncertainty regarding his degree of responsibility for his girlfriend’s demise.

The lyrics on the postcard act as a disalienating force in the sense that they pull the protagonist out of the automaticity at the headquarters in which he immersed himself after the funeral: “... a corneta, o hino, a bandeira, o desfile, o vestiário, ...” (“... the horn, the anthem, the flag, the parade, the locker room, ...”; Laub 107). The impact of receiving the postcard pushes him into a spiral of guilt that culminates with him nearly dying in a car accident. The accident, the protagonist suggests, could have been
a suicide attempt, a decision about which he is not sure because it would have been made while he was intoxicated. Nevertheless, he survives the accident, having the time at the hospital, in the middle of his new routine of care as he recovers, to reflect about what happened (his accident, Valéria’s death) and to devise a plan for the future. This plan entailed leaving Brazil and living under the radar in London, where he immerses himself again in a numbing routine, as if in a kind of self-punishment. There, he lives frugally, abandoning, albeit temporarily, the comforts of his middle-class life in Brazil. He recalls wearing the same jacket, pants, and boots for months, sharing an Underground pass with his roommate while living in a pension, working twelve hours a day at a snack bar, and earning enough per hour to buy a bagel and a soda (23–24).

The narrative calls into question his time of “sacrifice” in London, by representing Valéria’s voice echoing in the protagonist’s head as he writes his account (the book that we hold in our hands, A maçã envenenada itself) and imagines what questions she would ask if she could interview him now. In fragment 88, her voice, represented in italics, criticizes his self-centered behavior in what is ultimately a criticism of Generation X’s experiences, as we can see in the following passage, which is worth citing, albeit long:


Você já viu tudo aos quarenta anos. O desencantado. O sábio que dispensa a piedade das outras pessoas mas não deixa de aproveitar essa piedade que aparece em tantas formas de recompensa ... O que importa é isso, não é mesmo? Se você sofreu ou não ... Você que teve a vida cheia de aventuras e a experiência mais importante. Alguma vez você se envolveu de verdade com alguma coisa? ... Abriu mão de alguma coisa valiosa? Deu alguma prova? Aceitou perder uma
única vez? Digo, perder de verdade, sem a recompensa de ser viti-
ma. Só você e a sua derrota. Só você e o fim. Mais nada e ningué-
Apenas o fim. (Laub 106–07)

You love to think that you came out of this situation a whole new
person. The survivor who learned a lesson. And was scared by this
hard life that catches us all by surprise, isn’t it? You want others
to be impressed by a few months in the military, is that it? A few
months waking up early. Ironing uniforms, look at that! Shaving
your beard. A few months pretending to have a band. The only per-
son in the world who had a car accident. Two months in bed, and
after that a sultan in exile. You know the names of London streets,
is that it? You went to parks and museums? Took the Underground
to go to work, what an adventure! And after that came back to
mama’s house. And finished college. And became a journalist in São
Paulo. And for the rest of your life thought that you’d had, how do
you call it, quite a youth.

You’ve seen everything at the age of forty. The disenchanted. The
wise man who dismisses the piety of others, but who doesn’t pass
on the opportunity to take advantage of this piety that manifests
itself in so many types of rewards … That’s what matters, isn’t it?
Whether you suffered or not … You had a life full of adventure
and had the most important experience. Did you ever get involved
in something for real? … Did you ever give up on something that
had real value? Proved anything? Accepted losing just one time? I
mean, losing for real, without the reward of being a victim. Only
you and your defeat. Only you and the end. Nothing and nobody
else. Just the end.

This passage questions several facts the reader has learned about
the protagonist up until this point. First, it criticizes the con-
formism to which his band subscribed, reproducing Nirvana’s
commercial formula, as we have seen. As the protagonist notes in
another passage, the lyrics that he wrote were nothing more than
what any unimportant songwriter of his age would write about at
the time. He further conveys a sense of his generation’s conform-
isim when he points out that all the ninety thousand people at-
tending the Nirvana concert in São Paulo would be wearing plaid
shirts, in grunge fashion.

Second, Valéria’s voice criticizes the protagonist’s forced,
meaningless, and monotonous time in the military, which stands
in stark contrast with the rebellious attitude of the generation
with which he identifies. The numb routine of discipline and
repetition, in which the larger political life of the country does not matter (Laub 8), is conveyed by the protagonist’s remark that “ninguém era capaz de entender como o brilho de uma fivela e um alfinete de gola e a extensão exata de um cadarço passaram a ser tão importantes” (“nobody was able to understand how the shine on a buckle and a pin on a collar and the exact length of a shoelace had become so important”; 38).

Third, she questions his self-exile in London, and his isolation from everyone else in a life as an undocumented worker in precarious conditions. Finally, she condemns his incidental start of a career as a journalist, due to the mere fact that he had the right connections. Collectively, these events deemed dramatic by the protagonist are rendered mere expressions of an individualism that is condensed in the title of the third part of the novel, in which the quote above illustrating Valéria’s questioning appears and which is borrowed from “Drain You”: “a não ser que seja sobre mim” (“unless it is about me”; Laub 83). In this way, Valéria’s voice functions as the protagonist’s present conscience, questioning his selfish attitudes, interrupting the cycle of alienation, driving him into a state of awareness of his limits and flaws.

The process of self-questioning—and therefore, another movement toward disalienation, that is, another “moment”—that results in the protagonist’s account of his past to us, readers, takes place when he interviews Immaculée Ilibagiza, a real survivor of the Rwanda genocide. A task he takes up as a freelancer for a magazine, this interview affects him like none of the ones he had done before, as he acknowledges (Laub 45). This encounter is described in the first part of the novel, titled “Que sorte ter encontrado você” (“How lucky am I to have found you”). The title is highly ambiguous, for it could refer to several encounters in the book between the protagonist and others (Ilibagiza, Valéria, Lieutenant Pires, the music of Cobain, Unha, Alexandre—Valéria’s previous boyfriend) that deeply affect him and that at times shift, and at times strengthen his perception of the past.

Although he does not describe it explicitly, several comparisons between the circumstances involving Cobain’s suicide and Ilibagiza’s fight to survive, along with instances in which the protagonist questions his response to Valéria’s death, indicate that the encounter with his interviewee made him reflect about the ethics of his individualistic and apathetic attitude. In one of the comparisons in question, he states:
One way to explain what happened in April 1994: Kurt Cobain had a wife, a one-year-and-seven-month-old daughter, money and fame for being successful in what he always liked to do; in addition to the possibility of abandoning this any time and living however he wanted, away from the press, the fans, in whatever city he chose, in whatever house he had custom-built, surrounded by the people he liked and with decades of material comfort ahead of him and, in spite of this, pulled the trigger. Imaculée Ilibagiza, in turn, got into a less-than-four-foot bathroom and spent ninety-eight days eating leftovers brought by the pastor; sleeping and using the toilet in front of seven other women; seeing the other seven do the same, the noises and the metabolism of each one of them; taking turns standing up, sleeping, crying, getting sick; and during this time knowing or imagining that she would lose her home, her city, her country, her language, her family and everything that makes someone who they are; but not even for a moment did she think about anything other than surviving. (Laub 51–52)

In this comment, the protagonist wonders about what makes someone commit suicide, when this person has everything a consumer society considers necessary to be happy: fame, success, and especially the money that grants freedom to be or to do whatever one desires. He also wonders, conversely, what gives someone the desire to live even when facing the most precarious material conditions.
Ilibagiza thus functions in the narrative as a public figure who stands as a counterpoint to Cobain: she is life in the face of suicide, hope in the face of despair, possibility in the face of totality. Where Cobain says no, she says yes, as the following passage, one of several that compare their attitudes toward life and death, shows:

O bilhete que Kurt Cobain deixou … terminava com uma citação de Neil Young: é melhor queimar do que apagar aos poucos. [N]a edição brasileira das memórias de Immaculée Ilibagiza … a penúltima frase de suas mais de trezentas páginas é: acredito que podemos curar Ruanda—e o nosso mundo—curando os nossos corações um a um. (Laub 89)

The [suicide] note that Kurt Cobain left … ended with a quote by Neil Young: it is better to burn than to fade away. … the second to last sentence of the more than three hundred pages of the Brazilian edition of Immaculée Ilibagiza’s book is: I believe that we can cure Rwanda—and our world—by curing our hearts one by one.

The protagonist’s comparisons between Cobain and Ilibagiza represent the push-and-pull that he experiences between being drained by his past and attempting to overcome it. Ilibagiza brings to the narrative a spiritual layer of reflection about not only Valéria’s death but also about the protagonist’s own apparent attempt to commit suicide.

Although he expresses disdain for people with strong religious beliefs, the narrative has multiple references to the Bible that inform his view of his relationship with Valéria and his responsibility for her demise. In addition, the protagonist notes that Cobain was more religious than he appeared, possibly indicating that this might also be true of himself. An important character that serves to introduce this religious facet of the protagonist’s reflection is Lieutenant Pires, whom the protagonist meets while serving in the military. Pires is described as someone who takes the Bible literally. The protagonist joins Pires’s Bible study group in order to avoid having to do rough chores that Pires assigns to those who are free during that time of the day. The passages of the Bible that they read or that Pires mentions when he visits the protagonist at the hospital all refer directly or indirectly to sin, betrayal, punishment, and knowledge as punishment:
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a. Deuteronomy 28:30—“And thou shalt betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her: thou shalt build a house, and thou shalt not dwell therein: thou shalt plant a vineyard, and shalt not gather the grapes thereof”;

b. Ecclesiastes 1:15–18—“That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow”;

c. Leviticus 4:27–28—“And if any one of the common people sin through ignorance, while he doeth somewhat against any of the commandments of the LORD concerning things which ought not to be done, and be guilty; Or if his sin, which he hath sinned, come to his knowledge: then he shall bring his offering, a kid of the goats, a female without blemish, for his sin which he hath sinned.”

These passages from the Bible reference several aspects of the novel. Deuteronomy alludes to Valéria’s and Unha’s possible affair as a betrayal of the protagonist. Ecclesiastes points to the protagonist’s knowledge about Valéria’s past (her mother’s potential suicide, her own attempt to commit suicide years earlier), about Ilibagiza (a strive to survive in spite of the world around her wanting her dead), about Cobain (the details of the suicide note and of everything in his life that seemed to lead up to his tragic end). This knowledge, in turn, is referenced in the very title of the novel, A maçã envenenada, an allusion to Adam’s and Eve’s consumption of the forbidden fruit from the knowledge tree, which leads to their condemnation to mortality and pain. In this parallel, Valéria’s postcard stands for this forbidden fruit, for the suggestion that the protagonist’s breaking up with her potentially led to her suicide is knowledge that sets him off on a quest for answers in the hopes for absolution. The mention of Leviticus, in turn, frames Valéria’s death as sacrifice for having possibly betrayed the protagonist, who attempts to defend himself and justify his choice of not showing up at the Nirvana concert and, indirectly, potentially having caused her death.
Pires also provides a counternarrative to the protagonist’s implied (and rather sexist) argument that Valéria, repeating Eve and the many other mythical women that would have led men into temptation, is responsible for his condemnation. The protagonist points out that, according to Pires, his wife saved him from a life of vice and indolence by introducing him to her church (Laub 86). As in the case of Ilibagiza, spirituality becomes a way out of situations of despair, allowing for survival. Although the protagonist mocks Pires’s and Ilibagiza’s connections with the divine—and says that after leaving the military he abandoned religion altogether—the contact with them clearly creates some discomfort within him and plays a role in his reflection. If Cobain’s and Valéria’s suicides push the protagonist toward doom and despair, Pires’s and Ilibagiza’s survival, albeit problematically tied to the potential alienation of religion, pull him back to hope and life. The contrasts between Cobain and Ilibagiza, on one hand, and Valéria and Pires, on the other hand, represent totality in opposition to possibilities to start anew in both the collective and the individual spheres, respectively. Similarly, Cobain and Valéria represent repetition, totality, and linearity, whereas Ilibagiza and Pires signify change and cycle, to put it in Lefebvre’s terms.

Standing among these stories, the protagonist’s trajectory is, in a way, a synthesis of them all: the (ambiguous) wish to die as a way to punish oneself, to take revenge on others, or even to appear heroic, like many of the biblical suicides to which he refers, and the will to live. Here, guilt, economic debt, and Christianity intersect in the sense proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche in On the Genealogy of Morals. For the German philosopher in question, the sense of Christian guilt originates in a shift in the economic concept of debt. In Christianity, God, our ultimate creditor, sacrifices his son for humankind, in an act of self-punishment meant to impinge on humankind the “uttermost sense of guilt” (71), for we are the debtors who should, in an economic sense, take the punishment for our failing to pay our dues, that is, for our sins. There is a sense of Christian guilt in A maçã, tied to consumption as sin, which echoes this correlation between the pre-capitalist relations to which Nietzsche refers. As we have seen, Cobain’s suicide is attributed, at least in part, to his difficulties in dealing with accusations that Nirvana had sold out to consumer capitalism, whereas the protagonist’s struggle is, in turn, indirectly tied to his
consumption of Cobain’s music, the product of the singer’s selling out. Moreover, there is speculation, as we have seen, about the morality of Cobain’s suicide in the face of a much more materially and socially comfortable life than that of Ilibagiza’s, who chose survival in spite of her drastic circumstances. The protagonist, in turn, torn between these two examples, Cobain and Ilibagiza, questions his own morals with respect to his suggested desire to commit suicide. In this sense, both Cobain and the protagonist incur into a debt to society and to God that is at once economic and moral.

Nevertheless, Laub’s protagonist is given a second chance when he survives the car accident, a chance that signifies the very possibility of a new beginning. This new beginning, however, much like Hermano’s, is likely not one without contradictions and uncertainty. It is rather filled with what-ifs, as the language of the novel demonstrates. To answer the previously cited question that the protagonist poses about his own text (“o que a aparência, a sintaxe e o estilo de um texto diz sobre quem o escreveu?” [“what does the appearance, the syntax, and the style of a text say about the person who wrote it?”]), we can say that the language of his text says much, for the novel has many layers and many possible readings. With respect to consumer culture, it says that, as a subject who belongs to a generation that has been defined as selfish, the protagonist may well be individualistic, but he is not unaware of his condition. He wrestles with this internal conflict, this push-and-pull between oblivion and awareness of his role in his personal relationships (his responsibility for Valéria’s death, from which he attempts to absolve himself) and of his place in society (his privileged condition, the emptiness of the music that he produces—a mere copy of music that is considered commercial—, the insignificance of his little world and his little drama in the face of collective tragedies such as the Rwanda genocide).

One of the possibilities of the protagonist’s new beginning is a kind of redemptive death, considering that the novel ends with the question that the protagonist poses to an interlocutor who is likely Valéria, as he narrates the night of the accident: “meu amor, é então que pergunto a você se devo ou não acelerar o carro” (“my love, that is when I ask you whether I should press on the accelerator”; Laub 119).

As the protagonist states in the very first line of the novel, “um suicídio muda tudo o que o seu autor disse, cantou ou escreveu”
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(“a suicide changes everything its author said, sang or wrote”; Laub 7). The word autor in Portuguese can be used to refer to a writer/composer or authorial figure in general, as well as to the person who commits a crime, although it implies less of a judgment than the word “perpetrator,” which conveys the idea of guilt. Laub plays here with the idea of writing and killing, in reference to Cobain as both author of songs and “author” of his own death. In the context of a narrative that interprets other deaths based on what their authors said or wrote, it is possible to read A maçã as the protagonist’s own metaphorical suicide note, in the sense that, by writing, he is attempting to “kill” his struggling self.

Conclusion

In both novels, the future is uncertain. In Mãos, the protagonist leaves a conversation with an old friend and we do not know what comes next. Nor do we know what the result of the writing process is for the protagonist of A maçã. However, instead of the indication of a surrender to the dissolution of time promoted by consumer culture and the sense of being lost in a dystopic world of an eternal present, the characters’ trajectories indicate an impulse to work through, in the sense proposed by Dominick LaCapra in Writing History, Writing Trauma (2014):

... working through is not a linear, teleological, or straightforward developmental (or stereotypically dialectal) process either for the individual or for the collectivity. It requires going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them. Even when they are worked through, this does not mean that they may not recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again. (148)

Therefore, if on one hand, the narratives may signal the permanence of the protagonists’ tie to the past, on the other hand, they also suggest gestures toward undoing that tie, another step in the non-linear process of working through: of disalienation. In this process, consumer culture, in the form of toys, films, cartoons, and songs, emerges in both novels as both gloom and hope for the protagonists. It is gloom because it is at the core of their struggles, in the form of a perverse discourse on masculinity for Hermano and as a symbol of the individualism of a generation for the protagonist
of *A maçã*. Nevertheless, consumer culture also appears as their hope, for it is primarily by way of being triggered by them—the imagination of a camera in an action movie in the case of Hermano and the song “Drain You,” in the case of Laub’s main characters—that the protagonists of both novels are pushed toward reflection.

From a broader societal perspective, these characters’ reflections, the obsession with memory that the novels express as they pile references to several commodities that have marked the imaginary of the decades they cover—recall the Google search referenced in the opening of this chapter—operate in the twilight, to use Huyssen’s metaphor in *Twilight Memories* (1995). The protagonists’ reflections are in a sense, however confused and murky, an attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload. (7)

The novels under analysis in this chapter can thus be read as narratives of ambivalent awareness, in the sense that both characters experience several shifts in their perception of reality, oscillating between surrendering to the forces that alienate them, on one hand, and resisting these forces, on the other hand. Rather than locating agents of change in another realm, as do Lísias and B. Carvalho, Laub and Galera suggest that change exists in the ambivalent experiences of everyday life proper. These experiences, exactly for being repetitive in nature, offer several opportunities for change, as opposed to one radical opening for transcendence, as proposed by Maia’s narratives analyzed in the previous chapter. Laub’s and Galera’s novels suggest that, somewhere in the movement between alienation and disalienation that the characters experience, between the repetitiveness of everyday life and the potential for difference that comes with each repetition, lies the change that can ultimately lead to transitions in historical processes.

In the next chapter, I will focus on Faustini’s representation of consumption and how it provides what I consider the most hopeful narrative of existence in consumer culture of all the fiction addressed in this book.