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Violent Postcolonial Ecosystems. Environmental Crisis and Eco-Critique in João Paulo Borges Coelho's Literary Writing

Abstract: The literary work of Mozambican contemporary novelist João Paulo Borges Coelho is characterized by critical reflections of great originality and relevance on the relation between violence and the environment (Nixon 2011), addressing a wide range of problematizations that when situated within a postcolonial eco-critical perspective seem to re-signify bio-political paradigms, pointing to what has been defined as “eco-materialist aesthetics” (Mukherjee 2010: 19). Far beyond a mere metaphorical resource, the environment appears to be an aesthetic – and theoretical – index of the “necropolitical” condition (Mbembe 2003; 2019) of human and non-human life within the Mozambican nation-state. However, Borges Coelho's novels offer the possibility to add further complexities, on the one hand, to the entanglement between the “ordered colonial violence” and the “violent postcolonial order” (Borges Coelho 2003a: 175–193) and, on the other hand, to bio-political and eco-critical readings of his work. The crisis registered in Borges Coelho's work *Cidades dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista* (City of Mirrors. Futurist Novella) (2011) stood out as a pragmatic example in order to reassess the meaning of environmental and eco-materialist aesthetics and therefore to grasp his critique of *violent postcolonial (eco)systems*, in Mozambique and in the World.

Keywords: João Paulo Borges Coelho, Mozambique, African literatures, postcolonial ecosystem, environmental crisis, eco-critique

Tal como os animais ganham as feições dos donos, também os moradores vão afeiçoando aos bairros onde vivem.

Just as animals take on the features of their owners, residents also resemble the neighborhoods where they live. (Borges Coelho 2011)

In the literary works published by Mozambican contemporary novelist João Paulo Borges Coelho, the concept of crisis is a central problematization as well as a strategic aesthetic device in his literary writing. Since the publication of his first novel, *As Duas Sombras do Rio* (The two shadows of the river) in 2003, the idea of *violent (post)colonial (eco)systems* is a central theme of his literary work through-

out the registration of the impact of (colonial and civil) wars, (human and natural) catastrophes and (political and social) crisis within the vast and diverse context of Mozambican territory in different historical moments. As Paulo de Medeiros puts it in his study of two novels published by Borges Coelho, *Água. Uma novela rural* (Water. A rural novella) (2016) and *Ponta Gea* (2017):

Borges Coelho goes further than simply continuing his previous use of symbolic references to water or general ecological concerns to present us with a forceful critique of how ‘development’ has come to threaten not just established ways of life but life itself. In doing so, [. . .], Borges Coelho not only aligns national concerns with global ones but places the national and even individual cases as paradigmatic before the readers. In doing so, I will want to argue, Borges Coelho intervenes sharply on both the socio-political register and on the literary-aesthetic one. The two novels under consideration advance the notion of a Mozambican literature fully enmeshed in global currents and debates, participating fully in the world-literary system, without for a moment losing sight of their responsibility towards local specificities. (Medeiros 2020: 223)

Therefore, his literary work can be addressed as a paradigmatic example of a strategic convergence between global and national/regional crises where the very idea of crisis is always unfolded through its political, human and environmental dimensions. In this way Borges Coelho’s literary project shows an emblematic connection between nature and human history and therefore, paraphrasing Raymond Williams, fosters an original (re)definition of “the idea of man [human] in society, and [therefore] ideas of kinds of society” (2005: 70–71). According to this perspective, Borges Coelho’s literary work can be addressed as an example of what Pablo U. Mukherjee defines as “eco-materialist aesthetic” and, thus, a literary work that underlines and addresses: “the essential unity of humans and environment, of history and nature; (. . .) finally, the specific enabling condition that the environment offers to all human cultural activities” (Mukherjee 2010: 63A critical). Reading of Borges Coelho’s literary project can certainly contribute to foster “a radically creative alliance between environmental and postcolonial studies” and therefore, “imaginative coalitions that may help redress environmental injustice” (Nixon 2011: 259–260) and thus (re)signifying the very idea of crisis in its multiple space-time unfolding within a materialist and postcolonial critical perspective.

João Paulo Borges Coelho was born in 1955, in the city of Porto while his family was traveling to Portugal. He spent his childhood between the mining town of Moatize and the Island of Ibo, in northern Mozambique. Then he moved with his family to the city of Beira, capital of Sofala, where he remained until 1973, when he left for Portugal to study Psychology and then History at the University of Lisbon. Without finishing his studies in Portugal, he returned to Mozambique days after the outbreak of the Carnation Revolution (1974), in a move contrary to the majority of Portuguese settlers who abandoned the overseas provinces to return

to Portugal. He caught “an empty plane” (Borges Coelho 2009) and returned to Maputo where he concluded his degree in History at the University Eduardo Mondlane becoming a recognized professor and researcher of the History of Mozambique and Southern Africa. After working in different research environments,¹ in 1994 he obtained his Ph.D. in Economic and Social History at the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom. Although a deliberate distinction between the profession of historian and the profession of writer remains unequivocal (Gallo 2018), the literary work of Borges Coelho shows the potentialities that arise from the intertwining of these two disciplines and intellectual dimensions: science and fiction, history and literature, whose tensions and “telescopic pressures”² are the mark of the politics and the aesthetics that guide the author’s work. João Paulo Borges Coelho is currently a retired full professor at the University Eduardo Mondlane and lives in Maputo with his wife, children, and grandchildren.³ His career as novelist started in 2003 with the publication of the novel *As Duas Sombras do Rio* (Borges Coelho 2003b), however before that he published three books of graphic novels, *Namacurra* (Borges Coelho 1987), *No Tempo do Farelahi* (Borges Coelho 1984) and *Akapwichi Akaporo – Armas e escravos* (Borges Coelho 1981), all currently out of print.⁴ Since 2003, the author published thirteen books – eight novels, three novellas, and three collections of short stories. Despite his late beginning as a novelist, João Paulo Borges Coelho represents one the most original and outstanding authors of the Portuguese-speaking literary world.⁵

As previously mentioned, the literary work of João Paulo Borges Coelho is characterized by critical reflections of great originality and relevance on the relation between violence and the environment (Nixon 2011), addressing a wide range of problematizations which, when situated within a postcolonial eco-critical perspective, seem to re-signify bio-political paradigms, pointing to what has been defined

1 In addition to teaching, Borges Coelho was deputy director of the Center for Basic Techniques for the Use of Natural Resources (TBARN), which led him to carry out fieldwork in the district of Mavago, in the province of Niassa. He also worked in the School of Marxism-Leninism until writing, in 1983, along with José Negrão and Luís de Brito, a manual on the National Liberation Struggle that would have displeased the party by addressing topics considered controversial, such as hunger and insecurity in the liberated zones, gender inequality, and the place of death of Eduardo Mondlane. After this episode, he was transferred to the University Publication Center and, in 1987, he started to manage the Bulletin of the Archive, linked to the Historical Archive of Mozambique. Regarding the professional trajectory of João Paulo Borges Coelho, see Israel 2020.

2 About the concepts of *telescopic pressures*, see WReC 2015: 17.

3 For an autobiography of the author, see Borges Coelho 2009.

4 For a reading of his graphic novels, see Israel in Brugioni et al. 2020: 37–68.

5 For an overview of his oeuvre, see Brugioni, Grossegeesse and Medeiros in Brugioni et al. 2020: 1–8.

as “eco-materialist aesthetics” (Mukherjee 2010). Far beyond a mere metaphorical resource, the environment seems to be an aesthetic – and theoretical – index of the “necropolitical condition” (Mbembe 2003, 2019) of human and non-human life within the Mozambican nation-state. However, Borges Coelho’s novels offer the possibility to add further complexities, on the one hand, to the entanglement between the “ordered colonial violence” and the “violent postcolonial order” (Borges Coelho 2003a: 175–193) and, on the other hand, to bio-political and eco-critical debates for the study of contemporary Mozambican and African literatures. The environmental crisis registered in Borges Coelho’s literary writing, as Paulo de Medeiros states it, appears as “a forceful critique of how ‘development’ has come to threaten not just established ways of life but life itself” (Medeiros 2020: 219–248), offering the possibility to reassess the meaning of Borges Coelho’s environmental and eco-materialist aesthetics and, thus, to grasp his critique of violent postcolonial (eco)systems, in Mozambique and in the world.⁶

Cidade dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista [City of Mirrors. Futuristic Novella] (Borges Coelho 2011) presents itself as a paradigmatic example to reflect on the eco-materialist aesthetics that guides the author’s work. It is a singular work not only within the literary project developed by João Paulo Borges Coelho but also within the scope of Mozambican literature, as well as in the broader field of contemporary African literatures. Among many, two of the main reasons for this singularity: the genre of the novel and the futuristic theme – both explicit in the subtitle of the book –; the two aspects lead to the observation of this work from the perspective of a paradigmatic proposal within the Mozambican literary universe and, more generally, contemporary literatures from Portuguese-speaking contexts. Observing *Cidade dos Espelhos* in contrast to other novellas published by Borges Coelho – *Hinyambaan. Novela Burlesca* (2008) and *Uma novela rural* (2016) – but also within the corpus produced by the author, several aspects stand out distinctively especially regarding the literary genre of the novella and the realistic dimension that constitutes itself as an aesthetic, critical, and conceptual strategy characteristic of Borges Coelho’s work.

In *Cidade dos Espelhos* this aspect seems articulated in the perspective of what has been defined as “critical irrealism” (Löwy 2007; Medeiros 2020) that is: an aesthetic not corresponding “to any depreciation of realism, but to a refinement of it, under the specific circumstances of combined and uneven development” (WReC 2015: 70). Therefore, according to the perspective put forward by the Warwick Research Collective in the essay *Combined and Uneven Development*:

⁶ Parts of the reflections developed in this chapter are published in Brugioni 2022 and in Brugioni and Gallo 2019.

Towards a New Theory of world-literature: “We are proposing that something of an elective affinity exists between the general situation(s) of peripherality and irrealist aesthetics” recalling to something that “following Michael Löwy (from whom we have derived the term ‘irrealism’ in the first instance), we might call the ‘ideal-type’ of realism (2007: 195).” (WReC 2015: 68)

In this sense, this work of Borges Coelho can be defined as a paradigmatic case of “peripheral (ir)realism” (WReC, 2015), that is, a literary work governed by the dimensions of combination and inequality that guide the conditions of life and existence – human and non-human – within the capitalist system in which the “postcolonial environment” (Mukherjee 2010) is also inscribed. In this regard, it is important to highlight that the reading of *Cidade dos Espelhos* that I aim to develop in this chapter establishes a dialog and is, in a way, tributary of the critical reflection proposed by Paulo de Medeiros in his analysis of two literary works recently published by João Paulo Borges Coelho, *Água. Uma novela rural* and *Ponta Gea* (Medeiros 2020: 219–247) According to Paulo de Medeiros, these two works can be read: “Not only as aesthetic experiments that question the boundaries between, on the one hand, History, memory, and fiction and, on the other, realistic and mythical representation, but also as powerful records of a new type of crisis that Deckard, quoting Minqi Li, defines as ‘an epochal crisis of the capitalist world economy’”(Medeiros 2020: 232; Deckard 2019; Minqi Li 2008). Therefore, in this sense, the two works: “record – and ask us to reflect on – the history of the combined development that led to the catastrophic moment we are experiencing, to be understood in terms of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory or the ecosophy proposed by Guattari” (Medeiros 2020: 242).

Within the scope of this reading, the aim is to address *Cidade dos Espelhos* not as a work that contrasts opposing and antithetical times and spaces (colony/nation-state, past/future, human/nature, among others) but as a literary form characterized by “dialectical images of combined unevenness” (WReC 2015: 17). The theoretical perspectives that emerge throughout this approach seem to re-frame aesthetic and political meanings of Borges Coelho’s literary project as well as to readdress the critical debate within postcolonial theory and environmental studies. On this, as Michael Niblett puts it – drawing on the theorizations proposed by Raymond Williams and Roberto Schwarz – it is important to recognize on the ability of Borges Coelho’s literature to “intervene in more creative or critical ways” (Niblett 2020: 4) and therefore to propose new way to read and understand social and political conditions or, rather, as Williams states, to develop “a dramatization of values that becomes an action” (1970: 58–59). Therefore, according to Niblett: “The specific kinds of knowledge enabled by literary works can sensitize readers to the possibility of new types of social practice (including new

ways of organizing nature) and new analytical optics. ‘A good novel,’ claims Roberto Schwarz, ‘is a genuine event for theory’ (2012: 22).” (Niblett 2020: 4)

Furthermore, reading Borges Coelho’s work through a line of materialist thought – and here I refer to the critical reflection on world-literature proposed by the Warwick Research Collective as well as to theorizations developed within the field of postcolonial theory⁷ – contributes substantially to understanding the “unstable mix of past and future systems” (WReC 2015: 72) that guides his literary project, as well as contemporary capitalism, inside and outside Mozambique. Moreover, it is possible to observe the unrealistic aesthetics of (semi)peripheral literatures without “losing sight of the historical specificity of mutations in literary form (and their correspondence to particular social developments)” (WReC 2015: 68). At this respect, the futuristic outline of the *novella* – as a specific literary form – appears to be the most evident aesthetic device in order to address meanings and implications of its irrealism as an ‘impure’ combination of both realism and irrealism (Löwy 2007).⁸

Cidade dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista is a work structured in 20 brief chapters through a narration entirely set in a “distant capital of an old empire” (Borges Coelho 2011: 7) where socio-political, environmental, and human collapse(s) are the central narrative devices. Beyond the city that is presented as the preponderant spatial setting of the narration – opening to a reflection on what has come to be defined as “Afropolis”⁹ – the anti-linear plot is developed around three un-rounded characters, Laissone, Jeremias, and Caia, who despite not having any family or friendship ties between them, together provoke a spectacular terrorist attack towards a religious temple, at the exact liturgical moment, killing hundreds of people. The operation to assault the temple, described in the first chapter of the text – “Bolas de Sabão” [Soap Bubbles] – is perhaps the first and most paradigmatic example of the dimension of *combination* and inequality that characterizes this literary work:

7 I am referring here to authors such as Edward W. Said, Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus, Robert C. Young, among others, who, despite developing different theorizations, propose critical and conceptual dimensions deeply based on a “consistent criticism of Eurocentrism” (Said 1995), as well as on the observation of postcolonialism from its material, economic, and political conditions.

8 On this, as Michael Niblett states: “Literary form, in working on social (or socioecological) forms, will transform the latter in line with the logic of aesthetic practice. Thus, to take a relevant example, if we were to sift a novel or poem for signs of the ecological antagonisms of a particular commodity frontier, we might not find them at the level of thematic content, but they may well be present in transmuted form as, say, generic or stylistic discontinuities.” (Niblett 2020: 4–5).

9 In this regard, see Nuttal and Mbembe 2008 and WReC 2015.

Jeremiah takes out of his bag the small bamboo cane that always accompanies him, and from his pocket a small handful of tiny metal cones a little larger than grains of coarse sand. He puts some in his cane, puts it in his mouth, and waits for the guards to get their act together. (. . .)

Caia nimbly climbs the bars of the gate to fulfill his part of the mission. He holds himself tightly by the legs while taking out of the bag a small jar and a wire rod with a ring at the end, those that children use to blow soap bubbles. He shakes the bottle of liquid, unscrews the lid, plunges the rod into it, removes it, and blows the ring making a huge bubble grow, which is only not round due to the weight it has, which forces it to stretch at the same time that mysterious forces try to bring it to spherical shape again. (. . .)

In the other hand, now gloved, Caia already has a syringe whose needle he sticks carefully into the soap bubble, slightly pressing the plunger with his thumb to release a drop of the deadly broth of bacteria. [. . .] In a matter of minutes, the daring gestures of Caia produce half a dozen bubbles of the most varied sizes (he stops blowing them to make them grow when a very acute intuition tells him they are about to burst) at the same time that with the syringe he puts a drop of broth inside them. (Borges Coelho 2011: 11–13; my translation)¹⁰

The dialectical combination between traditional and technological, or rather between archaic and contemporary, not only mobilizes some of the assumptions that guide the (afro)futuristic aesthetics (Paul 2019) but illustrates, above all, a juxtaposed combination of strategies, techniques, and tools that are configured as an emblematic element of a “singular modernity” (Jameson 2002). Without a clear motivation as to the reasons determining the attack, the following chapters dwell on the escape of the “three robbers” whose crossings of urban space take place as assumptions to indicate the atmospheric violence and the human and environmental collapse in which the city and its inhabitants are inserted: “Among the robbers grows a silent euphoria. For Caia, it is a game, while for the other two, it

10 Original quote: “Jeremias tira da sacola a pequena cana de bambu que o acompanha sempre, e do bolso um pequeno punhado de minúsculos cones de metal pouco maiores que grãos de areia grossa. Mete alguns na cana, leva-a a boca e espera que os guardas se ponham a jeito. (. . .) Caia trepa agilmente as grades do portão a fim de cumprir com a sua parte da missão. Segura-se firmemente pelas pernas enquanto tira da sacola um pequeno frasco e uma haste de arame com uma argola na ponta, daquelas que as crianças usam para soprar bolas de sabão. Agita o frasco do líquido, desenrosca a tampa mergulha nele a haste, retira-a e sopra na argola fazendo crescer uma bola enorme, que só não é redonda devido ao peso que tem, que a obriga a alongar-se ao mesmo tempo que forças misteriosa a tentam trazer ao formato esférico outra vez. (. . .) Na outra mão, agora enluvada, Caia já tem uma seringa cuja agulha espeta com cuidado na bola de sabão, pressionando ligeiramente o êmbolo com o polegar para lhe soltar dentro uma gota apenas do mortífero caldo de bactérias. (. . .) Numa questão de minutos os temerários gestos de Caia produzem meia dúzia de bolas dos mais variados tamanhos (deixa de lhes soprar para as fazer crescer quando uma agudíssima intuição lhe diz estarem prestes a rebentar) ao mesmo tempo que com a seringa lhes vai metendo uma gota de caldo dentro.”

is a kind of revenge. When taking stock, obviously there is no way not to consider that it was chance that played in favor of the robbers” (Borges Coelho 2011: 14).

Caia, the youngest, goes about his daily life committing violence and dodging the affections of his grandmother, the only person with whom he seems to have any feeling; “for him, reality is almost always the imitation of a film” (Borges Coelho 2011: 10). Laissone, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by a pressing sense of lack that leaves him vulnerable even to the sound of a trumpet, a passage in which the character expresses the desire to put himself into a fetal position in search of a security that is now unattainable; “He wants to renounce his own strength, to surrender to a slow orbit that only as vaguely as possible accounts for gravity” (31). Jeremias, the oldest of the group, experiences the tyranny of power when he is cruelly tortured by soldiers who, while beating him, shout incessantly: “we want the words, we want the words,” while he, in the depths of his pain, can only offer his aggressors memories of old friendships and loves: “as if his whole life had accumulated to be able, here and now, to dump” (62). Memories that do not interest their torturers bothered with the fragments offered by Jeremias and from whom they demand: “a torrent of docile words that dissolve into a certain logic, but what the prisoner gives them are words that swallow the act, transform it into something that is no longer an act but some delusional construction. Metaphors?” (62). The three un-rounded characters that play a leading role in the story’s opening event, populate the rest of the narration as three appearances whose histories and subjectivities will be getting lost in the unfolding of the novella.

The past, almost completely erased, crosses the entire narrative in a residual way through indicative elements that characterize the urban geography and the environment; first of all, Avenida Louise (Louise Avenue), bumpy and very wide, to which the name Avenida do Escárnio (Mockery Avenue) would better fit:

Avenue Louise is the main axis, the backbone that allows us to say that the body of a city exists here. Avenue Louise. Without her, the city would be nothing more than an archipelago of alienated villages, caught up in mutual hatred. Its name is a mystery: for use it represents the nostalgia, now in disuse, with which something that existed in the past was remembered, perhaps a *boulevard* identical to that of the distant capital of the old empire. (. . .) In any case, the name Mockery Avenue would suit it best because of the appearance it presents today: a bumpy and very wide strip formed by the junction of three lanes since those gardens disappeared, a width without any purpose given the rarity of vehicles and also because people and bicycles do not need such a space to circulate. As if the inhabitants were saying that this is how they imagine the original Avenue Louise. Assumptions (Borges Colho 2011: 17–18; my translation)¹¹

11 Original quote: “A Avenida Louise é o eixo principal, a espinha dorsal que nos permite dizer que existe aqui, levantando, o corpo de uma cidade. Avenida Louise. Sem ela a cidade não passa-

The Avenue Louise – a clear anthropomorphic metonym of the city – is surrounded by amputated busts of stone, without ears and noses; houses ruined by acid rain; fetid canals that were once rivers; trees mutilated into trunks without branches or leaves; high walls. Exemplary, in this sense, is the geographical division of the city between the Zona Alta (Upper Zone) with its “nylon trees,” place where the wealthy live – like the general who spends his days “ensuring that others can continue with the war he started” (Borges Coelho 2011: 24) – and the Bairro Colonial [Colonial Neighborhood], where Caia’s grandmother lives, transformed by this experience into something that resembles a turtle but that time and modern life have been eating away, turning only into a meaningless shell.¹² In the Colonial Neighborhood the architects gave up greater planning and “limited themselves to mapping the tortuous itineraries of pain, the one that gained the solidity of bones” (Borges Coelho 2011: 29). In this regard, it is worth underlining what the Warwick Research Collective notes when analyzing Vladislavic’s work concerning the city and its social imaginary: “the ‘dynamism and multiplicity of the city space’ (. . .) desperately compromised by the limits set by the dead weight of the past: (. . .) (Graham 2008: 335).” (WReC 2015: 146)¹³

João Cabrita, in his reading of *Cidade dos Espelhos*, focuses on some central themes to reflect on the political and contextual meanings recorded by Borges Coelho’s text: the figure of the general – whose body “is the result of the grotesque canon of a mad doctor” (Borges Coelho 2011: 24) – described by him as: “a man who crosses the various cloaks of reality, perhaps the gelatin of time because in the case of a hero – as it is always a general in this Africa that, instead of looking forward and projecting a future, clings to the deeds of his heroes in the independence war” (Borges Coelho 2011: 24). Cabrita also underlines the social and

ria de um arquipélago de aldeias desavindas, entretidas em ódios mútuos. O seu nome é um mistério: para uso representa a nostalgia, hoje cada em desuso, com que se lembrava algo que existiu no passado, talvez um *boulevard* idêntico ao da longínqua capital do velho império. (. . .) Seja como for melhor lhe assentaria o nome de Avenida do Escárnio pelo aspecto que hoje apresenta: esburacada e larguíssima faixa formada pela junção de três vias desde que os tais jardins desapareceram, largura sem propósito algum dada a raridade de veículos e também porque gente e bicicletas não precisam de um espaço assim para circular. Como se os habitantes dissessem que é assim que imaginam, a havê-la, a Avenida Louise original. Suposições.”

12 Original quote: “Caia’s grandmother paid the price of living for so many years in a Colonial neighborhood that reminds of a turtle: slow rough shell enveloping a surprisingly tender interior. But, given that time and modern life have been cutting this interior, there is only this meaningless shell left, unless for those who know the animal from other eras. That is why it is often said that memory is the hand of meaning.” (Borges Coelho 2011: 49).

13 For a reading of the city figure in Vladislavic see also Graham 2007: 67–83.

human geography of the city that is drawn around Louise Avenue, establishing an interesting counterpoint with today's Maputo.¹⁴

Cidade dos Espelhos appears, as António Cabrita states, as a very “inconvenient novel” being a narrative openly built through a collapse of its (literary) form and language (Cabrita 2011). It is a novel where History is concentrated in its folds, and it can be captured only by those who know the rubble of cities ulcerated by their increasing peripheralization; a futuristic work, where the future is – always and hopelessly – “*posthumous*” (Cabrita 2011; my emphasis). Especially emblematic in this sense is chapter seven – “*Procissão dos Pobres*” (Procession of the Poor) – where access to the Upper Zone is granted to the residents of the Colonial Neighborhood so that they can use the remains – the garbage – that the suburb produces. A procession that chants inaudible praises to the *God of leftovers* – “the God of perishable things” –:

They look at the bins arranged in the corners, gaping with routine amazement (look at the strange processions, beyond the garbage and its bittersweet smells, and you don't think it's more than a simple shredding machine). They have long since given up the path that leads them to the heavy and unchanging values. If only the procession would let loose a tune! if only they could rehearse the army's rhythmic breathing! But no. They are here only to maintain the condition of the rest of the world. Were it not for the procession and the suburb would indeed be poor: and the shopkeepers would be the suburb and the Upper Zone beyond the bridge would be populated by the degraded statues of the Colonial Neighborhood; and the sky would be no more than the Upper Zone; and above the sky would be the sky. Were it not for the procession of the poor and the world would live in this astonishing misadventure! (Borges Coelho 2011: 53; my translation)¹⁵

14 Boulevard Louise, Little Louise in a literal translation, is a nail stuck in the martial project of the city, a macho-city project that dispenses with any other sense of unity beyond fear, embarrassment, meek authoritarian wills. A macho-city is a city where the trail of solidarity and communication has gone astray. In this macho-city mirrors do not return any image and people live in the mutual estrangement that takes place when the threads of affection and reciprocity have been broken; without that tremulous and ulcerated memory of the feminine – boulevard Louise –, the city, it is said, “would be nothing more than an archipelago of disaffected villages, entertained in mutual hatreds.” Look, Sommerchild and Xipamanine – hopefully this will all happen in the future! (Cabrita 2011).

15 Original quote: “Espreitam os caixotes dispostos nas esquinas, escancarando de rotineiro espanto (revolvam-se as estranhas procissões, para lá do lixo e dos seus cheiros acre-doces, e não se acha mais de que uma simples máquina de triturar). Há muito que desistiram da caminhada que os leva até aos valores pesados e imutáveis. Se ao menos da procissão se soltasse uma toada!, se ensiassem o tal respirar ritmado do exército! Mas não. Estão aqui apenas para manter a condição do resto do mundo. Não fosse a procissão e o subúrbio seria de facto pobre: e os lojistas seriam o subúrbio e a Zona Alta para lá da ponte estaria povoada pelas estatuas degradadas do Bairro Colonial; e o seu não seria mais que a Zona Alta; e a acima do céu seria o céu. Não fosse a procissão dos pobres e o mundo viveria neste espantoso desacerto!”

In this way, in addition to an image that seems to echo many of the reflections that have been developed on the urban and social organization of African metropolises – from the postcolonial megalopolis to the Afropolis – in their geometries of economic, social, and racial division, it becomes evident how the socially and economically hierarchical fragmentation of the urban space – “the uneven city” (WReC 2015: 143–167) – is an indispensable condition for the preservation of a world order that is, the capitalist system – “They are here only to maintain the condition of the rest of the world” (Borges Coelho 2011: 53). In this regard, the critical perspective that I intend to subscribe to here, concerning the unequal city recorded by Borges Coelho in *Cidade dos Espelhos*, is tributary to the reflection proposed by the Warwick Research Collective on the convergence between “Afropolitan modernity” and conditions determined by contemporary global capitalism; therefore, it should be noted that:

Against the suggestion, frequently encountered today, that this casualised and migratory mode of human existence signals a unique African form of modernity, we insist that it instead signals the unfolding of a singular global modernity, however uneven over time and space, and that the lived experiences of the inhabitants of African cities find precise counterparts in the lived experiences of the inhabitants not only of cities elsewhere in the ‘global south’ but also in certain spaces within cities across the ‘global north’. (WReC 2015: 150–151)

The concern to situate *Cidade dos Espelhos* in a perspective not necessarily readable in terms of geographically predefined local particularisms becomes evident in the elusive dimension that characterizes its spatial coordinates – “a distant capital of an old empire” (Borges Coelho 2011: 17) – and particularly in the aesthetic and conceptual theme of the *mirror* as a paradigmatic element for the definition and the specificity of this city. Therefore, a city whose substance is defined, above all, by its surface and where the: “expressions at the level of its surface provide unmediated access to the fundamental substances of the state of things” (Kracauer 1995 qtd. in WReC 2015: 154) pointing to and demanding “a reading of the political unconscious of the surfaces and façades of urban forms” (WReC 2015: 154). However, beyond the urban space and its surfaces, it is also the human landscape, its forms of coexistence, and relationship that is configured as a central aesthetic and conceptual element of the novel.

In the essay *Necropolitics* (2003, 2019), Achille Mbembe calls attention to a daily exposure to violence identified by him as the direct result of the neoliberal capitalism of the twenty-first century, based on profit as a paradigm of existence. In this sense, the construction of walls,¹⁶ the militarization of borders; deadly po-

¹⁶ The figure and theme of the wall constitutes a central and paradigmatic element of Borges Coelho’s literary project, an aesthetic element that points to the concepts of *durability* and *recur-*

licing; the growth of sexism, racism, and xenophobia are structural symptoms of what the Cameroonian theorist will define in another text as “the end of the humanism era” (Mbembe 2016). In other words: the rational humanistic notion of the containment of the unconscious, fundamental for the existence of sociability, and more or less active in the liberal democracies of the twenty-first century, would no longer make sense. In short, neoliberal capitalism and its multitude of destroyed subjects are inevitably doomed to continuous exposure to violence and existential threat. In *Cidade dos Espelhos*, the mirrors keep nothing, neither history nor memory, but reflect everything: the great metonymic image of a devastated world that can only be redeemed by the emergence of “new herbs” – or “new characters with other political practices” – capable of producing a possible future. And it is perhaps in the image of the mirror that Borges Coelho allegorizes the inexorable condition of catastrophe that plagues the *city of mirrors*:

Mirrors encompass all things, even other mirrors, mirrors are filled with space inside them, twice as much as infinite space, albeit inverted. Mirrors do not get tired or full because they keep nothing, they are always available to receive more. And a mirror is broken and all that space, already infinite in itself, is multiplied as many times as the fragments that result from that mirror, which are nothing more than new full mirrors that keep nothing. So much space, and yet there is no room within it for what has happened, success or frustrations. (. . .)

That is why the city of mirrors will remain suspended, lost in this game of reflections, while from the failures of the walls and the sidewalks, from the friezes of the buildings and the punished eyes of the statues, new herbs do not burst and from these do not arise the seeds of future characters marching slowly in procession to the temple of columns, with their colors and their rumours (Borges Coelho 2011: 118; my translation).¹⁷

In his article “If Colonialism Was the Apocalypse, What Comes Next?” Mark Bould (2015) reviews several science fiction literary and audiovisual productions from the African continent, addressing them as “post-colonial documents” to be understood

sion (Stoler 2016) as central categories to dismantle an idea of *continuity* and *rupture* between colonial and post-independence times.

17 Original quote: “Nos espelhos cabem todas as coisas, até mesmo outros espelhos, os espelhos estão cheios de espaço dentro deles, o dobro do espaço infinito, embora invertido. Os espelhos não se cansam nem se enchem porque nada guardam, estão sempre disponíveis para receber mais. E quebra-se um espelho e todo aquele espaço, de si já infinito, se multiplica tantas vezes quantos os fragmentos que desse espelho resultarem, que não são mais que novos espelhos cheios que não guardam nada. Tanto espaço, e, todavia, não cabe dentro dele aquilo que ocorreu, sucesso ou frustrações. Por isso a cidade dos espelhos ficará em suspenso, perdida neste jogo de reflexos, enquanto das falhas das paredes e dos passeios, dos frisos dos edifícios e dos castigados olhos das estátuas, não rebentem novas ervas e destas não surgirem as sementes de futuros personagens marchando lentamente em procissão até ao templo das colunas, com as suas cores e os seus rumores.”

from the critical perspective of the science and speculative fictions genre.¹⁸ According to the author, although some of the stories show themes and experiences that appeal more openly and explicitly to the genre of science fiction – time travel, virtual reality, technology –, narratives about the future are key elements to face social and political crises within the “postcolony” (Mbembe 2000). This hypothesis offers the possibility of thinking critically about literary forms that record the conditions of human and non-human existence in “postcolonial environment” (Mukherjee, 2010). In addition, the reading developed by Bould shows in an exemplary way how, contrary to mainstream expectations from the public and critics, science/speculative fiction in African literatures constitutes a genre of long and consolidated tradition, however, scarcely valued in Western editorial and academic networks (Bould 2015).¹⁹ At the same time, the emergence of anthologies and collections in various African contexts – especially in English – since the early 2000s has made evident the strength of a literary genre whose complexities and meanings offer new starting points for a critical reflection on the aesthetics of memory and the future²⁰ that guide contemporary African literary writing.²¹

Regarding the consolidated tradition of this literary genre in African literatures produced in the continent, it is worth emphasizing that science or speculative fiction can be systematized around two axes of representation: on the one hand, the narratives that unfold around themes related to the so-called world of spirits – which globally has been defined as supernatural or ghost stories –, a genre that is central to the emergence of the modern African novel;²² and, on the

18 For a critical definition of science fiction and speculative fiction, see Bould et al. 2009. For a critical discussion of theme related with future in literary studies see Paul 2019.

19 In this regard, see Maurits 2020.

20 In this regard, see Brugioni and Gallo 2019.

21 On this, as Peter J. Maurits states: “Afrofuturism is arguably the most widespread form of contemporary futurism. Like its Italian counterpart, it is cross-disciplinary and includes inter alia painting (Jean-Michel Basquiat), literature (Samuel Delany), visual arts (D. Denenge Akpem), and music (Parliament-Funkadelic’s *Mothership Connection*, Afrika Bambaataa’s *Zulu Nation*). However, although the forms are related, it is unlikely that a direct line can be drawn from Italian futurism to Afrofuturism. The latter draws mainly on the imagery of the space age, which was unavailable to Marinetti, and on science fiction [. . .] and is thought to have started with W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1908 *The Princes Steel* [. . .] Ralph Ellison’s 1952 *Invisible Man* [. . .] or the jazz musician Sun Ra [. . .]. Most importantly, Afrofuturism does not aim to erase the past, but instead “pull[s] from the past to build [the] future” (Womack 2013, p. 160), for example, by “recovering the histories of counter-futures” (Eshun 2003, p. 301). The instrumentalization of the past is manifest in Afrofuturist works (e.g. Pierre Bennu’s techno-ancestral masks) as well as in the politics that inform them. (Maurits 2019: 134).

22 In this regard, think of authors such as Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Mia Couto, among many others.

other hand, literary works that develop around problems of a speculative nature, pointing to themes and aesthetics that fit into the imaginary of the future (Bould et al. 2009). Concerning science fiction, its developments in the literary field evidently point to the category of *magical realism* (Jameson 2002; Quayson 1997; 2004; WReC 2015), giving the possibility to reflect on African literary texts and their tensions with the literary genre of realism (Gikandi 2011; Lazarus 2011; Maurits 2020) and pointing to what can be defined as “peripheral (ir)realism” (WReC 2015). However, regarding speculative fiction, a problem of some relevance seems to arise around the potentialities and impasses that this genre mobilizes in the specific case of literatures that are – spatially and conceptually – situated in the area of African literary studies. In this context, as Bould states:

Most of the stories [. . .] articulates the relationship between the globalized culture of the First World – with its expectations of fiction, genre, and style – and diverse African localities – with their virtually untouched cultural specificities. Most of these narratives smell like History and seem to be put in a post-apocalyptic perspective. But these stories are not post-apocalyptic in the same way as cozy British catastrophes, Hollywood blockbusters, or die-hard zombies taught us to think about what comes after the end of it all. They are post-colonial documents and, like the Namibian sites of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, we are reminded that this is also, and always has been, the post-apocalypse. They are what comes next. (Bould 2015)

In short, it is a substantial revision that marks the aesthetics of the genre of science/speculative fiction in African texts and contexts, pointing to narrative forms whose specificity contributes to a redefinition of this literary genre in a postcolonial critical and epistemological perspective. Such productions, by moving away from stereotypical aesthetics about the future and the end of the world and distancing themselves from the reproduction of dichotomies between colonial and postcolonial, past and future, archaic and contemporary and should be understood as literary registrations of (semi-)peripheral environment and experiences. As noted by WReC: “In the work of writers from peripheral and semi-peripheral formations, the registration of combined and uneven development through deployment of an aesthetics of anamorphosis is characteristically pronounced and intensified. (. . .) in order to convey the palimpsestic, combinatory and contradictory ‘order’ of peripheral experience.” (WReC 2015: 72)

Thus, *Cidade dos Espelhos. Novela Futurista* seems to correspond to some of the features that characterize speculative fiction, being a literary work that “displaces ‘ideal-type’ realism backwards and forwards” (WReC 2015: 71), demystifying moments and figures produced within “the script of liberation” (Borges Coelho 2015). Against any aesthetic or conceptual exploitation of the exotic, the text registers a past openly marked by “the ordered colonial violence” and which unfolds into a “violent postcolonial order” (Borges Coelho, 2003a) depicting “a his-

torical condition of intense and continuous exploitation of most humans and non-humans in territories that were once colonies by cartels composed of autochthonous people and European and North American elites” (Mukherjee 2010: 5–6). A city that functions as a broken mirror that “gives us back the image multiplied in many possibilities (a mirror that multiplies the dark sky and the fear)” (Borges Coelho 2011: 30).²³ In conclusion, *Cidade dos Espelhos* registers a discomforting – yet plausible – answer to a question that inevitably haunts the human and environmental condition in the periphery of capitalism: since colonialism was the apocalypse, what can still come next?²⁴

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²³ It is worth pointing out here a counterpoint, in my opinion quite productive and still unpublished, between the registration of the city in the work of João Paulo Borges Coelho and that of Ivan Vladislavic. This is an interpretative possibility of evident relevance, especially in view of the multiple relations and tensions between Maputo and Johannesburg, cities that are central themes in the work of the two authors.

²⁴ The author thanks Espaço da Escrita – Pró-Reitoria de Pesquisa – UNICAMP – for the language services provided.

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