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GENRE, FRAGMENTATION AND *MONTAGE* IN THE BRAZILIAN NOVEL: *ZERO*, BY IGNÁCIO DE LOYOLA BRANDÃO

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this proposed investigation is to explain what the book *Zero* tries to express and how it does so. It is hypothesized that the mixture of genres through the use of the process of *montage*, in the particular case of *Zero*, creates a metaphor for the turbulence of the military period and establishes the *novel* genre as a metaphor for an abusive dictatorial regime.

Keywords: Brazilian novel; Ignácio de Loyola Brandão; *Zero*; Montage; Nonsense.

Confusing at some points, gripping at others. I did not thoroughly enjoy *Zero*, due to its absurdity and vulgar prose. Although, I did appreciate the author's attempt to make a political statement, I feel as if the writing style distracted from it. [...] I would never suggest it or read it again. ⁱⁱ

Good book, but it is very disturbing. Lots of sex, lots of violence, lots of confusion [...].ⁱⁱⁱ

[A] [...] sometimes funny, but mostly angry tale/satire of living under a repressive dictatorship. The story, such as it is, follows Jose through his unfulfilling if bizarre life, and his eventual descent into a sort of nihilistic rebellion against the state [.]. The novel is kind of exuberantly experimental, mixing in drawings, satirical asides, repetition, paragraphs that consist almost entirely on onomatopoeias, and a hint of mysticism. Despite the fact that I generally love this type of thing I thought this was only okay, mainly because the novel wasn't exactly subtle in its emotions, and at times it became [a] bit monotonous.^{iv}

This book was all over the place and most of the time I didn't enjoy reading it. There were certainly moments of humor, and parts that I liked but overall I felt confused! ^v

Perhaps one of the most celebrated literary documents of criticism to the abuses committed by a dictatorial regime in Brazil is the novel *Zero*, by Ignácio de Loyola Brandão. Published in 1974 in Milan and in 1975 in Brazil, the book is considered Brandão's most



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famous work, according to Nogueira Jr. (2010). In July of 1976, the book received the “Best Fiction” award from the Cultural Foundation of the Federal District and the “Best Novel of the Twentieth Century” award after a poll conducted for *Manchete* magazine and *O Globo* newspaper in 2000.

The book *Zero* tells the story of José, a common man who is compelled to build a stable life after marrying Rosa in a city marked by the strong repression of a military regime. His quest for social stability is lost in the course of several failed attempts to succeed, all leading him to the disintegration of his character, of his marriage and of the lives of those around him.

The above quotes are of a number of reviewers who express dissatisfaction with the book on the site <www.goodreads.com>. They refer to the book with words like “confusing”, or say that they feel “distracted” or that the story is marked by “confusion”. In the opinion of one reviewer, the book is “monotonous” and, yet, another reviewer says: “I felt confused”. It seems that the allusion the book makes to “confusion” is to be seen, irrevocably, as if it were unintentional rather than premeditated; or a flaw rather than a quality.

Zero is marked by the transit between prose and other genres like poetry, proverbs and newspaper articles. This transit does not occur without a definite expressive function. The purpose of this essay is, therefore, to explain what the book *Zero* tries to express and how it does so. It is hypothesized that the mixture of genres through the use of the process of *montage*, in the particular case of *Zero*, creates a metaphor for the turbulence of the military period and establishes the *novel* genre as a metaphor for an abusive dictatorial regime.

The book *Zero* was developed in a period of nine years, from 1964 to 1973. Lavorati (2007) affirms that the work was composed of journalistic pieces produced by the author and censored by the military regime. “I kept saving censored journalistic pieces, thinking about writing a romance novel. Unconsciously, *Zero* was coming to life” (BRANDÃO apud LEITE, n.d.). The journalistic fragments saved by the author shared the theme of the violent big city in turbulence. According to Leite (n.d.), “when [Brandão] realized that [the fragments] had potential for a novel, [he] created the couple José and Rosa as a way of connection between the existing pieces.”

The style and techniques of the book are unconventional if compared to the styles and techniques used in the traditional novel. The narrative flow of the main plot is interrupted



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in various moments of the book by portions of texts from several other genres. These constant interruptions call the attention of the reader to the process by which the book is made and distract him from comprehending the main plot in an immediate, direct way.

The page layout style of the book is also unusual if compared to styles typically employed in traditional literary and commercial fiction. The layout style of *Zero* makes allusion to journalistic styles and to styles of other types of texts, such as proverbs or culinary recipes. The variety of texts in the book establishes a fusion between the *novel* and these other genres. It is this fusion that distracts the reader from the plot.

The feeling of confusion caused by the many layout styles in the novel is capable of causing an estrangement effect in the reader. The first page of the book illustrates the misleading effect of an unusual layout style for a novel. The reader is given no instructions regarding to which part of the page he should look first in order to better comprehend it. There's no immediate flowing start of the story, but the shock caused by the surprising layout can serve as an attention grabber. This is the first page of a Brazilian edition of 1979, followed by page 65:



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José mata ratos num cinema poeira. É um homem comum, 28 anos, que come, dorme, mijá, anda, corre, ri, chora, se diverte, se entristece, trepa, enxerga bem dos dois olhos, tem dor de cabeça de vez em quando, mas toma melhora, lê regularmente livros e jornais, vai ao cinema sempre, não usa relógio nem sapato de amarrar, é solteiro e manca um pouco, quando tem emoção forte, boa ou ruim.

Atualmente, José está impressionado com uma declaração do Papa de que o Natal corre perigo de se tornar uma festa profana.

CADA RATO TEM UM PREÇO

Nove horas, José veste o macacão, calça as botas de borracha e instala a aparelhagem de tambores e tubos plásticos. Aciona a manivela e

NOME: cosmo ou universo.

CARACTERÍSTICAS: contém os "corpos" celestes e o espaço em que eles se encontram. O seu conjunto contém 10^{76} (10 elevado a 76 potência) de prótons.

PESO: em gramas: 10^{56} .

GRANDEZA: segundo Einstein, todo o universo deve ter um diâmetro de 8 milhões de anos-luz.

IDADE: (presumível) 10 a 12 bilhões de anos.

FORMAÇÃO: os "corpos" celestes são principalmente as estrelas, os planetas que giram com seus satélites em volta das estrelas, os cometas e matérias que aparecem periodicamente entre as estrelas.

IDADE MÉDIA DE UMA ESTRELA: 10.000 milhões de anos.

QUANTIDADE DE ESTRELAS: cada galáxia contém em média 100.000 milhões de estrelas.

FORMA DE VIDA: 1 planeta em cada grupo de 1.000 parece oferecer condições favoráveis à vida.

Figure 1: First Page of *Zero*. Rio de Janeiro: Codecri, 1979.

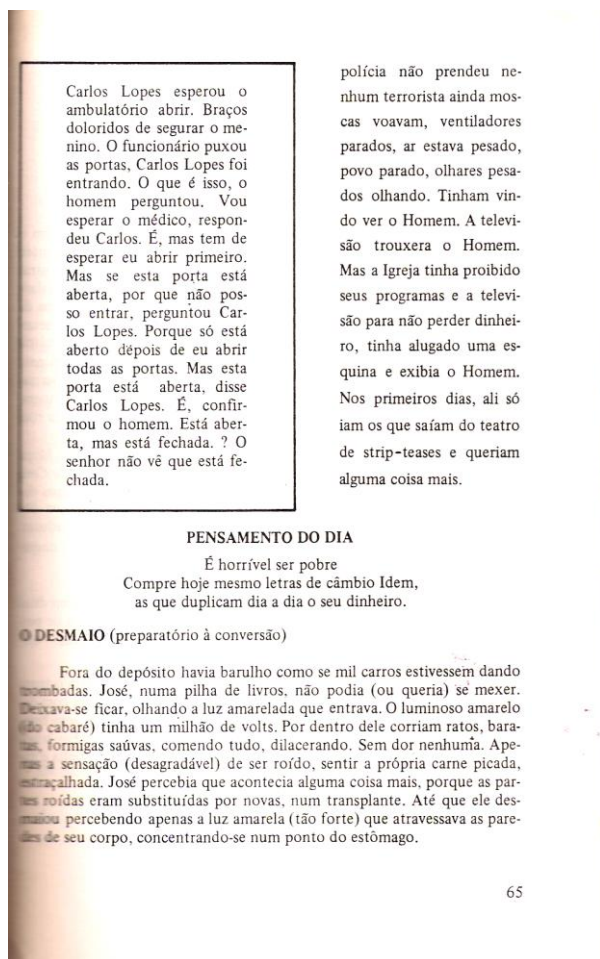


Figure 2: Page 65 of *Zero*. Rio de Janeiro: Codecri, 1979.

The Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the different layout styles in *Zero*. In Figure 1, the uncommon blank space which occupies the upper part of the page suggests a suppressed newspaper headline. This space may also be an allusion to the book's title. The bar which separates both texts in the page brings the journalistic layout element to the page and the texts from both columns have no apparent thematic relationship between one another. The text of the left column is the one that most resembles that of a story, because it presents a character by name and characterizes him. This presentation of a character right in the beginning of many stories is usually pointed a sign of a carefully crafted book. It represents a very traditional storytelling device in *Zero*, despite the experimental proposal of this book. The first page of the book shows the connection that Brandão establishes to both traditional



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storytelling and innovative approach to the *novel* genre. The second column brings the feeling of nonsense through its encyclopedic layout style.

The page reproduced in Figure 2 show the multitude of genres and the fragmentary disposition of texts in the book: a subplot in a box, a “thought of the day” and the main plot. There are also many examples of fusion between prose and proverbs, newspaper pieces, bathroom inscriptions, culinary recipes, drawings, riddles and, as the next example shows, visual poetry:

[...] make him eat shit, cut the throat, shocks in the tongue, give a sting in the vein,
 give a shot in the head
 smash, break in a t

hou sand p i c e
 e c s

(BRANDÃO, 1979, p. 273)^{vi}

In the following page, two paragraphs concerning the story of José and Rosa are interrupted by a bathroom inscription:



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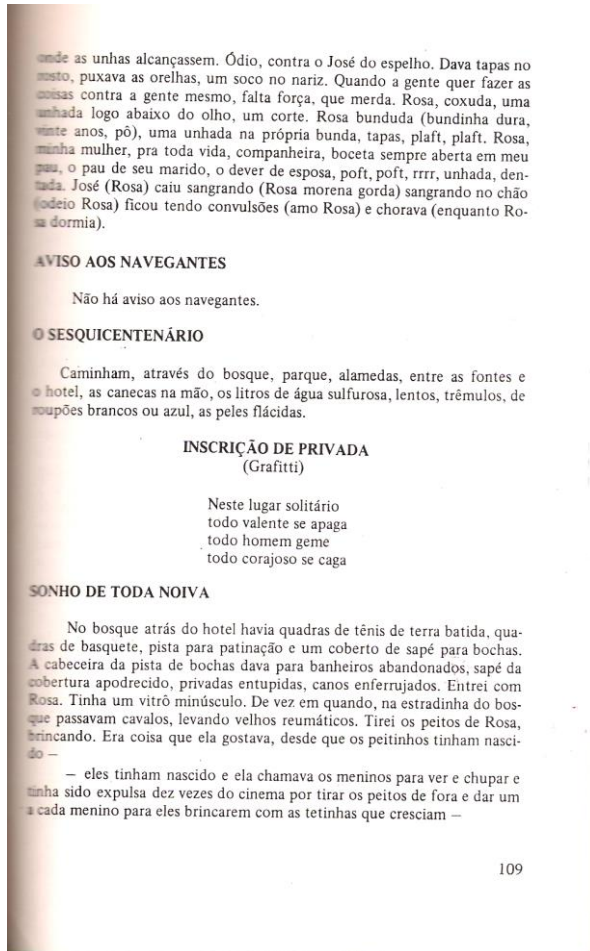


Figure 3: Bathroom inscription (*Inscrição de privada*). Page 109 of *Zero*. Rio de Janeiro: Codecri, 1979.

The same interruption of the story is made, this time, with a riddle which delays the return to the main plot:



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TEMPERATURA INSTÁVEL, SUJEITA A CHUVAS E TROVOADAS

Denuncie um terrorista, ou um subversivo, e você terá um ponto na sua carteira. Os pontos serão computados para promoções em serviços, prioridade em empréstimos bancários oficiais, compra de casas e apartamentos, facilidades de crédito, descontos, nos impostos de renda pagamento de meia entradas em cinemas e teatros. Os que contarem muitos pontos ao serem presos terão vantagens de salas especiais, advogados, Habeas Corpus, comida privilegiada. Começou o fuzilamento de prostitutas, ontem, às seis horas, nas principais capitais do país. Trata-se de uma campanha para exterminar o vício, comunicou o Ministério do Bem-Estar Social. Ao ser entrevistado, salientou que não é uma atitude desumana, porque todas as mulheres terão chance de regeneração e conversão. Se aceitarem, serão libertadas e irão trabalhar como enfermeiras e assistentes sociais. Deverão apenas se confessar e comungar uma vez por semana, sendo que o padre carimbará carteira que elas apresentarão cada três meses na delegacia mais próxima. As que não aceitarem, serão fuziladas. A grande maioria não está aceitando. E assim, as putas morrem ao amanhecer. A lei que atinge as prostitutas é mais ampla: todo aquele que for apanhado em ato com uma delas, será preso e julgado. Sendo casado, será fuzilado, por se tratar de adultério. Sendo solteiro, apanhará de dez a vinte anos de prisão por vício.

O QUE É QUE É

- 1 – Ela aperta, ele ronca.
- 2 – São duas irmãs no nome diferentes no viver; uma serve de remédio, outra serve de comer.
- 3 – Tem olho não enxerga, tem dente, não morde, tem pé, mas não anda.

/ Respostas nas próximas páginas /

ESTILHAÇOS DO BOMBARDEIO EM CIMA DE JOSÉ

- ? O senhor quer comprar uma mesa que não tem nada de excepcional.
- ? O senhor quer comprar um colchão anatômico.
- ? O senhor quer comprar uma coleção de livros em branco. Assim não é necessário ler.

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Figure 4: Riddle (*O que é o que é*). Page 148 of *Zero*. Rio de Janeiro: Codecri, 1979.

The constant interruptions to the story in *Zero* appear to be similar to the intrusions of the narrator which are common in XIX century literature. This can be understood as another element of the traditional novel being used in *Zero*, despite the fact that narrator intrusion is currently out of favor with readers and writers. Perhaps these intrusions in *Zero* symbolize the abusive intrusion of the military regime in the life of civilians. It represents an attitude: the intrusion of the regime in people's lives and the intrusions of civilians in the political battle against an abusive dictatorship.



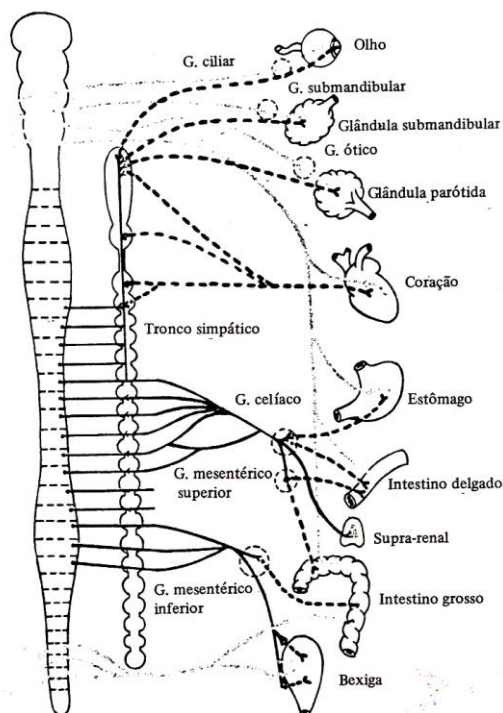
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In the following paragraph, some women are desperate to find their houses in their new neighborhood while others exchange information concerning cooking. This is the moment in which prose and culinary recipe are also mixed:

[...] where might my house be [...]. And the two were ten, a group of twenty, a hundred women/clucking/screaming-laughing-frightened-ex: bzzzzzzzzzz: they whispered:? what about my little house? and how much butter it takes? and my street? and gelatin, takes a lot? where's my street? [...] condensed milk. They walked, then ran, went up, went down, beat well in the blender, two whole eggs, two egg yolks, they turned, the met each other, they asked, screamed, 1 tablespoon of brandy,

1 cup of sieved wheat flour, put in the beat blender cup all the ingredients for the pasta, I put a mat in front of my door, so beautiful, all green, matching with the blue and now where is it? My little house. Peeled onion, green bell pepper, 1 sliced cucumber [...]. (BRANDÃO, 1977, p. 145)

In between pages like the ones reproduced before, there are pages entirely devoted to images. The following page is typical of science books:



José toca em Rosa, ela quer, gosta e se retrai. Do mesmo modo que o Homem tinha visto José por dentro, ele também vê Rosa. Coração, estômago, pulmão, intestino, glândulas, supra-renal, bexiga, mesentéricos. Rosa nua, José se excita. José nu, Rosa se excitando.

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Figure 5: Visual element. Page 101 of *Zero*. Rio de Janeiro: Codecri, 1979.

The grammatical aspect of *Zero* follows the theme of *disorder* already expressed in the combination of fragments from different genres. Unusual grammatical styles and punctuation and the use of dialects are also combined in multiple ways. In the following dialogue, the punctuation is inverted in a conversation between an agent of the regime and a prisoner:

- ? Know this one
- . No
- ? From your group
- . No
- ? But he's a commie
- . No



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? How so
[...] Nobody knew him
? Nobody where
. In the cell
? No
. No
. Then, get beaten, so you don't lie (BRANDÃO, 1979, p. 274)

Some other paragraphs of the book are written without pauses:

HOME

the mother and the father agreed and said goodbye to him Saying that he would rather kill himself then to fall in the hands of the Death squad a 20 year old robber terror of the Village committed suicide with a shot in the ear having the care to sit in a stool (BRANDÃO, 1979, p. 216)

The use of dialect in dialogue is common in literature and its most common purpose is that of establishing characterization. Dialect in dialogue, nevertheless, need to be used carefully for it to be effective and not distract the reader from the story. In *Zero*, the use of dialect is exaggerated. It makes the reading process difficult. In the following example, misrepresentation of language characterizes the agents of the regime and expresses the vision of the narrator concerning the intellectual level of the soldiers. What would usually be considered a fault in the dialogue becomes a valid tool of expression:

“ther’ ain’t no problem, ol’ man, cuz we kno’ well how ta do da thing, without leave no mark”
“yea, but have ta be with care.”
“no care, no way, we command, da government is on our side, screw them others.”
(BRANDÃO, 1979, p. 260)^{vii}

The same use of dialect occurs in this “talk between two cops” (BRANDÃO, 1979, p. 262):

“If da boss of POSU know dis, order to fuzilate da squad.”
“They’re mad with da squad, true.”
“’tis cuz evr’ybody wanna catch them most important convict. Get promoted.”^{viii}

MONTAGE OF ZERO



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The book *Zero* is a composition of fragments. It does not only contain fragments of prose, but of other genres which, mixed with portions of storytelling, become obstacles to the comprehension of the main plot. They become tools through which the book forces the reader to experiment the feeling of disorientation, of non-apprehension of meaning. It is to the subject of disintegration of communication that *montage*, in *Zero*, seems to allude. The problem of censorship is, thus, approached. As Resende (2008, p. 3) explains, not only writers but musicians and other artists were deprived of freedom of speech and had to search for new ways of expression:

In 1964, Brazil suffered a military coup that established a dictatorship in the country until 1985. During this period, the armed forces used unrestrained violence to suppress the opposition, and the government placed a heavy censorship on the media and the arts. Music was a targeted area due to its great influence on society, especially on the youth, and many songwriters and singers were exiled. In order to escape from the censors and still be able to convey a revolutionary message to the people, they had to use different literary devices and create new methods of writing. It was in this context that a new and unique segment in Brazilian music emerged—the so-called “protest songs.”

In literature, *Zero* also makes use of new ways of writing. The book alludes to the absurdities experimented by those who lived the dictatorship era in Brazil. *Zero* might be understood as a literary turmoil and a metaphor for the turbulence of the military regime. According to Brandão (apud LEITE, n. d.), “the work is about the cruelties of dictatorship, but in a metaphoric, literary way”. The aggressive subversion of grammatical rules and of the *novel* as a genre works as a metaphor for the rebellion against the regime.

Considering the *novel* as a genre, the fragmentation and the different types of texts that appear in *Zero* can be considered elements of an anti-literary approach to the book. They work against the effects of linearity, organicity and causality for which the traditional novel is praised and that seems to contribute to its enduring popularity. *Zero* is an anti-novel and, as such, relies on techniques other than those of the traditional literary or commercial fiction.

WRITING AND *MONTAGE*

According to Nogueira Jr. (2010), in 1953, Ignácio de Loyola Brandão participated in the filming of *Aurora de uma cidade*, directed by Wallace Leal, and founded,



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in 1954, the Araraquara Cinema Club (*Clube de Cinema de Araraquara*). The author was also an extra in Anselmo Duarte's *O Pagador de Promessas* (1961) and in 1963 he tried to fulfill his dream to become a screenwriter in Italy. Brandão also “watched 53 times the movie ‘8½’ by Federico Fellini, which, as he admitted, influenced him in the making of his novel *Zero*” (NOGUEIRA JR., 2010).

Montage appears to be a practice inherent to Brandão's writing because it is a common process both in film and in print journalism. Carla Lavorati (2007) refers to *Zero* through the expression “reportage novel”, due to its close relationship to print journalism and its sections of journalistic pieces followed by riddles, recipes and visual elements.

The technical expressivity of *Zero* is close to that of Dada and Surrealist works. These vanguards privilege the use of the *montage* principle in their literary productions as a way of subverting the *novel* genre and, thus, stimulating new forms of interpretation of reality.

Montage, as that of cinema and, mainly, the so called *intellectual montage*, compels the viewer to think about his own condition of spectator, thus transforming a once restful individual into an active thinker. In order to compel the passive viewer to action of thought, it is necessary to shock. Shock creates an estrangement effect which makes readers and viewers ask themselves if they really are in front of a “work of art”.

The foundation of the *montage* procedure is the coupling of sparse fragments with no apparent relationship with one another. Meaning, in those cases, is given by the organization of fragments and not by the whole of the work. Even if readers and audiences reactions are negative towards the work, the artist still achieves his goal of making them active thinkers about their condition and about art itself. In Dada and Surrealism, for instance, fragmentation and montage contribute to put the “institution art” in crisis. Such artists are not interested in fame or money. Their main interest is political.

Every artist that makes use of the *montage* process assumes the role of an assembler. In Dadaism, for instance, the artist assumes the role of the workman, of the assembler of a car factory. The work process of the workman (or of a journalist, a film-maker, a plastic artist) is incorporated in the writing or in the production of the work of art. The artist's political engagement becomes present in the process by which the work is made. This engagement occurs after an intentional quest on the part of the artist for joining the alienation of the worker. In the vanguards, *montage* creates, many times, a kind of shock because the



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reader/viewer does not immediately realize that the alienation visible in the work of art is nothing more than an expression of the alienation of the world.

Montage, in the vanguards, has been used as a mean to fight the “institution art”. For the Dada and the Surrealists, the artistic expression should be pure, i. e., non-institutionalized and financially disinterested. Art should never be a profession, and the notion of authorship should be banished from the work of art.

Montage is also capable of eliminating the “I” (a hero/the voice of the author) and of revealing that the combatant is a common man (the car assembler, the workman; José, in the case of *Zero*). In the vanguards, in order to put the concept of art in crisis, it is necessary to put in crisis the concept of authorship (author as a brand, a product of capitalization). This is what happens, also, in *Zero*, that is not an autobiographical book, a book inserted in the literature of the “I”.

But, one might ask, what all this have to do with *Zero*? First, the book adheres to the alienation of the world caused by dictatorship. Second, the *montage* procedure fights the institutionalized notion of *novel*, which assumes the metaphorical role of the military regime. In this sense, the *novel* as a genre becomes as rigid as a dictatorial regime. Third, by elimination the “I”, the book tells us that José is the metaphorical representation of a collectivity.

Dada and Surrealist works of art which use *montage* as a way of expression create a nonsensical feeling on readers and viewers. This feeling generates, many times, heated attacks against these works. The review reproduced below shows how *Zero* is capable of getting the same rebellious reactions from readers:

It is immediately apparent when Brandao thinks that he is on a role: he loses any sort of content filter (did he even have an editor?), balloons his paragraphs and rants, lists, shouts, spews nonsense and seems to feel proud of the result. [...]

[...] so much sex, violence and repression. In between steam-rolling sections of mediocre, under-planned, contradictory and unrewarding narrative, there are all sorts of choke-start interruptive paragraphs under recurring headlines like “Free Association” or “Affective Memory.” There aren’t any dimensional characters in the book and none of the people are really capable of absorbing or relating to their environment: increasingly repulsive and repressive urban Brazil. In fact, Jose, the closest thing to a protagonist [...]. He is a purposeless slob immersed in sickening violence.

Why does Brandao think it is okay to write, “Don’t know why, but it’s true, my



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heart beats when i see you, parala-la, parala-lay, tooky tecky tooky tootooky, gorogogo gorogoga, elephant stampedes a great many people, two elephants stampede a great many more, oooooo bah tatatatatatata, oh juicy, juicy festival of striptease.”?

And why are there dozens of sadistic, pages floundering around in material of this variety, “Whap, whap. Plaft, pleft, shit, he’s hit in the mouth, all his teeth are knocked out, his nails pulled out one by one, he’s been burned, they’ve drilled a hole in one eye, thrown acid in the other, stuffed a rat in his mouth, razor slashes and briny water, wires stuck in his asshole, shocks tear him all apart, smash his fingers, his cock, jab him in the stomach, make him eat shit”?

Seriously, who is the author trying to punish with that sort of prose? Both of these excerpts are representative. Neither of them is part of a key plot moment or even about a recognizable moment in the narrative of any main character. They are just outbursts. The most charitable interpretation that I can offer is that Brandao hated almost everyone in Brazil (whether perpetrators of repression or complacent accomplices) and he wanted his book to be a venom-spitting affront to everything that they held sacred or thought pleasant.

I’m sure it was a groundbreaking book for it’s time and location. I’m sure it posed a sort of challenge to a now defunct establishment and it might be rewarding to read it within the context of Brazilian history and literature. But in order to stand on its own as a book for the casual reader sixty years later and thousands of miles away, it needs more craft, cleaner narrative, less repetition and more imagination.^{ix}

The dislike expressed by the reviewer towards the character, the narrative style and the features of the plot are to be taken as qualities rather than flaws, for this is the idea that the book tries to express: the effects of dictatorship in the lives and destinies of those who lived under the repression of the military regime from 1964 to 1985 in Brazil. The reviewer was right in the sense of defending a more traditional style of novel, which *Zero* strives to destroy. It is a question of personal opinion. What is most important, nevertheless, is not what the reviewer says, but the attitude behind it. That attitude is what *Zero* desires to inspire on readers. It is a political attitude.

Zero’s aggression against the *novel* genre is motivated by its disapproval for the values of rigidity, of tradition and of institutionalization represented by the *novel*. Metaphorically, it is the rigidity, the tradition and the institutionalization of the Army, of the Family and of Religion that are criticized, for all three had played a part in the implementation of the *coup d’etat* that took place in 1964 in Brazil. *Zero* ridicules the *novel* as a form of protest, as if this literary genre were the dictatorial regime itself. The *novel* is transformed in its own absurdity as a representation of the excesses of dictatorship. *Montage*, in *Zero*, makes the reader experiment the same confusion felt by intellectuals and civilians during the regime.



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The rebellious technical aspect of *Zero* is not separated from its expressive goal. It is through what is many times considered “form” that political engagement is expressed. The engagement is to be found in the process by which the work of art is produced. It constantly calls attention to itself by deviating the reader’s focus from the plot to the “language” of the book. *Zero* is a vengeance against the oppression of the military regime. Its rebellious “form”, achieved with the fusion and *montage* of texts from different genres, is a metaphor for the absurdity related to abusive practices of power. According to Brandão, “in the process of creation, the writer cannot turn back. [...] literature is a vengeance”, an area in which “everything is possible [...] There’s no absurdity in literature. Literature has invention, has imagination. Absurdity is what exists in Brasília, [the federal capital of Brazil]”.

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ⁱⁱ <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/608787.Zero>>. (*sic*) (Community reviews, 17 March 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/608787.Zero>>. (Community reviews, 08 December 2008).

^{iv} <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/608787.Zero>>. (*sic*) (Community reviews, 20 December 2008).

^v <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/608787.Zero>>. (*sic*) (Community reviews, 12 November 2008).

^{vi} All translations are the author's.

^{vii} “num tem problema veio, qui nois cunhece bem cumu fazê a coisa, sem dexá marcá.”

“é, mais tem qui tê cuidado.”

“qui cuidado, qui nada, quem manda é nois, o governo é di nosso lado, os otros qui si fodam.”

^{viii} “Si o chefe da POSU souber disso, manda fuzilar o esquadrão.”

“Eles anda de bronca co esquadrão, verdade.”

“É qui tudu mundu qué pegá os preso importanti. Dá promoção.”

^{ix} <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/608787.Zero>>. (*sic*) (Community reviews, 6 September 2007).