

**THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF:
FANTASTIC DOLLS IN *LAS HORTENSIAS* AND *A MATÉRIA DO SONHO***

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Las Hortensias (1949) is Felisberto Hernández's most important (and most disturbing) exploration of the problems of representation. It has been rewritten at least twice in Latin America. Rosario Ferré (who would later write a short book on Felisberto) makes her *La muñeca menor* a thorough recasting of the story into a woman-centered dynasty in small-town Puerto Rico, and Felisberto's sex dolls are rethought as a medium of passing on a feminine tradition. Rubem Fonseca's *A Matéria do Sonho* stays closer to the Felisberto story, focusing on the story's central motif of „the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction“. I will focus on Fonseca's rewriting here. Ferré's is more accessible – and less startling.

In *Las Hortensias*, the main character, Horacio, orders the creation of a series of life-size female dolls, called „Hortensias“ after his wife María Hortensia. His butler, Alex, stages tableaux vivants using the dolls in two glass-enclosed rooms. The tableaux vivants contain implied stories, but these stories when most effective are ambiguous - was the poisoned bride murdered or did she commit suicide? The stories Horacio imagines can then be checked against the 'legends' that Alex leaves in written form. Horacio likes the scenes the best when the meanings are not explicit. Though he likes to guess right, he is often less pleased by those legends that confirm his hypotheses than by those that allow a freer play of the imagination.

The dramatic effect of the story is heightened when the boundaries are erased between the glass cases holding the tableaux vivants and the rest of Horacio and María's

house and garden. First, María establishes a special relationship with the most important of the dolls, the first Hortensia. Then, Horacio has Hortensia modified so that the doll can serve his sexual pleasure, a modification that provokes María to violence. Finally, Horacio and his associates, sensing the commercial potential in the dolls, sell a line of Hortensias to solitary male citizens. In each of these stages, moral limits, and the limits between imagination and reality, are transgressed. That these transgressions are produced by the interpolation of lifesized dolls into the real world of men and women implies that visual and narrative art serve to confound the limits set by the conscience and the rational mind in their vain efforts to exert control over the world.

Horacio goes mad at the close of the story (though for some readers he was never quite sane earlier on), and his madness has its correlative throughout the story in the noise of the machines from the factory next door to the house. Noise here is the sound of chaos that exceeds rational and artistic discourse, and Horacio's final movement toward the noise marks the failure of his project of a controlled economy of libido and imagination. Similarly, the artifice of the Hortensias is finally revealed as a futile attempt to replace the body, for the body can be represented in and to the mind only as absence and emptiness. The Hortensias, instead of being a mechanism for controlling and subduing frustration, ultimately increase it.

Rubem Fonseca's brilliant story *A Matéria do Sonho* (in *Lúcia McCartney*, 1970) replays the motif of the Hortensias, with the difference that the narrator's Hortensia is

provided to him free of charge in a perverse kind of social and sexual engineering: a social worker lends him „Gretchen“, a full-size female sex doll, to cure him of his habit of remaining solitary. The interest of juxtaposing this story to *Las Hortensias* (which is obviously its main source) is to see what Fonseca has done with Hernández's treatment of the character's fantasy life. In *Las Hortensias*, as we have seen, Horacio uses his social position to employ helpers to construct the dolls and to set up the fantasmatic scenes; in the Fonseca story, the subaltern position of the character in the story, who starts the story as the helper to an aged and infirm wealthy man, is downwardly mobile, and the only clue to his rich fantasy life is the long list of books he reads. Instead, then, of ordering others to prepare fantasies for him, he accumulates books that serve him to fantasize that he will improve himself by reading them. The character's inability to order or hierarchize, however, has him juxtapose in his list of reading works like *The Magic Mountain* or *I, Claudius* to others with titles like *How to Play Basketball*, Flavius Josephus to works of pulp fiction:

Lá: Guerra e Paz, O Príncipe e o Mendigo, O Monge de Cister, Winnetou, Pardaillan, A Vingança do Judeu, Scaramouche, Pimpinela Escarlata, Buridan, Os Três Mosqueteiros, O Homem Invisível, Drácula, Crime e Castigo, Fausta, Fausta Vencida, Eu Claudius, O Conde Belisarius, A Montanha Mágica, Os Thibault, Como Jogar Basketball, O Lobo da Estepe, Tarzan o Rei das Selvas, Os Homens de Borracha, As Mulheres de Bronze, O Processo, Eurico, o Presbítero. (136)

The three long lists of books that punctuate the story (the others are on pages 139 and 142-43) provide a note of humor, as the protagonist reveals his lack of any criteria in choosing reading material: like Edmund Mallory before Everest, he reads it because it's there.

Some years ago Pierre Bourdieu, in an empirical study that is laughable in its design, though Bourdieu's conclusions are not, argued that „taste“ is governed by the same sorts of binary oppositions that Saussure proposed as basic structures for linguistics. Informants of a certain class preferred Mozart to *The Blue Danube*, and if that

class was the dominant one, then Mozart was considered „in good taste“ and the Strauss waltz „in questionable taste“. Fonseca's main characters, the young narrator and Dr. R., the son of the old couple who employ the narrator initially, engage in a series of discussions that sound like they came out of Bourdieu's surveys:

Dr. R., qual o melhor livro, perguntei um dia, Crime e Castigo ou Fausta Vencida. Ele gostava mais de Crime e Castigo mas a Fausta Vencida era a sua infância. Mas também está certo gostar mais da Fausta, como você. (136)

Here, Dr. R. reveals his knowledge of „good taste“ by preferring the Dostoevsky novel to the pulp novel, though he allows his subordinate to prefer the latter if he so prefers. A couple of pages later, the dialogue turns to another subject, masturbation and bestiality:

Para o dr. R. dava uma vontade de contar tudo. Quando era garotinho eu comia galinhas. As galinhas eram quentinhas, eu gozava. Depois cresci e passei a comer bichos maiores; cabras e éguas. Qual a melhor? A galinha ou a cabra?, perguntou o dr. R. da mesma maneira que eu perguntei qual era melhor Crime e Castigo ou Fausta Vencida. A cabra respondi. Isso é muito comum entre os pastores na Arábia, comer cabras. O Lawrence conta isso. Você leu os Sete Pilares? Eu não tinha lido os Sete Pilares. Os Sete Pilares da Sabedoria. (138)

Here the crucial question - „which is better?“ - is turned around, with the narrator the possessor of knowledge (though not necessarily of good taste) and Dr. R. the desiring subject. Dr. R. recovers his dominant position by asserting that the narrator's knowledge was already present in a book, in this case an illustrious one, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. The move is subversive and destabilizing, however, since it puts Lawrence of Arabia in the position of knowing whether it is better to have sex with chickens or with goats. This is surely not the sort of „wisdom“ his book is expected to offer.

Dr. R. is the one who intrudes on the narrator's masturbation scene, causing the narrator to resign his post with Dr. R.'s

parents. Some days later, he discovers that the narrator has stopped eating, and decides that there is a connection between the interrupted masturbation and the fasting. He proposes to solve the narrator's difficulties by providing him with „Gretchen“, a life-size sex doll. The narrator happily accepts, perhaps because of the *class* associated with Germanic and English names in Brazil, though once he has Gretchen at home he is given to calling her other names: Mônica, Kátia, Roxane, Anamaria, Regina, Cabrinha. The story comes to a near catastrophe when in a moment of passion the narrator bites Gretchen and disinflates her:

Um dia aconteceu uma desgraça que até tirou a minha vontade de ler. Não sei como pude, com apenas uma ou duas dentadas fazer aquilo com Gretchen. Não podia nem olhar para ela, disforme sobre a cama. Cobri-a com um lençol. Tentei ler. Não podia. A toda hora olhava para o lençol. Tentei vários livros. Inútil. Estava tão deprimido que resolvi ler o Fim de Pardaillan. Guardava esse livro para um momento especial. O último livro do Pardaillan! Esse livro eu li com a maior atenção. Mas depois foi pior. Nunca fiquei tão triste em toda a minha vida. O fim de Pardaillan e o fim de Gretchen. Era demais. Era demais. Deitei no chão. O que ia fazer de minha vida? (143)

When Dr. R. finds him several days later he is again delirious from not eating. Dr. R.'s solution? A new doll:

Esta aqui é ainda melhor do que Gretchen, disse ele soprando. O nome dela é Cláudia. Suas medidas são 36, 24, 36. Polegadas evidentemente. Altura: cinco pés e quatro inches. (143)

Here, *Fonseca* is playing with the idea of cultural dependency: Cláudia's measurements are those made popular in U.S.-style beauty contests, and she is measured in feet and inches, not in the metric system (see Tolman 80). Once again „taste“ is revealed to be relational.

One notable aspect of the long list of books that the narrator reads in *A Matéria do Sonho* is the absence of Brazilian and Spanish-American texts. There is no doubt a hint by the author of the cultural dependency of the Brazilian dominant classes, as represented in the story by Dr. R. and his parents. It is not, however, a sign of his own cultural frontiers. Rubem Fonseca - widely considered the most original of Brazilian writers of the present moment - poses sometimes as a naive writer, yet one of his first crime novels, *O caso Morel*, alludes to Bioy's *La invención de Morel*, and this story clearly depends on a reader's knowledge of *Las hortensias*. Crucial to an understanding of the story is the recognition of the cultural references. The narrator's reading is wholly disconnected from his sexual „experience“, if we can call it that, with the vinyl dolls. The reader is implicated in the process of cultural dependency, since the reader who „knows“ the difference between a pulp novel or *How to Play Basketball* and a novel by Thomas Mann or Fedor Dostoevsky is inserted in the story in the role of the unsavory Dr. R., whose ideas of social engineering are hardly presented as desirable.

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