Zola in Rio de Janeiro: The Production of Space in Aluísio Azevedo's *O Cortiço*

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The most frequently quoted passages from Aluísio Azevedo's 1890 Naturalist novel *O Cortiço* (*The Slum*, 1890) are those in which the narrator contrasts the lush, sensual, and dangerous American tropics with the still and melancholy Portugal, as in the following description from the point of view of the Portuguese immigrant, Piedade:

Sim, lá os campos eram frios e melancólicos, de um verde alourado e quieto, e não ardentes e esmeraldinos e afogados em tanto sol e em tanto perfume como o deste inferno, onde em cada folha que se pisa há debaixo um réptil venenoso, como em cada flor que desabotoa e em cada moscardo que adeja há um vírus de lascívia. Lá nos saudosos campos de sua terra, não se ouviam em noites de lua clara roncar a onça e o maracajá, nem pela manhã, ao romper do dia rilhava o bando truculento das queixadas; lá não varava pelas florestas a anta feia e terrível, quebrando árvores. Lá a cascavel não chocalhava a sua campainha fúnebre, anunciando a morte, nem a coral esperava traidora o viajante descuidado para lhe dar o bote certo e decisivo. (p. 176)¹

[Yes, back in Portugal the fields were cool and melancholy, brownish-green and still, not ardent and emerald, bathed in brilliant light and perfume as in Brazil. That inferno where every blade of grass conceals some venomous reptile, where every budding flower and every buzzing bluebottle fly bears a lascivious virus. There, amidst Portugal's wistful landscapes, one didn't hear jaguars and wildcats snarling on moonlit nights, or herds of peccaries foraging at daybreak. There the hideous and dreadful tapir did not crash through forests, snapping trees; there the anaconda didn't shake its deadly rattles nor did the coral snake lie in wait for the unsuspecting traveler, ready to strike and kill.] (p. 155)²

Such descriptions are, however, relatively rare in the novel, perhaps because *O Cortiço* takes place not in a jungle full of *maracajás*, jaguars, and tapirs, but in a tenement or slum in Rio de Janeiro, where such animals are nowhere to be seen. The reason why passages like this are so often quoted has to do with the

¹ Aluísio Azevedo, *O Cortiço* [1890] (São Paulo: Círculo do Livro, 1973). All Portuguese quotations from this novel are from this edition. Page numbers are given in the text.

² All English translations from *O Cortiço* are taken from *The Slum*, trans. by David H. Rosenthal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Page numbers are shown in the text after each quotation.

ease with which they seem to illustrate Aluísio Azevedo's adherence to Emile Zola's Naturalist thesis that humans are a product of their environment. Thus, the Portuguese immigrant Jerônimo, Piedade's husband, is described as going through profound changes after his arrival in Brazil:

Uma transformação, lenta e profunda, operava-se nele, dia a dia, hora a hora, reviscerando-lhe o corpo e alando-lhe os sentidos, num trabalho misterioso e surdo de crisálida. A sua energia afrouxava lentamente: fazia-se contemplativo e amoroso. A vida americana e a natureza do Brasil patenteavam-lhe agora aspectos imprevistos e sedutores que o comoviam; esquecia-se dos seus primitivos sonhos de ambição, para idealizar felicidades novas, picantes e violentas; tornava-se liberal, imprevidente e franco, mais amigo de gastar que de guardar; adquiria desejos, tomava gosto aos prazeres, e volvia-se preguiçoso resignando-se, vencido, às imposições do sol e do calor, muralha de fogo com que o espírito eternamente revoltado do último tambor entricheirou a pátria contra os conquistadores aventureiros. (p. 92)

[Day by day, hour by hour, a slow but profound change was transforming him, altering his body and sharpening his senses as silently and mysteriously as a butterfly growing in its cocoon. His energy drained away, he became contemplative and easygoing. He found life in the Americas and Brazil's landscapes exciting and seductive; he forgot his earlier ambitions and began to enjoy new, pungent, strong sensations. He was more generous and less concerned about tomorrow, quicker to spend than to save. He developed desires, enjoyed his pleasures, and grew lazy, bowing in defeat before the blazing sun and hot weather: a wall of fire behind which the last Tamoio Indian's rebellious spirit defends its fatherland against conquering adventurers from overseas.] (p. 75)

It is as though Azevedo, with recourse to Romantic cliché, had to bring another type of landscape into his urban novel in order to offer his own formulaic variation on Zola's claim that the environment determines the fate of the individuals. It is true that other characters in the novel also support this deterministic thesis: the fair and gentle Pombinha, for example, in spite of her marriage to a good man, becomes a prostitute. But neither Jerônimo's nor Pombinha's transformations tell us, so to speak, the whole story. *O Cortiço* can also be read as an illustration of the opposite thesis, that is, of how — and why — human beings transform the environments around them.

This article will analyse spatial relations and practices in *O Cortiço* in order to demonstrate the novel's strong social-political critique of nineteenth-century Brazil. Critics have been for the most part reluctant to accept that Azevedo was attempting to make clear political claims through his novels. His fate has not been, in this sense, very different from that of his French model, Emile Zola. Marxist criticism has been especially remarkable for its outright rejection of Naturalism's negative analyses of capitalism. David Baguley's comment on George Lukács's essay 'The Zola Centenary' summarizes their views:

The essay is valuable, however, less for its topicality than for the way in which it articulates an already firmly established and seemingly self-

perpetuating set of arguments against Zola and Naturalism by Marxist critics, a tradition that can be traced back to Plekhanov, Gorki, and Lafargue, and even the famous letter of Engels to Miss Harkness (of April 1888), in which Balzac is appraised as infinitely greater than 'all the Zolas past, present and future'. The recurring charges are that Zola's Naturalism is a debased form of the great Realist tradition, represented in France by Balzac; that it mechanistically assimilates society to a biological model and passes over its inherent contradictions; that except perhaps in *Germinal*, it fails to depict the class struggle and offers instead a Darwinian vision of competing social species; that it espouses a fatalistic and static worldview; that it is excessively preoccupied with peripheral detail, facts, description, documentation, failing to represent characters who convey social, as opposed to physiological or pathological significance.³

Brazilian critics of the time and thereafter were almost unanimous in seeing local Naturalist novels as too close to Zola's works, and therefore equally incapable of depicting local reality. Thus, contemporary reviews of Brazilian Naturalist novels often criticized their 'mau gosto' [bad taste]: the excessively open treatment of sexual behaviour; the reduction of humans to their physiological aspects; the concentration on debased aspects of life, such as diseases and pathological behaviours; their fatalism, and their outdated scientism.⁴ Later critics, on the other hand, tended to repeat what Baguley called the 'already firmly established and seemingly self-perpetuating set of arguments against Zola and Naturalism by Marxist critics' (as above). Nelson Werneck Sodré, for instance, after accusing Zola of concentrating on 'aspectos exteriores da vida das classes trabalhadoras' [some external aspects of the life of the working classes],⁵ describes Brazilian Naturalism as having, in comparison to the French version, 'o mesmo materialismo vulgar, o mesmo misticismo fisiológico, a mesma estreiteza artística, a mesma representação detalhista dos ambientes, o mesmo pedantismo científico do evolucionismo, do positivismo, a mesma fascinação pela histeria feminina e pelas manifestações patológicas em geral e, no fim de contas, a mesma inverossimilhança' [the same vulgar materialism, the same artistic narrowness, the same pedantic scientism of evolutionism and determinism, the same fascination with feminine hysteria and for pathological manifestations in general, and, in the end, the same inverisimilitude].⁶ At the same time, he argues, since Brazilian social reality was different from that of Europe, Brazilian Naturalist novels 'are the falsier the harder they try to copy

³ *Critical Essays on Emile Zola*, ed. by David Baguley (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), p. 13.

⁴ See for instance Sílvio Romero's 'Movimento Espiritual do Brasil', which, in a review of several Brazilian Naturalist novels, refers to the 'narrow-minded and sterile naturalism of Zola's school'. 'O Movimento Espiritual no Brasil', in *Sílvio Romero: Teoria, Crítica e História Literária*, ed. by Antonio Candido (São Paulo: Edusp, 1978), p. 115.

⁵ Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O Naturalismo no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1965), p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

the foreign recipe'.⁷ Lúcia Miguel-Pereira in *Prosa de Ficção* (1950) accused Brazilian Naturalists of dealing with 'casos de alcova' [bedroom affairs], while refusing to engage in serious analysis of a society where 'se processavam experiências raciais da maior importância, onde as relações de senhores e escravos suscitavam um sem-número de problemas' [extremely important racial experiences were being processed, and where the relationship between masters and slaves generated numerous problems].⁸

After asking why Brazilian writers tended to prefer Zola as a model to Flaubert, and Comte and Spencer to Marx, Flora Süssekind answers her own question by claiming that the 'bedroom affairs' of Brazilian Naturalism provided conservative (and comfortable) substitutes for the social problems that the writers were aware of, but preferred not to discuss.⁹ In other words, instead of approaching the conflicts that split the country around the abolition of slavery or the movements towards a Republic, writers preferred to dwell on the image of deranged women, who become a favoured metaphor for a sick society. The solution they presented for such sickness was, in turn, as conservative as possible: marriage, i.e., the straitjacket of legally constituted families in a patriarchal society.

Excellent as it is, Süssekind's analysis leaves out *O Cortiço*, which is generally considered to be the most important novel of Brazilian Naturalism. For Azevedo's novel does not fit the 'bedroom' model, as it discusses social relations between different classes, and even slavery and abolition. It is not Azevedo's depiction of social conflict, however, that receives most praise from critics: the overwhelming majority of them list as the most definitive quality of the novel its capacity to portray the movement of the crowds and collective forces — a quality also attributed to Zola by more than one of his contemporaries.¹⁰ Naomi Schor, in her book *Zola's Crowds* (1978), points out that before structuralism it was impossible to make a serious study of crowds in Zola because virtually all critics until then assumed that 'Zola (over-)compensated for his congenial ineptitude at creating "well-rounded" protagonists by creating impressive crowds'.¹¹ The same assumption surrounds most critical comments about Azevedo's crowds. Lúcia Miguel-Pereira, who considers *O Cortiço* Azevedo's masterpiece, says that the best thing about it is its 'visão panorâmica' [panoramic vision] (an expression also used to refer to Zola's writings), and its capacity to show the 'espetáculo das massas' [spectacle of the masses] — a very fortunate

⁷ Ibid, p. 233.

⁸ Lúcia Miguel-Pereira, *Prosa de Ficção (de 1870 a 1920)* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1950), p. 126.

⁹ Flora Süssekind, *Tal Brasil, Qual Romance? Uma Ideologia Estética e sua História: Naturalismo* (Rio de Janeiro: Achiamé, 1984), p. 53.

¹⁰ Jules Lamaitre lauded Zola's ability to depict collective forces, and Emile Faguet, after giving a very negative view of Zola's works, conceded that he had a 'special talent for depicting the crowds' (quoted in English in Baguley's *Critical Essays*, p. 5).

¹¹ Naomi Schor, *Zola's Crowds* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. xiii.

phrase that is then repeated by practically every critic afterwards. Echoing the phenomenon described by Schor, she adds that 'Só nos momentos em que vê o indivíduo em função do meio a que pertence, como parte dele, e não como um caso a estudar isoladamente, é que o escritor se sente no seu elemento' [The writer feels within his own element only in those moments when he sees the individual as a function of the environment, as part of it, and not as a case to be studied in isolation].¹² Álvaro Lins rehearses the same argument, claiming that Azevedo 'Nunca pôde manter uma atitude psicológica em face do homem isolado, mas soube, com uma eficiência surpreendente, penetrar no interior dos agrupamentos humanos' [was never able to maintain a psychological attitude towards the isolated man, but he knew surprisingly well how to penetrate human groups].¹³ Nelson Werneck Sodré once again repeats that assumption, positively remarking on Azevedo's 'orquestração do meio coletivo' [orchestration of the collective environment].¹⁴ Alfredo Bosi is perhaps the most explicit of all: 'Só em *O Cortiço* Aluísio atinou de fato com a fórmula que se ajustava ao seu talento: desistindo de montar um enredo em função de pessoas, ateve-se à seqüência de descrições muito precisas onde cenas coletivas e tipos psicologicamente primários fazem, no conjunto, do cortiço a personagem mais convincente do nosso romance naturalista' [Only in *O Cortiço* did Aluísio finally find the formula best suited to his talent: giving up the idea of creating a plot around *people*, he concentrated on very precise descriptions of collective scenes and psychologically primary types that transform, as a whole, the tenement into the most convincing character of our Naturalist novels].¹⁵

Here is another one of those fortunate phrases, used by Lúcia Miguel-Pereira and much repeated ever since: the tenement as 'the most convincing character' in the novel of Brazilian Naturalism. As all fortunate phrases, it allows us to understand, in one stroke, the weight of the collective scenes in the novel, as well as the great importance that space has in it. Moreover, it implies that space and people, in the case of this novel, are inextricably linked. Yet, as often happens with fortunate phrases, it also keeps us from going further into the analysis of the novel. Just like the much-repeated idea that collective movement is the best, if not the only good element of *O Cortiço*, the notion that the tenement itself is the novel's strongest character limits us to the surface of the phenomena described in it; in other words, it keeps us at the level of the 'exterior elements' mentioned by Sodré with respect to the Naturalists themselves. Because what is implicit — and in some cases explicit — in the assumptions that the tenement is the best character and collective movement the best overall aspect of the novel, is that Azevedo resorted to them because he could not create psychologically complex individual characters. As readers, we are then asked no more than to

¹² Miguel-Pereira, p. 149.

¹³ Álvaro Lins, 'Dois Naturalistas: Aluísio Azevedo e Júlio Ribeiro', *Jornal de Crítica*. 2a. Série (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1943), pp. 134–65 (p. 149).

¹⁴ Werneck Sodré, p. 189.

¹⁵ Alfredo Bosi, *História Concisa da Literatura Brasileira* (São Paulo: Cultrix, 1994), p. 190.

observe the 'spectacle of the masses' and spy on the novel's 'best character', the tenement: the novel is colourful, brings us close to the people, but has no depth. This is perhaps the reason why *O Cortiço*, in spite of being considered one of the best novels in Brazilian literature, has received very few detailed analyses of its social processes, its structure, or indeed almost any other of its aspects. It has deserved, in other words, a treatment very similar to that accorded to Zola's novels until the 1950s — that is, a lack of engagement with the text itself on the part of the critics, who have tended to repeat the same set phrases already used to analyse Zola — even though, unlike Zola's texts, it was considered a good novel. An important exception is Antonio Candido's superb article 'De cortiço a cortiço', the first study to take seriously Azevedo's engagement with 'o mundo do trabalho, do lucro, da competição, da exploração econômica visível' [the world of labour, profit, competition, visible economic exploitation].¹⁶ Even so, for Candido there is 'pouco sentimento de injustiça social e nenhum da exploração de classe, mas nacionalismo e xenofobia, ataque ao *abuso* do imigrante que vem "tirar o nosso sangue"' [little sense of social injustice in the novel and none of class exploitation, just nationalism and xenophobia, an attack on the immigrant's abuse, who has come here to 'drain our blood'].¹⁷ By examining in detail how space is configured in the novel, I hope to show that *O Cortiço* actually reveals a deep sense of social injustice and class exploitation.

The problem is not only that the tenement is not, in any normal sense, a character, but that Azevedo's novel, besides its much-celebrated collective scenes (which proportionately form only a minor part of the text), is also composed of many individual characters, in fact some of the best-remembered characters in Brazilian literature. Such is the case of Rita Bahiana who conquered a definitive space in Brazilian minds as the sexy mulatta who drives men to commit the craziest acts, just to watch her move her hips while dancing the *chorado*. Rita even has literary daughters: Jorge Amado's Gabriela, for instance, is a direct continuation of Azevedo's mulatta: both share the same mixed-blood beauty, the lustrous hair perfumed with natural spices, the same open generosity and love of freedom. João Romão, the penny-pinching Portuguese immigrant is also a memorable character from *O Cortiço*, and so are the young prostitute Pombinha and the slave Bertoleza — all of them well remembered precisely because, I should add, they are types or caricatures. The fact that these and other characters in *O Cortiço* supposedly lack psychological depth does not make the relationship between them unimportant with respect to sexual and identity negotiations, as Mendes demonstrated,¹⁸ or from the point of view of social and economic structures.

If we then go back to the idea of the tenement as a *character* and try to

¹⁶ Antonio Candido, 'De cortiço a cortiço', in *O Discurso e a Cidade* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1998), pp. 123–52 (p. 151).

¹⁷ Candido, p. 131.

¹⁸ Leonardo Mendes, *O Retrato do Imperador: Negociação, Sexualidade e Romance Naturalista no Brasil* (Porto Alegre: EDIPUCRS, 2000), p. 41.

unfold it, recovering its double reference to *space* and *people*, and if at the same time we expand the idea of 'people' to include not just crowds but the relationships between individuals, we can start to read the novel as a quite well-accomplished analysis of economic power as it is inscribed in the urban space of Rio de Janeiro. At the time, Brazil was slowly emerging from slavery with a series of laws that led to Abolition (1888) and the Republic (1889), the massive urbanization that drew in immigrants both within the country and from Europe, and the consequences all this had for the national imaginary of environment.

In contrast to Zola, and in spite of some critics' references to its 'detailed descriptions',¹⁹ Azevedo's novel includes relatively few such, most of the novel consisting of dramatic action and dialogue. Above all, *O Cortiço* has no long descriptions in the style of Zola, much less of the type criticized by Lukács — the type that details one place or scene from more than one point of view.²⁰ Some of the most clearly descriptive passages in the novel are the formulaic passages, quoted above, that compare Brazilian nature (the jungle) to its Portuguese counterpart. The descriptions of city environment, in contrast, are brief and to the point, minimalist in the way they link the things or places described to a necessity created by the plot. One of the longest, for instance, depicts the quarry as João Romão is showing it to a possible new manager, Jerônimo. It is a panoramic scene that shows the rock face but above all the groups of men, and it is important because it allows Jerônimo to persuade João Romão to hire him on the basis that the job is presently being badly done (pp. 49–50 [pp. 34–35]). Again, when João Romão starts to build the tenement, all we know about the little houses is that they have two rooms and are badly built: we are told much more about the process of building, about how João Romão and Bertoleza steal materials and tools from the neighbourhood and hide them in the backyard. It is only when the tenement is completed that we are finally given a brief description of its floor plan, and even then only because the narrator needs to explain how it stood in relation to Miranda's house:

E os quartos do cortiço pararam enfim de encontro ao muro do negociante, formado com a continuação da casa deste um grande quadrilongo, espécie de pátio de quartel, onde podia formar um batalhão.

Noventa e cinco casinhas comportou a imensa estalagem. (p. 25)

[The two-room houses finally stopped when they reached Miranda's wall and turned again to create a large quadrangle, one side of which was right up against his backyard. The space in the middle resembled the courtyard at a military barracks, large enough for an entire battalion to drill in.

Ninety-five houses made up the huge slum.] (p. 11)

¹⁹ See for instance Luiz Antonio Ferreira, *Roteiro de Leitura: 'O Cortiço' de Aluísio Azevedo* (São Paulo: Ática, 1997), p. 132, and Wilson Martins, *História da Inteligência Brasileira*, 7 vols (São Paulo: Cultrix; EDUSP: 1977), IV, 341.

²⁰ Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970), pp. 110–48 (p. 113).

Another example: when the active tenement is described for the first time — also one of the longest descriptions in the novel — it is through a panoramic scene that shows the movements of men and women going from the houses to the bathrooms and to the faucets to wash themselves, and from there to the shop to buy bread. Though highly visual in a choreographic sense, this scene includes few details about the place itself. The details of the scene prepare the reader for the arrival of each of the washerwomen. The novel does not give us a single description of the interior of the little houses in the tenement, except, at the end, of the unit rented by the homosexual washerman Albino, whose bed is always full of ants (p. 202 [p. 181]).

Space in *O Cortiço* is made up of people: their relationship with each other, the back-and-forth of their movements through the patio, the up-and-down views between Miranda's rich mansion and the tiny houses, the sounds of music, fights, and love-making as they are heard by anxious listeners. If we try to find the spatial model to represent this idea it will certainly not be the Euclidean notion of absolute space. The Aristotelian categories could be more useful (for we can basically talk about unity of space in *O Cortiço*), but they bring with them an unhelpful tendency to separate space from time and from other narrative elements, which is not appropriate, not even provisionally, to Azevedo's novel. Neither can space in it be depicted as a container inside which stories develop. Rather, the notion that can most usefully guide us through Azevedo's novel is Henri Lefebvre's 'social space', which as he explains in a self-conscious tautology, 'is a social product'.²¹ As he defends the need for his space-centred approach, Lefebvre starts with Marx's replacement of 'this study of things taken "in themselves", in isolation from one another, with a critical analysis of productive activity itself (social labour; the relations and mode of production)'. He then goes on to claim that 'A comparable approach is called for today, an approach which would analyse not things in space but space itself, with a view to uncovering the social relationships embedded in it'.²²

At the most basic level, *O Cortiço* can be described as a novel *about* the production of space, as it tells the story of how João Romão, a Portuguese immigrant of humble origins and little education, makes a fortune by building a tenement and renting each of its tiny units to families and individuals. Along with Bertoleza, the Black lover whom he pretended to have freed from slavery, he initially builds the tenement with his own hands, using materials stolen from the quarry behind the plot and from other construction sites. With time, the profits from the rent of the little houses allow him to buy the quarry, taking him another step towards controlling the means of production of space. Moreover, João Romão owns the shop where the tenants buy their food and other supplies, contracting debts that make them economically dependent on

²¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

him. Thus, João Romão is not simply the builder of the physical space tenement: he is the creator and controller of a social space. Needless to say, João Romão's tenement is part of a bigger process of production, the urbanization of the growing city of Rio de Janeiro. Botafogo, where the tenement is located, nowadays a central neighbourhood in Rio, was at the time part of the outskirts that were being incorporated into the city. This process followed a pattern typical of sudden urban growth: it was related to migration, both internal, of north-easterners who went to Rio in search of a better life, and external, of Portuguese and Italian immigrants.²³ It is also related to the nascent industrialization of the country, which is represented in the novel by the pasta and candle factories where some of the tenants work. The inhabitants of the tenement are, in the main, new to the city. They are also mostly poor workers, members of a new free workforce that was progressively replacing slave labour in the few years that preceded Abolition. The novel gives a clear view of the relationship between the tenement and the new economic conditions that are producing urban sprawl:

Entretanto, a rua lá fora povoava-se de um modo admirável. Construía-se mal, porém muito; surgiam chalés e casinhas da noite para o dia; subiam os aluguéis; as propriedades dobravam de valor. Montara-se uma fábrica de massas italianas e outra de velas, e os trabalhadores passavam de manhã e às ave-marias, e a maior parte deles ia comer à casa de pasto que João Romão arranjara aos fundos da sua varanda. (p. 23)

[Meanwhile, the street filled with people at an astonishing rate. The construction was shoddy, but there was a great deal of it. Shacks and small houses sprang up overnight. Rents rose, and properties doubled in value. An Italian pasta factory was built, and another that made candles. Workers trudged by each morning, at noon, and again in the evening, and most of them ate at the cheap eating-house he [João Romão] had set up under the veranda behind his store.] (pp. 9–10)

In the words of Lefebvre, 'If there is such a thing as the history of space, if space may indeed be said to be specified on the basis of historical periods, societies, modes of production and relations of production, then there is such a thing as a space characteristic of capitalism — that is characteristic of a society that is run

²³ According to Ribeiro, 'no período 1870/1890 ocorreu uma extraordinária expansão da população da cidade. Em 18 anos, com efeito, ela cresceu 90%' [in the period between 1870/1890 there was an extraordinary population growth in the city [of Rio de Janeiro]. In eighteen years, in fact, it grew by 90%]. However, 'tal crescimento demográfico não é acompanhado por uma correspondente expansão do parque domiciliar, aumentando, consequentemente, a densidade domiciliar no conjunto da cidade' [this growth was not followed by an expansion in the number of residences. Consequently the housing density grew significantly in the city as a whole]. Luiz Cesar de Queiroz Ribeiro, *Dos Cortiços aos Condomínios Fechados: As Formas de Produção da Moradia na Cidade do Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1997), pp. 169–73.

and dominated by the bourgeoisie'.²⁴ But can we call the filthy, penny-pinching João Romão a proper bourgeois? At first, this seems an unlikely prospect. In the earlier parts of the novel he sleeps with Bertoleza in a dirty room and works night and day. Despite all his wealth, he does not enjoy any of the comforts associated with bourgeois life: he dresses badly, eats little and cheap food, and does not drink good wine. His only drive is to make money: money that is used to make more and more money. In the words of the narrator: 'Desde que a febre de possuir se apoderou dele totalmente, todos os seus atos, todos, fosse o mais simples, visavam um interesse pecuniário. Só tinha uma preocupação: aumentar os bens' (p. 23) [Ever since this fever to possess had taken hold of him, all his actions, however simple, had pecuniary ends. He had one purpose only: to increase his wealth (p. 9)].²⁵ Described this way, João Romão's behaviour may seem to be that of a miser, but we should not be fooled by such appearances: in *O Cortiço*, the role of the miser is reserved, following the traditional anti-Jewish discourse of the time, to the old Jew, Libório. João Romão, by contrast, is a true capitalist, a man who knows the logic of money-making in a modern society. Marx himself points to the similarities between the capitalist and the miser: 'This urge towards absolute enrichment, this passionate hunt for value, is shared by the capitalist with the miser; but whereas the miser is only a capitalist gone mad, a capitalist is a miser who has come to his senses. The unceasing increment of value at which the miser aims in his endeavour to save his money from circulation, is attained by the shrewder capitalist by again and ever again handing over his money to circulation.'²⁶ Though not looking or living like a bourgeois, in the first part of the novel, João Romão embodies the logic of capitalism according to Marx, that is, his desire to produce capital is an end in itself, and has no limits.²⁷ For it is capital, not just money, that João Romão produces, in a process that begins with his selling food in a small grocery shop inherited from his former boss; it continues with the exploitation of the labour and savings of the slave Bertoleza (supposedly freed by him) in order to transform land into money-producing rental units — the tenement; and reaches a true capitalist stage, still quite early in the novel, with the incorporation of the space of the quarry for the production of building materials through the exploitation of a salaried workforce. According to the narrator, it is precisely when João Romão starts to employ workers in the quarry that he becomes truly rich: 'Pôs lá seis homens a quebrarem pedra e outros seis a fazerem lajedos e paralelepípedos, e então principiou a ganhar em grosso, tão em grosso que,

²⁴ Lefebvre, p. 126.

²⁵ In the English edition by David H. Rosenthal, the first sentence actually reads 'Ever since this fever to possess land had taken hold of him, all his actions, however simple, had pecuniary ends'. I have eliminated the word 'land' in order to make it closer to the Portuguese original.

²⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, trans. from the fourth German edition by Eden and Cedar Paul, 2 vols (London: Everyman's Library, 1967), 1, 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, 137.

dentro de ano e meio, arrematava já todo o espaço compreendido entre as suas casinhas e a pedreira, isto é, umas oitenta braças de fundo sobre vinte de frente em plano enxuto e magnífico para construir' (p. 17) [He hired six men to wield pickaxes and another six to fashion paving stones, and then he really began to make money — so much money that within a year and a half, he had bought up all the land between his row of houses and the quarry: that is, a plot about 500 by 120 feet, level, dry, and ideal for construction (pp. 4–5)]. Here is how Marx and Engels define 'capital' in 'Wage Labour and Capital': 'How, then, does any amount of commodities, of exchange values, become capital? By maintaining and multiplying itself as an independent social power, that is, as the power of a portion of society, by means of its exchange for direct living labour power. The existence of a class which possesses nothing but its capacity to labour is a necessary prerequisite of capital.'²⁸ By acquiring the means of social production (the quarry) and by exploiting labour, João Romão becomes a capitalist. And the prerequisite for his transformation are the workers, who also become the tenants of his tenement.

'Circulation' is an important concept in the novel, as the narrator again and again emphasizes how João Romão's capital is invested in order to create more capital. It is also linked to the general frantic movement that characterizes the novel, with people moving around the tenement and between the tenement and the shop, the eatery, the quarry. Merchandise is said to 'não lhe paravam nas prateleiras; o balcão estava cada vez mais lustroso, mais gasto. E o dinheiro a pingar, vintém por vintém, dentro da gaveta, e a escorrer da gaveta para a burra, aos cinqüenta e aos cem mil-réis, e da burra para o banco, aos contos e aos contos' (p. 23) [not to stay put on his shelves, and the counter where it was sold grew shinier and more worn. The coins rang as they tumbled into his till, whence they flooded into this strongbox in larger denominations and finally to the bank as *contos* (p. 10)]. But the money does not stay in the bank either, as João Romão hires new clerks, starts to buy products directly from Europe and, as he becomes even richer, expands his shop into a bazaar with more space and more workers, that make him even richer, and so on.

In the second half of the novel he 'comes to his senses', to use Marx's expression, by adopting a lifestyle more in line with his accumulated capital: he cleans up his appearance, and initiates a slow process of change that will culminate in his promise to marry the daughter of his rich neighbour, the recently ennobled baron Miranda. He now shaves and bathes everyday, wears clean and well-cut clothes, reads the newspapers, goes to concerts, and is seen in the central streets of Rio investing in the stock exchange. By the end of the novel he has become so prosperous that he provides goods for all the stores in Botafogo. More than that,

²⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Wage Labour and Capital' in *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), pp. 64–93 (p. 81).

A sua casa tinha agora um pessoal complicado de primeiros, segundos e terceiros caixeiros, além do guarda-livros, do comprador, do despachante e do caixa; do seu escritório saíam correspondências em várias línguas e, por dentro das grades de madeira polida, onde havia um bufete sempre servido com presunto, queijo, e cerveja, faziam-se largos contratos comerciais, transações em que se arriscavam fortunas; e propunham-se negociações de empresas e privilégios obtidos do governo; e realizavam-se vendas e compras de papéis; e concluíam-se empréstimos de juros fortes sobre hipotecas de grande valor. (p. 220)

[his employees now included clerks of all ranks, as well as a bookkeeper, a buyer, a dispatcher and a receiver; his office carried on correspondence in several languages, and behind its grille of polished wood, by a sideboard always loaded with ham, cheese, and beer, detailed contracts were drawn up, fortunes were gambled, deals were made and privileges obtained from the government, certificates were bought and sold, and loans were granted at high interest rates secured by enormous collateral.] (p. 198)

The list of people that ‘passed through his office’ includes not only businessmen and brokers, but all kinds of charity officials, lawyers, and also ‘foremen coming to collect the pay for João Romão’s workers’ (p. 220 [p. 198]).

At this point, his most troublesome physical connection with the old times is Bertoleza, who continues to sleep in the house. In order to get rid of her and marry Miranda’s daughter, he considers setting up a vegetable shop for her in another part of the city, but she refuses the deal with a remarkable speech:

— Ah! agora não me enxergo! agora eu não presto para nada! Porém, quando você precisou de mim não lhe ficava mal servir-se do meu corpo e agüentar a sua casa com o meu trabalho! Então a negra servia para um tudo; agora não presta para mais nada, e atira-se com ela no monturo do cisco! Não! assim também Deus não manda! Pois se aos cães velhos não se enxotam, por que me hão de pôr fora desta casa, em que meti muito suor do meu rosto?... Quer casar, espere então que eu feche primeiro os olhos; não seja ingrato! (p. 218)

[‘Ah! So now I’m good for nothing! But when you did need me, you didn’t mind using my body in bed and my work to run your business! Then your nigger came in handy in all kinds of ways, but now when she’s worn out you want to throw her out with the garbage! That’s not right! People don’t kick out old dogs, so who said you could kick me out of this house I helped build with the sweat of my brow! If you want to get married, wait till I’m dead; show a little respect!’] (p. 195)

João Romão dismisses the claim as absolutely insane and unreasonable. At the end, he takes advantage of the fact that he had never truly bought her freedom and calls the descendants of her former master to come and retrieve her. In an ending that Bosi called too theatrical, Aluísio has Bertoleza kill herself in order not to go back to being a slave, while João Romão, in another room, welcomes to his house a group of abolitionists who came to ‘respectfully deliver a certificate declaring him an honored member and patron’ [p. 208].

The message is all too clear: João Romão's new, gentrified tenement stands on the blood of slave labour. Modern capitalism and liberal ideas, in their Brazilian version, cannot erase its connections with slave money. Miguel-Pereira, who admired Bertoleza's dignity and her tragic suicide, lamented that 'o livro não termine aí, que o autor julgue necessário forçar a nota dramaticamente irônica, fazendo chegar uma comissão de abolicionistas para entregar a João Romão o diploma de sócio benemérito de sua sociedade' [the book didn't finish there, that the author should find it necessary to force the dramatically ironic tone by making an abolitionist commission arrive to give João Romão a certificate of contributing member of their society].²⁹ I disagree: though the scene does have a theatrical feel to it, it also has an important function. When the novel came out, two years after Abolition, it would have been easy to dismiss João Romão, after his turning Bertoleza over to her former master, as a backward supporter of slavery. In contrast, by depicting him as an abolitionist, Azevedo is able to criticize not simply an old order, which had already been replaced, but the new. João Romão is Brazilian modernity in its combination of fully capitalist exploitation of a salaried workforce (and, we should add, its participation in a global market), with its still recent economic ties with slavery and its refusal to recognize, after Abolition, that the former slaves were owed an equal part of its new, modern life.

Far from being simply a miser fatefully driven by an abnormal desire to acquire wealth — as he is initially described and as indeed many critics, repeating accusations of fatalism made against Zola, were quick to accept — João Romão is the embodiment of an economic process — capitalism, with its own dynamic. 'The circulation of money as capital' is, as Marx puts it, 'an end in itself, for the expansion of value can only occur within this perpetually renewed movement. Consequently, the circulation of capital has no limits.'³⁰

Whether or not Azevedo knew Marx's texts is a question that can probably never be answered. The 'Communist Manifesto' was translated into French (a language all Brazilian writers had to read) in 1848, and *Capital* in 1872.³¹ Zola's *Germinal* quotes Marx and makes use of his economic theories, even though it does not subscribe to the latter's quasi-religious belief in the Revolution. In any case, in the second half of the nineteenth century socialist ideas were in the air and were almost certainly known, though not in depth, by many people who had not read any of the original texts. More importantly, Marx's were not the only socialist theories around, as the works of Saint-Simon and Proudhon enjoyed popularity in Latin America. The latter is particularly relevant here for the extremely famous beginning of his book *What is Property?*, much quoted at the time:

²⁹ Miguel-Pereira, p. 151.

³⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 1, 137.

³¹ For a history of the reception of socialist texts in Brazil see José Nilo Tavares, *Marx, o Socialismo e o Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1983).

If I had to answer the following question, 'What is slavery?' and if I should respond in one word, 'It is murder', my meaning would be understood at once. I should not need a long explanation to show that the power to deprive a man of his thought, his will, and his personality is the power of life and death. So why to this other question, 'What is property?' should I not answer in the same way, 'It is theft', without fearing to be misunderstood, since the second proposition is only a transformation of the first?³²

Slavery and theft are also represented as twin principles in *O Cortiço*, since the economic progress of João Romão depended, initially, on the money and work of Bertoleza, and on the theft of tools, building materials, and even bits of land. Theft continued to be a common practice for João Romão throughout his career — as we can see after the fire that destroys the tenement, when he steals money from the old Libório, and on many other occasions.

Through João Romão, Aluísio Azevedo discusses the hegemony of the bourgeoisie over the free and enslaved working classes of Rio de Janeiro in the final decades of the nineteenth century — a hegemony that is, as we should expect, inscribed in space. Following Lefebvre, let us ask: what kind of space was produced by a bourgeoisie that at that stage still relied on slavery, and that would continue to rely on its legacy of extremely cheap labour and servitude even after abolition? One possible answer might be: the tenement, though not the tenement in isolation.

Spatial Practices

First, in sheer physical terms the tenement is not isolated because of the proximity of its tiny houses to Miranda's imposing mansion. Such overlapping of wealth and poverty follows a visual logic of verticality: the mansion looks at the tenement from above, while the latter observes the inhabitants of the house from below. As Lefebvre puts it, 'The arrogant verticality of skyscrapers, and especially of public and state buildings, introduces a phallic or more precisely, a phallocentric element into the visual realm; the purpose of this display, of this need to impress, is to convey an impression of authority to each spectator. Verticality and great height have ever been the spatial expression of potentially violent power'.³³ Of course we cannot talk about 'skyscrapers' or 'public and state buildings' in the case of *O Cortiço*, but the need to 'convey an impression of authority in each spectator' is still there. So much so that João Romão's great ambition when he changes his life style is to build 'um sobrado mais alto que o do Miranda, e, com toda a certeza, mais vistoso' (p. 191) [a house taller than Miranda's and far more imposing (p. 171)]. And if it is true that we cannot deny the theatrical effects and narrative advantages of having the mansion and the tenement sharing, so to speak, the same space, it is also true that such superimposition corresponds to the actual social contrast of Rio, visible still

³² Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, ed. and trans. by Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 13.

³³ Lefebvre, p. 98.

today in the *favelas* that hang from the hillsides, face to face with the inhabitants of luxurious condominiums. Nowadays, however, we can speak of an inverted visual logic of verticality, or maybe even of a battle for verticality in a city where tall apartment buildings compete with the mountain slums.

In *O Cortiço*, the relationship between the inhabitants of the mansion and those of the tenement takes several forms, all of them denouncing, at various levels, class difference. Thus, the poor washerwomen become, for example, the object of voyeuristic desire by male members of the mansion, particularly by Henrique, the young lodger of Miranda's household. He repeatedly watches Pombinha as she goes about in her daily tasks, and ends up having sex with one of the washerwomen, Leocádia, in an encounter arranged through gestures between the windows of the mansion and the patio of the tenement. The inhabitants of the tenement, too, like to observe what happens in the mansion. But instead of voyeuristic desires, they express a negative moral judgement about the rich family's behaviour, especially the adulterous encounters of Miranda's wife, Dona Estela. Here, Azevedo makes a clear distinction between the morality of the lower classes and that of the bourgeoisie. The latter's marriages are made exclusively on financial grounds. Miranda married Estela for her family's money, when he was still a poor immigrant recently arrived from Portugal;³⁴ João Romão got together with Bertoleza also for financial interest, and later arranged to marry Zulmira for the same reason. The result of such marriages can be disastrous, or at least it is in the case of Miranda and Estela, who hate each other. The poor, on the other hand — in spite of the narrator's occasional claims about promiscuity in the tenement, which is also seen as a breeding ground for prostitutes — are still capable of marrying for love, and seem much freer in their sexual and amorous choices. When a group in the tenement is gossiping about Miranda's desire to marry his daughter Zulmira to a rich man, the judgement is clear:

— Por isso é que se vê tanta porcaria por esse mundo de Cristo! disse a Augusta. Filha minha só se casará com quem ela bem quiser; que isto de casamentos empurrados à força acabam sempre desgraçando tanto a mulher como o homem! Meu marido é pobre e é de cor, mas eu sou feliz, porque casei por meu gosto!

— Ora, mais vale um gosto que quatro vinténs! (p. 75)

³⁴ The relationship between Miranda and Estela resembles in many aspects the marriage between Monsieur and Madame Hennebeau in *Germinal*. Both husbands got to where they are now because of the adulterous relationships of their wives in the city. Both wives continue to have amorous encounters in the new house, and both end up having as lovers very young lodgers, a nephew in the case of Madame Hennebeau, and a customer's son in the case of Miranda. In addition, both husbands retain some kind of fascination towards their wives: in the case of Monsieur Hennebeau, it is expressed in a continuing sexual desire that is never materialized because he is afraid of being despised by her; in the case of Miranda, he cannot resist his needs and goes to his wife's room once a month, so that 'from then on their sexual relations were better than ever, though their dislike of each other had in no way diminished' (p. 7).

['That's why there are so many sluts in the world!' Augusta added. 'My daughter's going to marry someone she loves; forced marriages always turn out badly for the woman and the man. My husband's poor and colored, but I'm happy because he's the one I wanted to marry.'

'Damned right! Money isn't everything!'] (p. 58)

The actual exchanges between the inhabitants of the mansion and those from the tenement also put in evidence the feelings each class has towards the other. On a Sunday, for instance, the parties at the tenement bother the inhabitants of the mansion, and Miranda comes to the window to protest:

— Vão gritar pra o inferno, com um milhão de raios! berrou ele, ameaçando para baixo. Isto também já é demais! Se não se calam, vou daqui direito chamar a polícia! Súcia de brutos!

Com os berros do Miranda muita gente chegou à porta da casa, e o coro de gargalhadas, que ninguém podia conter naquele momento de alegria, ainda mais o pôs fora de si.

— Ah, canalhas! O que eu devia fazer é atirar-lhes daqui, como a cães danados! (p. 70)

['God damn you all, why don't you do your yelling in hell?' he roared, threatening those below him. 'This is going too far! If you don't shut up, I'll call the police, you lousy brutes!'

Miranda's shouts brought people to their doors, and their uncontrollable laughter made him still more furious.

'Scum! I should shoot you all like rabid dogs!'] (p. 54)

The adjectives he uses (*súcia de brutos*, *canalhas*, *cães danados*) confirm his sense of superiority towards his neighbours, while the inhabitants of the tenement respond with irreverence, or, in the case of the troublemaker Firmo, Rita's boyfriend, with violent threats: '— Facilita muito, meu boi manso, que te escorvo os galhos na primeira ocasião' (p. 71) ['You chicken-hearted son of a bitch, I'll cut you down to size the first chance I get!'] (p. 54)] — a remark that provokes panic in Miranda's family, who take him away from the window. Later, when Miranda's household is celebrating his becoming a baron, it is the noise of champagne bottles and shouts from the mansion that provoke the resentful protest from the inhabitants of the tenement.

In addition to Miranda's mansion, several networks relate the tenement to the city around it, following the 'law' mentioned by Lefebvre, according to which 'Social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another'.³⁵ As a social space, the tenement is the result of various spatial practices. First among them is the planning of João Romão, who conceives and builds it, on the one hand, piling the highest possible number of rent-paying inhabitants into the smallest possible space. According to Ribeiro, the building of *cortiços* in Rio de Janeiro between 1870s and 1890s was 'regulada tão-somente pela busca da apropriação de uma renda fundiária, na forma de aluguel de

³⁵ Lefebvre, p. 86.

cômodos ou de pequenos cortiços, casas de cômodos e estalagens. Para tanto, o “corticeiro” procura investir o mínimo possível e aproveitar ao máximo o terreno’ [regulated only by the desire to acquire property income in the form of room rental or the rental of small tenement houses. For this purpose, the landlord invested as little as possible and occupied as much of the land as he could].³⁶ Indeed, the urban sprawl caused by the nascent industrialization of Rio guarantees João Romão a permanent revenue from the little houses: ‘À proporção que alguns locatários abandonavam a estalagem, muitos pretendentes surgiram disputando os cômodos desalugados [...] Os números dos hóspedes crescia, os casulos subdividiam-se em cubículos do tamanho de sepulturas (p. 145) [As soon as any tenant left São Romão, a crowd of candidates appeared, all squabbling over the vacant house. [...] The number of inhabitants increased; each two-room house was subdivided into cubicles the size of coffins (p. 125)].

On the other hand, this modern urban building logic is combined with the remnants of provincial town planning, so that the initial ninety-five houses are built around a courtyard ‘onde podia formar um batalhão’ (p. 25) [large enough for an entire battalion to drill in (p. 11)]. This planning serves to accommodate an older form of economy which has its origins in slavery and that coexisted with nascent capitalism in late nineteenth-century Brazil: the rental of wash tubs to professional *lavadeiras* (washerwomen). This includes, of course, most female tenants but also many washerwomen from outside the tenement. Such a design generates in turn its own spatial practices: as a public space, the courtyard serves as the social centre of the tenement. Our first encounter with the inhabitants of the tenement, for instance, happens through the women, who appear, one by one, in the washing scene. The washing tubs also relate the women of the tenement with other parts of the city, for they all do the laundry of wealthier families. Such networks between laundry women and the families they work for are made visible at a few moments in the novel, when owners or servants from the wealthier houses come looking for their clothes. The washing tubs also establish a relationship between the public space of the patio and the private space of the house. Ironically, washing laundry is a definition of the private, as in the expression ‘don’t wash dirty linen in public’, a recommendation that cannot be taken literally in a society that, due to a long history of slavery, came to rely on the service of poorly paid labour to accomplish the daily tasks of the house. Thus the clothes of the best families in Rio were hung out to dry in the public spaces of the tenement, erasing not only the limits between the private and the public, but more specifically, between the private of the richer and the public of the working class. But the women also ‘wash their own linen’ in the public space of the patio, as their conversations around the washing-tubs often refer to personal and sexual topics. Thus, the whole tenement knows, for instance, that the eighteen-

³⁶ Queiroz Ribeiro, p. 205.

year-old Pombinha, the flower of the tenement, has not yet become sexually mature. When she finally does, her mother, the washerwoman Dona Isabel, all but exhibits as a banner the blood of her menstruation, once again relating the theme of laundry-washing and personal life.

At night, the patio of the tenement becomes less a communal setting than an unwittingly shared space. Once again, private and public are difficult to distinguish, as various social gatherings are heard or observed by those who have and have not been invited. This is a typically urban scenario of welcome and unwelcome sounds and smells that generate multiple desires and anxieties. It is here that the conflicts between the different ethnic groups that live in the tenement are acted out. The Brazilians are represented mainly by the mulatta Rita Bahiana, her lover Firmo and their various friends who play and dance the *chorado*. Against them we have Portuguese immigrants like Jerônimo and his wife Piedade, who long for their cool, distant villages, while playing nostalgic fados. The Italians constitute the third ethnic group, but they always appear together and are invariably described by the noise they make and the amount of litter they produce.

As with most urban spaces, this tenement brings together individuals of different origins, and the conflicts between them allow Azevedo to adapt the determinist logic that Naturalism is credited with to the Brazilian environment. Hence, hard-working and ethical Portuguese such as Jerônimo become lazy, drunk, and sexually obsessed when exposed to the warmth of the tropical sun. Jerônimo falls in love with Rita because 'Naquela mulata estava o grande mistério, a síntese das impressões que ele recebeu chegando aqui: ela era a luz ardente do meio-dia; ela era o calor vermelho das sestras da fazenda; era o aroma quente dos trevos e das baunilhas, que o atordoara nas matas brasileiras; era a palmeira virginal e esquiva que se não torce a nenhuma outra planta; era o veneno e era o açúcar gostoso' (p. 78) [That mulatta embodied the mystery, the synthesis of everything he had experienced since his arrival in Brazil. She was the blazing light of midday; the fierce heat of the farm where he had toiled; the pungent scent of clover and vanilla that had made his head spin in the jungle; the palm tree, proud and virginal, unbending before its fellow plants. She was poison and sugar (p. 61)]. But as Mendes observed, in the case of *O Cortiço* such claims are surprisingly ambiguous. If it is true that Jerônimo is described at first as being strong, honest, and responsible, and his wife as being naturally beautiful, virtuous, and hard-working, it is also true that their music is presented as boring, their food bland and uninteresting, and their bodies as lacking personal hygiene. The mulatta Rita Bahiana, on the other hand, is depicted as being too fond of a good time: she often abandons work in order to accompany her boyfriend Firmo in orgies that last weeks. But she is also open, generous, and happy, her hair smells of vanilla and nobody in the tenement, man, woman, or child, can resist her charms. Firmo, it is true, is closer to being a villain: he is a violent *capoeira* fighter who is always looking

for trouble. But he is also a brilliant musician, and his tendency to violence ends up being no worse than that of Jerônimo, who kills him in a rather treacherous fight because of Rita.

It is this fight that causes the fire which ultimately destroys most of the tenement, the result of arson initiated by the mysterious Bruxa. The only indigenous character in the whole novel, this 'witch' is occasionally described as mad by the narrator, a sinister woman, but one who is nevertheless a wise herbalist and who can cure diseases. She twice attempts to burn the tenement down, and when she succeeds, in her second attempt, 'ela ria-se, ébria de satisfação, sem sentir as queimaduras e as feridas, vitoriosa no meio daquela orgia de fogo, com que ultimamente vivia a sonhar em segredo a sua alma extravagante de maluca' (p. 184) [She roared with laughter, indifferent to her burns, reveling in that orgy of flames, which she had dreamed of so long in secret (p. 163)]. This Indian woman who burns down João Romão's property cannot but remind us of the 'muralla de fogo com que o espírito eternamente revoltado do último tambor entricheirou a pátria contra os conquistadores aventureiros' [wall of fire behind which the last Tamoio Indian's rebellious spirit defends its fatherland against conquering adventurers from overseas], quoted near the beginning of this essay. It recalls, too, the celebrated climax of the Brazilian Indian's speech in Montaigne's essay 'Of Cannibals': '... that they had observed that there were among us men full and crammed with all sorts of things, while their halves were begging at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty, and they thought it strange that these necessitous halves were able to suffer such an injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses'.³⁷ This symbolic role of the Indian woman supports an allegorical reading of the novel according to which João Romão embodies not only Brazilian modernity, as I already indicated, but the whole historical process that created such modernity, beginning with Portuguese theft and colonization of Indian land, exploitation of Black slaves, and finally, integration into a capitalist order based on free labour.³⁸

Like a true capitalist João Romão does not lose any money with the fire: he had insured the tenement above its actual value, and managed to steal the life-savings of the old Libório, who died in the disaster. With the profits, he starts the process of gentrifying the tenement; instead of one, he now builds two stories of houses, with verandas:

À esquerda, até onde acabava o prédio do Miranda, estendia-se um novo correr de casinhas de porta e janela, e daí por diante, acompanhando todo o lado do fundo e dobrando depois para a direita até esbarrar no sobrado de João Romão, erguia-se um segundo andar, fechado em cima do primeiro por uma estreita e extensa varanda de grades de madeira, para a qual se

³⁷ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. and ed. by Jacob Zeilin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), p. 190.

³⁸ For the importance of allegory in Azevedo's novel, see Candido, 'De cortiço a cortiço'.

subia por duas escadas, uma em cada extremidade. De cento e tantos, a numeração dos cômodos elevou-se a mais de quatrocentos. (p. 202)

[On the left, by Miranda's house, there was a new row of doors and windows, and facing them, all along the back and then turning into another row that extended as far as João Romão's house, there was a second floor with a long wooden veranda and two sets of stairs: one at either end. Instead of a hundred or so, there were now more than four hundred dwellings.] (p. 181)

Middle-class service workers now move into the tenement, and many of the old-timers are forced to go live in 'Catheads', the neighbouring tenement that has gone the other way, becoming slummier. Here Azevedo describes another familiar urban process: the gentrification that displaces the poorer populations to worse parts of the city. Instead of a patio, the new tenement has an avenue between the rows of houses. Its purpose is not gathering, but circulation, that is, bring people in and out of the new tenement. With these changes, professionals start to open workshops in the tenement, and their clients, one imagines, are able to walk in and out safely. Due to the larger number of houses and the new spatial configuration, the inhabitants of the tenement are now less prone to mix private and public life: their parties happen inside their houses, and many of them do not mingle at all.

Social Control and Other Implications

As a social product, the tenement is also a space of control. In both its initial and gentrified shapes, the long row of houses allows João Romão (whose own house stands at the entrance of the tenement) to keep a close eye on the lives of the inhabitants, repressing them any time he sees fit. In his role as the owner of the tenement, he has the right to evict anybody that violates his authority in the use of space, and that right is never questioned by the inhabitants of the tenement. In other words, the spatial and social organization of the tenement is highly determined by the logic of rent monopoly, a logic that assures in daily practices the hegemony of one class over others. But cityscapes are spaces of contradiction, and while urban landscape can allow more control over individuals, it also creates its own pockets of resistance. If it is true that the inhabitants of the tenement cannot counter João Romão's rights as owner, it is also true that they are successful in counteracting the repressive state apparatus when, united by a common fear of the police, they actively repel, on more than one occasion, the attempts by policemen to enter the tenement. When the police finally come in, they do so with a vengeance, exhibiting a brutality that is unfortunately all too familiar to present-day Latin American cities.

In his descriptions of the tenement and its inhabitants, Azevedo at times resorts to some of the familiar tropes of Naturalism. Thus, the tenement is compared to a heap of dung, generating worms (the inhabitants), and few of

the characters escape comparison with animals at one or other moment in the novel. As an environment, the tenement is also said to have an unavoidable influence over the people who live in it, such as Pombinha, as we have seen. Yet, for most of the novel Azevedo seems to go against these deterministic principles. As Mendes puts it: '*O Cortiço* como um criadouro de prostitutas pode funcionar bem como preceito Naturalista, mas contradiz o que dizem quase todos os personagens do romance. As duas prostitutas do romance o são por escolha própria, e parecem felizes com sua escolha... Talvez as criaturas de *O Cortiço* não sejam uma boa ilustração para as teses Naturalistas do narrador' [*O Cortiço* as a hotbed for prostitutes works well as a Naturalist precept, but it goes against what almost every character in the novel says. The two prostitutes in the novel have become so by choice, and they seem happy with their choices [...]. Maybe the creatures in *O Cortiço* are not good illustrations for the narrator's Naturalist theses].³⁹ Indeed, most of the characters in the novel are not simply influenced by the environment they live in, they also have an active role in producing it.

If in order to read Aluísio Azevedo we need to make reference to Zola it is not because of the 'fatalism' or 'determinism' of both authors, nor simply to compare the 'collective scenes' in their novels. The main lesson Azevedo seems to have learned from his French Master (apart, of course, from specific situations and certain similar characters) was the critique of the dominant economic and social order, which is done, in both authors, through a rupture with what Schor called the 'hegemony of the French psychological novel'.⁴⁰ In Zola, an extremely acute visual sense and very detailed descriptions create a world where people seem dwarfed by the things around them. And although those things are moveable as commodities to be consumed, they create a sense of space that is oppressive and unchangeable, reflecting a well-established social and economic order where upward movement by the poor, although promised, is actually very rare. In Azevedo, short, almost schematic descriptions of objects and scenery serve as a minimal structure for a space that is made up of people and that is constantly being produced and changed by people. Their frantic movement mimics the infinite need for circulation of capitalism itself. This changeability of space reflects a social order in formation, where everything seems to be up for grabs, where ethnic and class identities are still being negotiated. The reason why the lack of descriptions in *O Cortiço* may have appealed to so many readers could have to do with the fact that in Brazil, unlike Zola's France, the upper classes did not need detailed descriptions to visualize the space of the poor: like the bourgeois women in the novel, all they had to do was to open their windows. The readers' interest in spaces of poverty like the tenement stemmed then not from a need to *see* those places, but from a desire to understand the choreography of identity and class negotiation in a society that

³⁹ Mendes, *O Retrato do Imperador*, p. 45.

⁴⁰ Schor, p. xiii.

was changing very fast. The permeability between the spaces of the rich and of the poor does not point, however, to a fairer relationship between the classes. On the contrary: it indicates that along with modern capitalist exploitation of free labour, there still remained in Brazilian society a slavery-derived tradition of servitude. Moreover, capitalist mobility itself is based, according to the novel, on brutal exploitation and theft. The fact that both writers chose to depict capitalism as a system that perpetuates class differences is not due to their fatalistic theories of human nature and society, but to a visionary understanding of capitalism's necessity and extraordinary ability to perpetuate itself.

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