

Mediations

Journal of the Marxist Literary Group



Volume 28, Number 2, Spring 2015 • **Dossier: Surface Reading**

Emilio Sauri. "Presuppositions — if I am not mistaken — of *Two Girls and Other Essays*." *Mediations* 28.2 (Spring 2015) 129-138. www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/two-girls

Two Girls and Other Essays

Roberto Schwarz

Francis Mulhern, Editor

London: Verso Books, 2012, 288pp.

US\$29.95

ISBN: 978-1844679669

Presuppositions — if I am not mistaken — of *Two Girls and Other Essays*

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"The defining concern of Marxist criticism of literature," Roberto Schwarz notes in *Two Girls and Other Essays*, "is the dialectic of literary form and social process" (10). But what does this dialectic look like, and why should the articulation of the form of the work of art and social reality yield greater insight into not only literature but society as well? Anyone familiar with Schwarz's critical achievement as Brazil's foremost literary critic and contributor to the tradition of the Frankfurt School will recognize this as the longstanding concern of his own work as well, and this is no less true of *Two Girls*, his latest volume to appear in English.¹ Indeed, each of the essays included in *Two Girls* is itself a demonstration of this dialectic, which, for reasons having everything to do with Schwarz's distinctive approach, will nonetheless end up looking different every time. To many of his English-language readers, this is familiar territory, though *Two Girls* has the virtue of making concepts and reflections essential to Schwarz's literary and cultural criticism absolutely clear, even more so than the earlier works in translation, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* and *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*.² This is no doubt to Francis Mulhern's credit as editor, whose choice of texts and insightful introduction succeeds in making *Two Girls* seem less like a selection of essays than an integrated whole in which individual parts are made to speak to each other. Thus, even as its author turns his attention to concerns ranging from the classics of Brazilian literature and criticism to European modernity and its peripheries, we could say that *Two Girls* is essentially a book about the dialectic of literature and society, which, rather than merely tell us what this dialectic looks

like, makes its consequences visible on nearly every page.

Importantly, programmatic statements like the one with which we began are a rarity in his essays and books, and as Mulhern observes in his introduction, his “disdain for elaborate methodological prospectuses is of long standing, and it is in keeping that his own most focused statement of theory and method” — the essay “Objective Form: Reflections on the Dialectic of Roguery” — “should be a nuanced reflection on the work of someone else”: namely, Antonio Candido, the intellectual to whom — along with Adorno — he is most indebted (xv). Nevertheless, Schwarz’s hat tip to Candido’s “Dialética da malandragem” (1970) — an investigation of Manuel Antônio de Almeida’s satirical novel *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant* (1852) — draws on keywords and concepts that have been central to his own literary criticism for some time now. Perhaps the most significant among these is “objective form,” a concept drawn from what Schwarz himself describes as the “tradition — itself contradictory — formed by Lukács, Benjamin, Brecht, and Adorno, and the inspiration of Marx,” and which is at play in Candido’s essay, whose originality in the context of Brazilian literary criticism stems from its attentiveness to form as it develops in relation to social processes (ix). Candido would identify that form with the uniquely Brazilian figure of the *malandro*, and demonstrate that “this form is at once the skeleton that supports the novel and the *structural reduction* of a social situation, external to literature, belonging to history,” and in this sense the “*aesthetic formalization* of a generalized rhythm in Brazilian society” (14).³ Rather than see the link between literature and society in, say, the novel’s descriptions of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro — that is, in its content — Schwarz’s mentor had discerned a richer set of connections in the structure of the narrative — on the level of form.

Meanwhile, that structure belongs no less to reality, which, at its most fundamental level, also has a form that mediates the various elements it comprises. Or as Schwarz puts it: “the notion of form can be applied beyond the literary sphere,” for “social forms are objective; that is, created by the process of social reproduction, independent of individual consciousness” (23). Abandoning the “superficiality of documentary representation” in favor of the “mimetic value of the *composition*,” Candido not only identifies a literary form, but discovers a social structure as well, a form whose objectivity is derived from the fact that the internal laws that govern its development occurs behind the backs, so to speak, of individuals (17, emphasis in original). This is a social form Candido’s essay links to the *malandro* and a dialectic of order and disorder, both generated by Brazil’s unique historical trajectory as a slave society — in which free men, who own no property, cannot sell their labor, and therefore barely survive by means of an informal system of favors curried from patrons — and which the literary form of *Memorias* makes visible. This is a wholly original insight, and one which, importantly for Schwarz, Candido had arrived at not by way of the social sciences alone but by means of an attention to literary form. The significance of this attention thus has everything to do with this capacity to produce new knowledge,

itself the product of a refusal to conceive of the literary and the extra-literary as mere illustrations of each other. Thus, Candido's reading allows for a "bold exploration of aesthetic experience and available knowledge: reading one through the other, literature and reality, until the mediating terms are found" (21). But for Schwarz this also means that the "unification of the novelistic sphere with that of reality comes about through their almost total separation, and the dialectic of the two works through their precise articulation, and not, as usually happens, through some kind of conflation" (24). The difference here between "articulation" and "conflation" is key precisely because it insists on drawing a connection between literature and society that does not reduce the one to the other.

In this way, "Dialética de malandragem" marks the "first conceptual crystallization and historical foregrounding of a socially distinctive point of view" (20), and it doesn't take much to see that it is this same point of view that Schwarz's own literary and cultural criticism has sought to build on and amplify. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his well-known studies of the nineteenth-century Brazilian novel, and particularly Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, whose *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1880) and *Dom Casmurro* (1899) become occasions for reflecting on the development of a similarly distinctive point of view in *Two Girls*. Thus, in "Beyond Universalism and Localism: Machado's Breakthrough," Schwarz associates the author's transformation from a "provincial, rather conventional writer into a world-class novelist" with a dramatic change in literary form that distinguishes a later novel like *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1880) from his early work (33). Yet if Brazilian criticism, according to Schwarz, had identified this change with a realism situated between Romanticism and naturalism — a sequence of styles that repeated European literary history in Brazil — it nonetheless failed to grasp the significance of Machado's realism, which couldn't be described as realist in any conventional sense anyway. In Schwarz's terms, Machado is a "realist who works with apparently anti-realist devices," a paradox that will not only begin to explain his advance as a novelist, but also suggest "how modern forms fare in regions that do not replicate the social conditions they originated in and still in some sense presume" (34).

Machado achieves this advance in *The Posthumous Memoirs* by transposing the narrative point of view from the position of the poor to that of the upper class, and as Schwarz makes clear, this involved finding a formal solution to a problem posed by the content of his early works and by Brazilian society itself. In focusing on the ups and downs of the down-and-out, these novels revealed the "unexpected, meandering ways in which clientelism, slavery, and modernity concatenated in Brazil" (44). Yet, in adopting the viewpoint of the poor who depended on the protection and favors of landowners and the wealthy, the earlier novels nonetheless failed to compel conviction as literary works precisely because they tended to dissociate the fate of social dependents under a particularly Brazilian form of paternalism from the structure of class relations that form an essential element of society everywhere.

In contrast, *The Posthumous Memoirs* adopts the point of view of the upper class by way of its narrator, Brás Cubas, whose claims to being as enlightened and modern as his European counterparts places no restrictions on his behavior toward the poor. Thus, if this later novel brings Machado closer to what Schwarz calls “realism as the ambition to capture contemporary society in motion,” this is because moving the narrative point of view to the position of the Brazilian elite highlighted the universal class dimension of this local reality (35). That is, the extreme uncertainty social dependents faced under a system of favors that could be withdrawn just as easily as they were extended is no longer simply a product of the elite’s fickleness — a question of their attitude — but an upshot of an objective structure that makes the class difference between dependents and elites possible in the first place. Which is to say that Machado’s breakthrough has nothing to do with valuing one subject’s position or viewpoint over another, and even less so with a multiplication of perspectives aiming to offer a more complete description of Brazilian society. As Schwarz notes, “Once reality has migrated into abstract economic functions, it can no longer be read in human faces,” and while “[o]bservation of life in a former colony, where social divisions remain stark, might seem more rewarding...such concreteness is suspect too since the abstractions of the world market are never far away and belie the fullness of spontaneous perception at every moment” (35). Rather, the advance suggested by *The Posthumous Memoirs* has everything to do here with taking a thing and making it a social relation.⁴

Schwarz’s own achievement in this regard has been the result of suturing a national-popular consciousness to a properly historical one whose origins lie in the spatially and temporally complex processes of capitalist accumulation that give rise to centers and peripheries. This is, in other words, what Schwarz describes as the “matter of Brazil,” a “particular universe of social positions and relations” that is always implicated in these same processes — something which is no less true of individual works, even (and sometimes precisely) when a writer or artist turns his or her attention to the specific and historically unique development that Brazil names (141). For all that, this point of view always belongs to the work itself, rather than to any theory or method that presupposes it and sets about finding it a novel, and it is in this sense that Schwarz’s own approach, as Silvia López has observed, cleaves to the “basic principle of modern Marxian/Adornian aesthetics: that of the primacy of the object.”⁵ This begins to explain Schwarz’s disdain for programmatic statements, for in contrast to a good deal of literary and cultural criticism, his engagement with literature and art consistently refuses to draw on a macro theoretical model or tools that might be applied at a more micro level to objects of interpretation; here, in good Adornian fashion, the last word is never given to anything the work might be said to exemplify. This is not to say that the work never speaks to anything beyond itself, and as Schwarz’s reflections on *Candido* already make clear, literary form can provide new knowledge about the structure of social relations because it is the aesthetic

formalization of society's own laws of motion.

This becomes all the clearer in the volume's centerpiece, *Duas meninas*, a previously untranslated study of two classics of Brazilian literature from which *Two Girls* takes its name: Machado's 1899 novel, *Dom Casmurro*, and *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* also written during the late-nineteenth century. In a way, the difference between these texts couldn't be more obvious: *Dom Casmurro* traces the unhappy arc of Bentinho's marriage to Capitu, while *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* comprises the mostly happy episodes in the life of an adolescent girl and her family; and while Machado's novel puts on view the specifically literary ambitions of his late works — narrated from the point of view of the jealous Bentinho, Dom Casmurro himself — Helena's diary entries lack the refinement associated with literary or artistic intent. Just the same, Schwarz demonstrates how, from a certain perspective, the lives of the fictional Capitu and the real Helena Morley speak to the question of Brazil in equal measure, revealing Helena to be "Another Capitu" and united to her fictional counterpart in intelligence and perceptiveness. As one might expect, this perspective is underwritten by Schwarz's attention to form, which, in drawing a connection between the two girls, brings to light a social system belonging to "an unexpected universe, full of abstract relations, as visible as they are unconscious" and steeped in patriarchy (97).

Turning his attention again to Machado's use of an unreliable narrator with decisively class features, Schwarz demonstrates that the author developed this point of view with half an eye to a system of relations (literary, political, economic) that extend beyond Brazil. As one would expect, his point of departure is the text itself, which demands to be read "against the grain of narration" — much like the work of Machado's contemporary, Henry James (58). In this way, *Dom Casmurro* produces an articulation of the local and the universal by way of a reversal of the novel's first section, in which Capitu successfully orchestrates her marriage to Bentinho. The union between the social dependent's daughter and the landowner's son signals the triumph of modern ideals, which Capitu gives voice to, over the backwardness of Brazilian paternalism, but this victory soon gives way to Bentinho's conviction, in the second section, that his bride has been unfaithful. This conviction subsequently casts a retrospective glance over the first section and cancels it out. Meanwhile, this neutralization is itself cancelled out by means of the narrative perspective that the novel calls into question, linking the narrator's authority to a brutal social system that modern intellectual progress fails to overcome. For Schwarz, however, Capitu's vindication will ultimately suggest that local reality could not live up to modern ideas like equality and tolerance, these too belong to a "universal model which not only prevents nothing but actually helps the property-owning patriarch to conceal his shameful interest" (91). Brazil, in other words, comes to stand for the truth of the social whole, a process of unification and totalization underlying the various links of the local and the universal, the national and the foreign, the ex-colony and the metropole that the form of the work of art makes visible.

Schwarz has long held that this is precisely what makes Machado a modern master, and, in an essay that would require its own review even to approximate the depth and reach of his analysis, describes *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* in similar terms, characterizing it as a "confirmation of Machado de Assis's project" (176). At the same time, the diary, Schwarz insists, has "no recourse to the authority of artistic specialization," and, for this reason, cannot be said to share the properly *literary* ambitions of a work like *Dom Casmurro* (125). For all that, the adolescent girl's account of life in the small Mineiro town offers "rather unconventional conclusions, which take the side of the real substance of things, against official, prestigious definitions," and are, in this sense, on a level with the acuity of the greatest modern writers. Observing that the diary reminds us "[t]here is nothing more instructive than the difference between a thing and its name, when the former is understood in its content and social development," Schwarz locates the very foundations of Adorno's negative dialectics — the contradiction between the thing and its concept — in the young girl's diary (133).⁶ The countless reversals and inversions that Helena's dialectic generates when aimed at concepts like work, clientelism, race, or religion not only suggest why this reading is justified, but reach, in Schwarz's words, "an enlightened, genuinely rare understanding of the reciprocal character of social relations and the positions they define" that finds a ready equivalent in Machado's *Capitu* (117). So, while the diary is not the product of any kind of artistic specialization, these inversions nonetheless point to "a high literary ideal," one which Schwarz identifies with an organizing principle underlying the entries individually and as a whole (125). This principle, in turn, makes the diary something more than a mere collection of observations and reflections, and gives rise to a viewpoint that shares "forms and subjects" with the social structure; forms and subjects which, moreover, the essay links to *Candido's* "dialectic of order and disorder." Thus, *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* is, in Schwarz's felicitous formulation, "poetry without prior warning" (156).

The essays on *Capitu* and *Helena* are followed by a third section in which *Two Girls* takes up Francisco Alvim's collection of poems, *Elefante* (2000), and Paulo Lins' novel *City of God* (1997). Not unlike their modernist predecessors, Alvim and Lins share an intense interest in what Schwarz calls the "peculiarities of national life — its speech, its rhythms, the interactions of its people and their unspoken pacts" — though now under considerably different conditions indicative of a major historical shift (192). In Alvim's minimalism, informality serves as a "principle of selection," which, at the same time, finds its origins in the "social fracture" that gives rise to the precarious position of the Brazilian poor and their disenfranchisement, as well as their only means of survival (215, 208). But while such informality had already served Brazilian modernism well as a means toward imagining the integration of the country's masses into a national-popular project — Schwarz reminds us of Mário de Andrade pronoun usage in *Macunaíma* (1928) — such integration, as Alvim's poetry suggests, no longer

remains the order of the day. Meanwhile, this state of affairs and its devastating consequences are made all the clearer in Lins' *City of God*, in which the repetitive cycles of drugs, crime, and violence that plague one of Rio's larger favelas highlights the "inescapable nature of our times" (226). The "our" here is important, for while the explosion in surplus populations living in Latin America's favelas, *villas miserias*, and *ciudades perdidas* — what Schwarz, following Roberto Kurz calls "monetary subjects without cash" — would appear to signal the disintegration of society, Lins and Alvim both suggest something of the opposite: namely, that "[t]heir world is our own" (234).⁷ Indeed, the attention given to the persistence of such forms of exclusion from the nineteenth century to the present (and beyond?) not only creates a thread that runs through *Two Girls*, and much of Schwarz's criticism more generally, but also gives the impression — confirmed by Marx — that these are products of wider and more global tendencies within capitalist society itself.

Bookended by a brief reflection on Kafka's story "Worries of a Family Man" from 1966 and a longer and more recent essay on Brecht's relevance (originally translated for *Mediations*), *Two Girls* also offers Anglophone readers a more complete sense of his wide-ranging interests. Yet, even here, modernism and the historical avant-garde are read with half an eye on Brazil, shedding new light on core societies, their peripheral counterparts, and the processes that bring them together. Hence, the relevance of Kafka's brief narrative to the centers of the world-system and peripheral countries alike: for what is Brazil if not the truth of the family man himself? Schwarz writes, "If in a capitalist society, production for the market permeates the social order as a whole, then concrete forms of activity cease to have their justifications in themselves"; in contrast, Odradek "has no purpose (that is, no external end), but he is in his own way complete; he embodies his end...in himself" (6-7). For this reason, what seems unimportant and inessential from the perspective of the family man becomes "the precise and logical construction of the negation" of the very "bourgeois life" for which he stands (7). Considering it appeared in *O Estado de São Paulo* only two years after the 1964 military coup, the essay is also a coded message of sorts, for nothing in Brazil embodied the logic of the bourgeois order or the violence of what Schwarz calls Kafka's "unacknowledged partisan of destruction" more than the dictatorship and its defense of "tradition, family, and property" (9). Thus, if "Worries of a Family Man" is, for Schwarz, "a minor masterpiece" it is because, in holding up a mirror to capitalist society as a whole, it becomes a way of talking about Brazil, thereby underlining the degree to which both are made possible by a threat of violence with a particular class character (5). The military coup, in turn, emerges here as the genuine face or logical endpoint of that same society, now shorn of any pretension to civility associated with Kafka's urbane family man. Meanwhile, the very thing the family man regards as an offense to his existence — namely, Odradek — ultimately finds an equivalent of sorts in that which the military government would eventually treat as a threat — culture.⁸ Indeed, to the extent that Odradek has "no external end," occupying the "social place

of a reconciled life” that “cannot be named on the map of bourgeois society,” he is also a placeholder for the realization of the artwork’s promise of autonomy.⁹ In this sense, culture, like Odradek, contains the seeds of that society’s destruction, and in the context of 1960s Brazil, the promise of overcoming the dictatorship.

But while the Brazilian military coup eventually ceded to democratization in the 1980s, the negation of capitalist society remains a long way off, appearing even to have been placed indefinitely on hold. As Schwarz’s essay on Brecht reminds us, the 1980s also marked capital’s victory in Brazil and the further ideological closure of the market’s horizon abroad. Nevertheless, if this new world order posed unfamiliar challenges that the Left in Brazil and elsewhere continues to struggle with today, “Brecht’s Relevance — Highs and Lows” also shows that reflection on art’s relation to politics can yield greater insight into the contemporary movement of society worldwide. As one of the foremost practitioners and theorists of this relationship, Brecht devoted much of his work as playwright and critic to the question of how aesthetic ambition and political conviction might be articulated, prioritizing one over the other whenever necessary. “The usefulness of the Brechtian spirit for the Third World Left,” Schwarz notes, “is easy to understand,” given the “linking of language and literature to a programme of collective experimentation of all sorts.” In this way, Brazil’s social and historical situation conferred a new significance to Brechtian experimentation, “freeing literary modernism from mere scribbling,” while occasioning “certain incongruities, since the 1920s were not the 1960s, nor was Germany Brazil” (241-42).

At the same time, Schwarz also notes that “artistic methods have presuppositions that are not themselves artistic: the beginning of the end of communism, as well as new features of capitalism, affected the credibility of Brecht’s theatrical technique” (244). Tracking Brecht’s relevance within Brazilian theater, film, and music during the dictatorship and following democratization thus becomes a way of tracing the fate of the Left in Brazil to transformations in the political configuration of the world economic system as well. These presuppositions, however, also point to a world in which capital has ostensibly given up the ideological smokescreen Brechtian didacticism sought to dissolve, while the decisively radical aims of his avant-garde techniques like estrangement and its attack on the institution of art are put to more conservative ends. Or as Schwarz puts it: “The Brechtian focus on the material infrastructure of ideology...has become a standard feature of TV newscasts, functioning as a prop for the authority of capital, rather than a critique,” just as “[e]conomic determinism has switched sides and functions as an explicit ideology of the dominant classes, a justification for social inequality” (245, 258). From this perspective, Brecht’s relevance is as much a question about the relevance of Marxism today.

But if such world-systemic change would suggest Brecht’s political-aesthetic positions are, at best, outdated and, at worst, obfuscating, Schwarz demonstrates how an attention to the literary-artistic qualities of a play like *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*

confers on Brechtian drama an entirely new relevance. Drawing out the play's allusions to the German classical tradition, including Goethe and Hölderlin, Schwarz offers an ingenious reading in which the political dimension of the playwright's virtuosity lies not in a demystification of bourgeois society that would reveal economic exploitation as its dirty little secret, but in its structural reduction of a social situation at the level of form. "The coupling of lyrical-philosophical pastiche to the brutalities of economic competition" in *Saint Joan* draws "cultural excellence and the standpoint of the working class" into the same social whole. In this way, "the realities of work and unemployment, hunger and cold, organized struggle and military massacre are presented in direct and decisive reciprocity with the strategies of capital, with aesthetic conventions and economic theories," as well as "with the new means of production" (256).

This is a process of unification and totalization that belongs to history itself, and which pertains just as much to Brecht's world as it does to the "inescapable nature of our times." This is also a process that poses historically unique challenges for which the same solutions don't always apply, something which makes the question Schwarz poses in the title of an earlier book — *What time is it?* (1987) — all the more significant.¹⁰ Yet, the essays gathered in *Two Girls* offer no program, powerfully demonstrating instead how reflection on the literary might guide us toward asking the right kinds of questions of both literature and society, and how these invite us to ask not only *What is to be done?* but also — and sometimes more importantly — *Que horas são?*

Notes

1. For an overview of Schwarz's intellectual formation, see Maria Elisa Cevalasco's excellent "The São Paulo Fraction: The Lineaments of a Cultural Formation," *Mediations* 28.1 (Fall 2014): 75-104 www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/sao-paulo-fraction; Neil Larsen offers key insights into the significance of Schwarz's contributions to critical theory in "Roberto Schwarz: A Quiet (Brazilian) Revolution in Critical Theory," *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London: Verso Books, 2001): 75-82.
2. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso Books, 1992), and *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*, trans. John Gledson (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).
3. As Schwarz explains, the *malandro* (which has often been translated in English as "rogue"), is a "figure conjoining the legendary trickster, the historic satirical style of the Regency, and a movement in which is transposed a historical dynamic of national significance (the comings and goings between the hemispheres of social order and disorder)" (19).
4. This has everything to do, in other words, with articulating what the Hegelian-Marxian tradition identifies as a standpoint, a logical position within a system of relations that is not reducible to a point of view or subject-position. Machado's breakthrough, in this sense, is the creation of a narrative point of view that is itself an aesthetic formalization of an objective system of relations.
5. Silvia López, "Dialectical Criticism in the Provinces of the 'World Republic of Letters': the Primacy of the Object in the Work of Roberto Schwarz," *A Contracoreinte* 9.1 (Fall 2011) 70.
6. See Adorno's *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), where he explains, for example, "for dialectical thought in the sense in which the category of contradiction is central, what is needed is the structure of the concept and the relation of the concept to the thing it stands for" (8).
7. See Schwarz's review of Kurz's *The Collapse of Modernization*, "An Audacious Book," *Mediations* 27.1-2 (Fall/Spring 2013-14): 401-406, www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/audacious-book.
8. See Schwarz's own minor masterpiece, "Culture and Politics in Brazil: 1964-1969," in *Misplaced Ideas*. Here, Schwarz observes, "Having broken the links between the cultural movement and the masses, the Castelo Branco government made no attempt to prevent the circulation of doctrinal or artistic left-wing material, which flourished to an extraordinary extent, albeit within a restricted area. With its ups and downs, the ingenious solution lasted until 1968, when a new group, capable of supplanting their ideology with practical strength, emerged: the students, who were organized in semi-clandestine manner.... In 1964 it had been possible for the right to 'preserve' cultural expression, since it had only been necessary to eliminate all contacts with the working masses in cities and rural areas; in 1968, when students and those who enjoyed the best films, the best theater, the best music, and the best books had become a politically dangerous group, it would become necessary for teachers, producers, authors, musicians, books, publishers to be replaced or censored — in other words, the active culture of the moment would have to be eliminated" (127-28).
9. Nicholas Brown elaborates on this point — and on Schwarz's reading of Brecht as well — in "Kurt Weill, Caetano Veloso, White Stripes," *nonsite.org, Issue #10: Affect, Effect, Bertolt Brecht* (Fall 2013) <http://nonsite.org/article/kurt-weill-caetano-veloso-white-stripes>.
10. Roberto Schwarz, *Que horas são?* 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Companhia Das Letras, 2006).