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The shadow of the world: excess and imprisonment in *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente*, by Lourenço Mutarelli

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In a scene at the beginning of *Detour*, a classic *film noir*, Al Roberts, played by Tom Neal, is in a diner somewhere in Nevada when one of the customers turns on the jukebox. The song that starts playing brings up painful memories to Al, who stares in front of him in anguish. The lighting of the scene changes, and a streak of light is projected over his eyes, leaving the rest of his face deep in shadows. Our own gaze shifts to a close shot of a mug – half of which is brightly lit, while the other half remains in shadows – then gets closer to the jukebox and finally rests on the surface of a drum, white as the moon or a searchlight, already part of Al's remembrance of the past, as he starts telling us his story, which includes the loss of the girl he loved, his involvement with a psychopathic woman and two unintentional murders.

In this scene, as in many other *films noirs*, ordinary objects become the focus of especial attention by framing, editing and lighting techniques. They are charged with meaning, becoming projections of the characters' psychology or moral and metaphysical musings. The change in lighting marks the passage from a realistic register (although already exceedingly somber) to another one, extremely subjective. The beam of light on the character's eyes stresses their expressiveness and ushers in the dimension of memory: from this point onwards, the film turns into a flashback showing Al's increasing isolation and his inability to control his own fate. But this lighting effect is not only expressive, it is also clearly artificial: first, because it does not match the ambient light of the setting, being motivated exclusively by the inner movement of the protagonist's mind; and second because the beam of light is not immediately fixed on the character's eyes, but climbs up his face, as if searching for its target. As James Naremore (2008/1998, p. 147) points out, here we can feel the undisguised presence of a technician behind the cameras trying to aim the light correctly. In other words, the scene purposefully reveals its own artificiality. The blown-up image of the mug, in its turn, transforms an ordinary object into an almost surreal apparition, setting the stage for the nightmarish atmosphere of the flashback (Naremore, 2008, p. 147-8). The

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mug also functions as a screen on which light is projected, and on which the spectator's gaze is fixed – an effect reproduced with even greater intensity with the appearance of the drum, which completes the transition to the past and which at first can hardly be recognized, for it simply looks like a huge white surface. What seems to be evoked here is the fascination of film itself and of the visual tricks it employs. Camera movements, lighting, and the use of props reveal an effort to guide the spectator's gaze, which goes from one object to the other, attaching itself to images from which it cannot escape, for they are invasively imposed on it. *Detour* is a narrative of imprisonment whose protagonist is led by chance until he is arrested for a crime he did not commit. The captivity of the spectator's gaze foreshadows the captivity of the main character. However, this scene is only an example of the careful manipulation of the gaze that, in my opinion, is one of the basic characteristics of *film noir*.

Naremore begins his discussion on *film noir* by remarking that this kind of film is usually remembered by its public as a series of stylistic traits. Going back to his early contacts with *film noir*, he mentions a special "aura" associated with the dreamlike atmosphere of cinema, composed by "details" such as the blond hair of an actress or the crumbled suit of a certain actor, which soon became fetishes (Naremore, 2008, p. 1-3), objects that have an effect analogous to that of the mug in the opening scene of *Detour*. Robert Lang makes a similar point when he argues that narrative in *film noir* is less important than iconography and gesture (Lang, 1988, p. 32-3). Relying on highly stylized elements, from expressive camera angles to the appearance of its characters (Fluck, 2001, p. 404-5), *film noir* displays to its public a collection of objects which creates a specific and easily recognizable visual language. In her analysis of Otto Preminger's *Laura*, Winfried Fluck notes that from the objects in the apartment of a homicide victim, the detective in charge of the investigation builds an image of the murdered woman as an idealized object of desire (Fluck, 2001, p. 395-6). This is by no means an isolated case. Something like this also happens in *Detour*, for instance. After Al accidentally kills the woman who was keeping him prisoner by blackmailing him, the camera lingers on the objects we have seen her use throughout the film, as if they were a silent and instantaneous testimony of her character and they preserved her essence. The same applies to Cora's lipstick in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, one of the most famous examples of *film noir*. In this instance, it is the image of the lipstick rolling on the floor that introduces us to Lana

Turner's character, just as the same lipstick rolling from her hand indicates her death at the end of the film. In these three examples, different objects acquire such an emblematic aspect that they can replace a female character when she is absent. The fascination exerted by these objects is a central element of *film noir*, and, as we have already seen, it is a calculated result of the manipulation of the spectator's gaze. It is an immobilizing and often obscure sort of fascination, since it resists interpretation and knowledge (Harris, 2003, p. 4-8).

In his graphic novel *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente* (*Diomedes: the accident trilogy*), Lourenço Mutarelli consistently employs the visual repertory of *film noir* in order to accomplish more or less the same effects. Diomedes, the protagonist of the narrative, appears for the first time in a panel that manages to squeeze in a single image an astounding amount of visual fetishes from *noir* aesthetics: the dark outlines of venetian blinds in the background, a rectangle of light projected by the glass on the door, a cigarette crushed in an ashtray, a glass filled with liquor, and the stark contrast of light and shadow over the room and the character's face (Figure 1).

Figure 1

All these elements – which have been reproduced in film with such insistence that they have become clichés – have the function of referring to the body of *films noirs* as a whole and to associate

Diomedes with this repertory. However, the very profusion of these objects, their almost comical excess, shows that we are dealing with a parody. Indeed, Diomedes shares with his moving-picture colleagues a disillusioned attitude towards society and life in general, not to mention a high moral ambiguity. Nevertheless, he is a failed detective, who has never managed to solve a single case. In this aspect, as Pascoal Farinaccio (2013, p. 248) observes, Diomedes is a typical representative of the kind of character we usually find in Mutarelli's fiction. As the other characters discussed by Farinaccio, Diomedes remains virtually confined in his office, which functions as an expression of his mental state (Farinaccio, 2013, p. 249-50). The panel in which Diomedes is first presented to us is a condensed representation of the crammed space he inhabits, and it generates a claustrophobic effect.

As in *Detour*, the artificiality of the scene is explicitly denounced by the narrative itself. Fate literally knocks at Diomedes' door in the shape of Hermes, who wants to hire the detective to find Enigmo, a magician who had disappeared many years before. There follows a short discussion between the two characters, during which each of them tries to impose on the other his own self-image: Diomedes delivers a performance in which, like Sherlock Holmes, he finds out everything there is to know about Hermes after a brief examination, while Hermes tries to keep the demeanor of a rich heir. He ends up accusing Diomedes of being an ordinary fellow who dreams of solving a great mystery and, in order to do that, had built around himself a *noir* atmosphere, "with blinds, a hat, and a glass on the door…" ("com persianas, chapéu e porta com vidro…") (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 12). However, at the end of "O dobro de cinco" ("The double of five"), the first volume in the trilogy, we find out that Hermes is also a fraud: he is not a rich heir, his real name is not Hermes, and he intended to use stolen money to pay Diomedes and hire Enigmo to perform at his son's birthday party. Although the *noir* apparatus that surrounds Diomedes is an illusion created by the character himself, it is nevertheless reinforced and naturalized by the narrative, which meticulously adheres to the thematic and visual conventions of *film noir*.

Figure 2

At many points, Mutarelli creates sequences which reproduce camera movements typical of the visual grammar of *film noir*. The second volume in the trilogy, "O rei do Ponto" ("The king of Pontus"), opens with the realistic rendition of an overpass (Figure 2). The point of view recedes, the image shrinks and then distorts itself, getting round-shaped. The "camera" recedes even further, and we see that the image is actually

being reflected in an eye. The image keeps receding and we finally perceive that the eye belongs to Diomedes who, sad and alone, stares from his office window. As in *Detour*, there is a transition from a realistic to a subjective perspective. Furthermore, all elements in the scene are overcharged with meaning: the overpass evokes urban decay and the sense of a path leading nowhere; Diomedes' stupefied gaze reveals the burden of his disillusionment; and his lonely figure at the window, with the glass on his door where one can barely read the word "detective" in the background, shows his insignificance after his failed attempt to find Enigmo at the end of "O dobro de cinco". Similarly, when Hermes knocks on Diomedes' door for the first time, the perspective of the picture is distorted so that half of his face is hidden by the enormous eye painted on the door glass, creating a surrealistic image which has as its theme the act of gazing itself. But gazing at what?

The attempt to find Enigmo is explicitly presented as a search for magic. In "O dobro de cinco", Hermes wanted to find Enigmo in order to prove to his son, who was incredulous to a fault, that there was enchantment in the world. Indeed, what we find in the first two parts of *Diomedes* is a degraded and claustrophobic world where there seems to be no room for magic. Much of the action takes place in enclosed spaces, such as cheap hotel rooms, Diomedes' home, and his office. These are also cluttered environments, full of cheap objects and even garbage that imprison the characters. Diomedes' home is stock-full of worthless objects that bespeak of a middle-class existence as mediocre as the detective's dream of making enough money to buy a three seater sofa for his wife. As the narrative develops, Diomedes' office gets increasingly littered with old papers, empty bottles and other detritus that reflect the character's chaotic mental state and his depressive inertia. This is a visual representation – once again condensed and intensified – of what Michal Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea (2013, p. 244-9), using a concept from Hegel, call "the prose of the world", that is, the assemblage of all everyday elements that constitute reality for human beings, and which therefore establish limits for individual action. It is the task of narratives, and particularly of the realist novel, to select, organize, and represent these elements in a significant way. If, on the one hand, the meaninglessness of these elements in their raw state may cause anguish, this indetermination or lack of form can be a liberating force by pointing to the possibility of a broader view, with no predetermined meanings – a resource explored by

novelists who try to incorporate into their work as many details from everyday life as possible. What is dominant in the first two volumes of *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente*, however, is the negative aspect of this "prose of the world": its burden, its senselessness, its chaotic and confining nature.

The objects in Diomedes' office are drawn in a somberly realistic style, and in obsessive detail. The same is true of the degraded urban landscape depicted in the narrative, with its congested streets, cheap hotels, and bridges covered with graffiti where prostitutes hang out. This desolated scenery, however, is overlaid by the visual virtuosity of *noir* aesthetics. In fact, as Eric Dussere notes, realism was always mixed with stylization in *film noir*, whose coarse and disillusioned tone creates the illusion of an unforgiving exposé of urban reality. But this is an authenticity effect obtained by putting into operation a whole series of stylistic conventions, such as expressionistic lighting, dialogues which adhere to a rather specific formula, and images from a more or less fixed repertory, which includes the view of rain-drenched streets or a gun firing in the dark (Dussere, 2006, p. 17). As a consequence, wretchedness is aestheticized and becomes almost poetic or oneiric, as in the image of the half-abandoned circus where Diomedes goes searching for Enigmo.[2] In *film noir*, the careful control of the spectator's gaze creates unusual perspectives in which the banality of everyday life acquires an almost marvelous appearance (Naremore, 1995-6, p. 18).

Transplanted to a graphic novel, the estrangement and fascination produced by *noir* aesthetics become even more intense, since it is possible to condense in a single panel the atmosphere and narrative sense of a whole film scene. That is the case, for instance, of the panel showing Diomedes sitting on the bed in his hotel room, after his fruitless search for Enigmo at the circus (Figure 3). His whole degradation is there, in the litter surrounding him, in the narrowness of that confined space, in his injured face. In the middle of this overload of visual information, our

[2] This aestheticizing of a register that presents itself as realistic is at the origins of *film noir*. Naremore raises the possibility that the *noir* style may have taken its form under the influence of the photographs published in tabloids and of the kind of urban photography that took magazines by storm in the 1940s (Naremore, 2008, p. 280-281). This possible connection with the production of realistic images and their enjoyment as art objects is reproduced in *A trilogia do acidente* itself. In "O rei do Ponto", Diomedes examines with admiration some crime scene photographs, praising their lighting and camera angle, and recognizing in them a work by someone he knows (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 147). Forensic photography, which should be merely a faithful record of reality, proves to be not only a work of art, but also an authorial product.

attention is captured by Diomedes' lopsided gaze, for one of his eyes is swollen shut after he has taken a beating. It is almost another take on the surreal image of Hermes with his face half covered by the eye painted on the door glass. Like the eye on glass, Diomedes' gaze seems to point nowhere, providing a concrete representation of his lack of perspective. This impression is confirmed by the caption on the panel, which points to the impossibility of magic ("If we accept magic as the truth, then it will cease to be").

Figure 3

Here, as in many other moments in *Diomedes*, the activation of *noir* aesthetics points to the character's imprisonment in a meaningless world. Confined in his room, the protagonist still holds in his hands two icons of *film noir*: a gun and a bottle of liquor. These objects, however, seem to offer him little comfort; they simply stress his isolation, his failure, and his inability to control his own destiny. According to Tom Conley (1987, p. 347, 350), confinement and immobility are central

themes of *film noir*, and they find their most obvious representation in one of the visual clichés of this style, the shadows of Venetian blinds projected over the setting and the characters. Conley notes that characters in *films noirs* are often staring through blinds to the emptiness of the world outside, their bodies cut by the shadows that fall over them. The words used by Conley evoke not only the absence of meaning, but also the violence of mutilation. But the shadows projected by Venetian blinds also have other functions both in *film noir* and in *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente*, where they recurrently reemerge. This pattern of shadow and light confers a dream-like atmosphere to the setting, but it is above all a visual metaphor for imprisonment, since it reproduces prison bars.

As we have already seen, the whole *noir* paraphernalia is part of the self-identity Diomedes tries to create and which he never manages to attain satisfactorily. However, if one of the roles of this paraphernalia is to evoke the style from which it is derived, it cannot help but reinforce the themes which it is one of the functions of this style to express. As a consequence, Diomedes becomes a prisoner of the formal conventions of the narrative in which he is the protagonist. It is possible to see this not only in the fact that the *noir* style is essential for the construction of a self-image which Diomedes is unable or unwilling to give up, but also in the way the detective is visually presented throughout the narrative. He is repeatedly displayed behind the bars created by the shadows of Venetian blinds and surrounded by the detritus which accumulates in his office, and which includes cigarette packs, empty bottles, an antiquated telephone, and papers related to old cases, all of them the remains of objects that help fashion the image of the *noir* detective. The presence of all this junk points to the existential anguish which is a central feature of *film noir*, whose characters, according to William Brevda (2006, p. 327-8), ceaselessly reenact their insignificance in the world.[3] It also represents the disenchanted perspective these films supposedly maintain and their commitment to reveal the basest aspects of human life. As the image of a depressed Diomedes in his hotel room shows,

[3] In his article, Brevda maps the connections between *film noir* and French existentialism. Brevda (2006, p. 330) also mentions the theme of imprisonment explored by the *noir* style; he notes that there is no possibility of escape for the characters in *films noirs*, who constantly find themselves rushing towards the very thing they were trying to run away from in the first place.

the detective can only take possession of the scenic elements of *film noir* (in this case, the gun and the bottle of whisky) by turning them into fetishes. In a way, that is precisely what Mutarelli does by appropriating them in *Diomedes*. The very excess of these elements, their often unmotivated appearance, their artificiality, and the manipulation of the reader's gaze turn *noir* aesthetics into an object of desire which holds us in fascination. As Naremore points out, this aesthetics has always attracted the public in general and film directors in particular, so that it ended up becoming a consumer good, being employed even in advertisements (Naremore, 2008, p. 197). This commodification of *noir* could be felt from the origins of this style. It manifests itself in the insistent reproduction of specific visual and narrative elements easily identifiable and easily parodied, as we have seen above. It is as if each *film noir* carried a label indicating that it is part of a larger body of works that attracts a particular public. A film style that addresses desire – desire for money, for an unreachable woman, for escape from a humdrum existence – becomes in itself a glamourized object of desire. But if the glamour of *film noir* can be a mannerism, an effect with no motivation besides its aesthetic and consumer attraction, on the other hand it makes sense precisely as a formal representation of desire itself. This aspect of *noir* as an object of desire is even clearer in its later manifestations. In *Diomedes*, it seems to bind reader, character, and author in a web of fascination with the charm of the style itself.

As I have pointed out above, the fact that the appropriation of elements from *noir* aesthetics is marked by excess in *Diomedes* would be an indication that Mutarelli's graphic novel is a parody of this style. The figure of the detective himself reinforces this parodic trait, not only because of its ridicule, but also because of the character's sense of humor, since he refuses to take himself seriously and quickly shifts from painfully expressing his own despair telling an outrageous joke. However, as it is often the case with parodies, *Diomedes* also has an ambiguous nature, and the fascination with the *noir* style is always present, even as a driving force behind the plot and a significant element in character development. It is also a means to represent some of the central themes of the narrative.

According to Oliver Harris (2003, p. 6), fascination begets perplexity, since it blocks the elaboration of lived experience and the

creation of true knowledge. Therefore, if the world Diomedes inhabits seems devoid of sense, this happens to a high degree because it is organized around an intense use of *noir* aesthetics, which is more engaged in creating a somber but fascinating atmosphere than in developing meaning (Fluck, 2001, 380-1). In *Diomedes*, however, fascination acquires meaning as a sign of – and a motive for – immobility.

To the issue of fascination is added the element of chance – already evoked by the title of the trilogy – as another instance of imprisonment. Diomedes frequently acts on impulses motivated by chance, which proves to be one of the driving forces of the narrative. It is because of such an impulse, for example, that Diomedes kills the lion tamer at the circus where he had been looking for Enigmo. It is by sheer chance that the murders in "O rei do Ponto" are solved, just as it is thanks to a fortuitous encounter with the graphic artist Zigmundo (a pastiche of Mutarelli himself) that the mystery in "A soma de tudo" ("The sum of everything"), the last volume in the trilogy, is solved. But chance finally takes up the contour of inflexible fate. By the end of the narrative, Diomedes has been convinced that his destiny was indeed to find the magician's whereabouts, once more through a series of apparently random events. Each chapter in "O dobro de cinco" is introduced by an illustration of the Wheel of Fortune tarot card, a symbol not only of the accidental changes brought by chance, but also of fate, as the fortune-teller Diomedes visits in the first volume in the trilogy explains to him. It is also the fortune-teller who reveals the meaning of the title of this volume: the double of five is another way of referring to the Wheel of Fortune, which bears the number ten in the tarot deck of cards. This card also represents totality (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 68), so that the title "O dobro de cinco" foreshadows the final volume in the trilogy, "A soma de tudo". Finally, it is Zigmundo who reveals to Diomedes the solution of the case the detective was investigating in "A soma de tudo", acting as a *deus ex machina* who, as an incarnation of the author, represents his direct interference in the graphic novel. After all, the author is the one actually responsible for the invention and organization of all events in the narrative. By letting himself be carried away by chance, which guides his actions and shapes his life, Diomedes is once again imprisoned by the conventions

of *film noir*, whose protagonist is usually a victim of fortuity, which becomes a crucial element in the narrative (Fluck, 2001, p. 402).

Is there no exit, then? Hope is somewhere else, a place which appears to be the opposite of the degraded world constructed by the visual repertory of *film noir*. In "A soma de tudo", Diomedes is hired by Suellen, the wife of a Brazilian millionaire, to travel to Lisbon in order to find her husband, who is supposedly betraying her with a beautiful Portuguese girl. This girl appeared in some photos the millionaire had sent to his wife, together with postal cards and an object that seems to make no sense: the miniature of a caravel, a worthless trinket bought at some tourist shop, and which Dr. Gouveia, the lawyer who had mediated Diomedes' encounter with his new client, calls a "macabre relic" ("relíquia macabra"). This passing allusion to a "relíquia macabra" is interesting, for it establishes a connection with *The Maltese Falcon*, one of the founding examples of *film noir* (*The Maltese Falcon* was translated as *Relíquia macabra* in Brazil). In the film, the relic in question is the gold statuette of a falcon which had disappeared a long time ago, and which all the characters want to find. The statuette is a symbol not only of human greed, but also of the pointless search for an unreachable dream, for when it is finally found, it proves to be only a fraud, a copy made of lead. The caravel in "A soma de tudo" is a degraded and inverted symbol of the Maltese falcon in the film: it is a cheap object, but a powerful dream hides behind it, the mystery of Lisbon, which Suellen's husband was trying to reveal. As Diomedes explains at the end of the story, this mystery was known by virtually all inhabitants of the city, but it was kept as a secret that could not be revealed to any outsider, under penalty of death. It concerned the appearance, in different points of the city, of a very attractive young woman (the same one that appears on the pictures sent by Suellen's husband), who was believed to be the incarnation of the soul of Lisbon.

When Diomedes arrives in the city, Lisbon is portrayed as a luminous, harmonious place. The decadent and claustrophobic urban areas previously depicted in the graphic novel are replaced by a beautiful and uncluttered landscape, which Mutarelli reproduces with loving care, paying an enormous attention to each decorative detail. Little is shown of the modern elements of the city, which seems to be limited to its most ancient and sublime monuments.

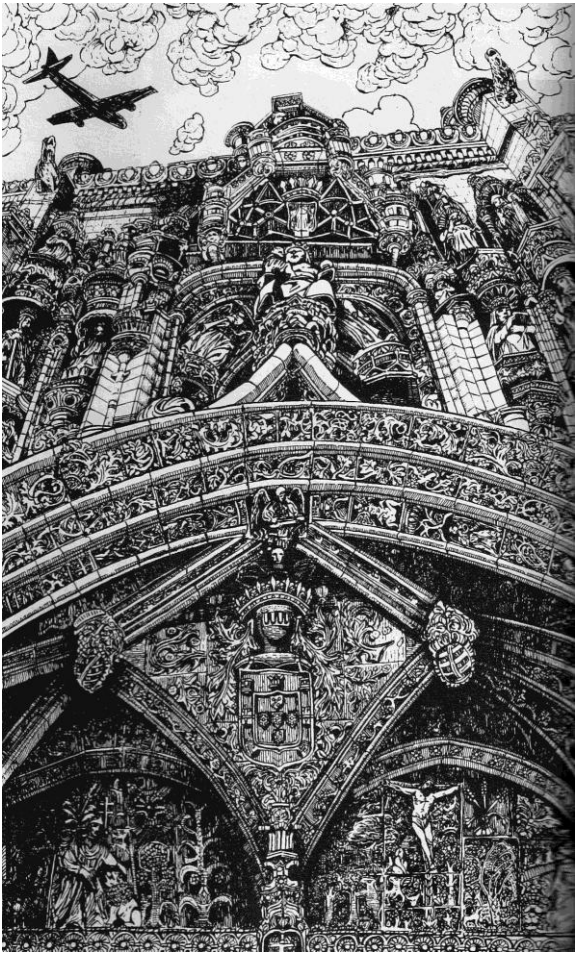

Figure 4

Farinaccio (2013, p. 251) argues that, in distancing themselves from the world, Mutarelli's characters long for the protection of the maternal womb. Lisbon seems to offer a refuge of this sort, a return to origins, a place far away from modernity and almost timeless. It may be possible to see here a version of the ontological detective story that Elana Gomel (1995, p. 346) finds in some science-fiction narratives. The mystery to be

solved in these narratives does not involve a murder, but rather the nature of the world; it is not connected with death but with being itself. As in the visual language of *film noir*, in which each object seems to overflow with meaning, the ontological detective story works on the principle that each detail has a meaning that points to a pattern with the potential to unveil a whole world, bringing it from obscurity to total visibility (Gomel, 1995, p. 346, 348-349). Indeed, in the images of Lisbon displayed in "A soma de tudo", the dense shadows and the distortions that characterized the *noir* world which Diomedes inhabited are replaced by clarity. The obsessively detailed art no longer plays the role of filling the panels with useless objects, creating a suffocating environment; instead, it shows beautiful buildings whose every detail is revealed (Figure 4).

In any way, the contact with Lisbon and with the image of the girl who is its synthesis seems to have a therapeutic effect on Diomedes. He is a little more serene when he returns from Portugal. His disillusionment seems to generate not so much anguish as self-knowledge and a certain resigned acceptance of reality. He tidies up his office, which is an indication of his new psychic order. The space in which he lives clears up. Something also changes in the way he is drawn. Up to this point, Diomedes was a grotesque, disproportionate and excessive figure, whose eyes were two black holes, as if the character were unable to see. In the last chapter of "A soma de tudo", however, he is rendered more realistically, with clear eyes, as if he were finally able to see reality.

For Camille Dumoulié (2007, p. 11), reality seems excessive for those who are unable to face it. This is the condition in which Diomedes seemed to exist while submerged in the garbage in his office and walking on the streets of a city filled with people, cars and billboards. As Dumoulié (2007, p. 11-14) also argues, excess, when seen as an affect, is associated with going out of one's self, with the attempt to find a signifier for something that remains unnamable and indefinite, since it lies beyond any kind of symbolization. The absence of a signifier which could give excess a satisfactory expression brings it closer to Kristeva's notion of the abject (1982, p. 1-15), a state that predates ego formation, and in which subjectivity is diffused in an amorphous whole, with no distinctions between the self and the other. In this state, any effort towards the construction of meaning is impossible. In pointing towards

magic, towards something that remains outside our reality, the secret of Lisbon would also be a kind of excess. In fact, Diomedes seems to be in the best situation to solve this mystery not because this is his destiny, but because he is excessive himself, and often abject. He plays the role of detective, but he is also capable of murdering someone with premeditation, or of abandoning an investigation in order to have sex with a prostitute. Therefore, he displays a deep moral ambiguity, and becomes a blend of the criminal with the champion of justice seeking the truth. Kristeva (1982, p. 4) argues that abjection is connected to a destabilization of rules and distinctions. For her, every crime is abject, for it reveals the fragility of the law; but a premeditated crime or a cunning murder – such as the one Diomedes commits – are particularly abject, for they expose this fragility with a higher intensity. Even Diomedes' humor reveals him as a being who lives on the boundaries between contradictory positions, since it is often associated with bitterness and disillusionment. He sees the girl who embodies the soul of Lisbon for the first time at a moment in which he is particularly abject: he is drunk, his features are distorted, his hat is askew, and he finally drops on the floor (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 296-299). Maybe because of its affinity to excess, abjection seems to be the necessary condition for the detective to have access to the secret. In a similar way, voluntary monstrosity can provide access to non-being, to that which cannot be symbolized (Dumoulié, 2007, p. 19).

However, when it crystalizes in the image of the girl, excess finds, if not a signifier, at least a concrete symbol to represent its presence. Stabilized in a visible form, it seems to be controlled. Its horrors, which were formerly underscored by the absurd disproportion of Diomedes' body, by the creation of surreal perspectives, and by the often forced contrast between light and shadow, are replaced by a sense of harmony. Magic proves to be even more controllable when it is revealed that the image of the girl was actually a trick created by Enigmo. Even so, she still keeps her old power to affect others as an object of desire and aesthetic fruition.

Indeed, something seems to have been left behind at the end of *Diomedes*. The shadows of the Venetian blinds appear once more, but this time they are reduced to the pattern on Diomedes' striped sofa, casually displayed as he crushes his cigarette in an ashtray. We could say, then, that in the last chapter of the third volume in the trilogy,

Diomedes relinquishes the glamorous illusions of *film noir* that composed his self-image in order to finally face reality with maturity. But the reappearance of the pattern of stripes on the sofa charges this mundane object with symbolic meaning, in a play of framing and representation that follows the same mechanism we have already discussed in connection to *noir* aesthetics. The sofa is turned into a symbol of disenchantment. Other elements of visual artificiality or deceptive perspectives keep turning up in this chapter apparently dominated by a plain realism. One example is the short sequence in which Diomedes' face is covered by cigarette smoke as he admits to his disenchantment with himself and with life as a whole. Mist, smoke or blurred images are resources traditionally employed to indicate the manifestation of dreams – and not only in *films noirs*. They play the same role in different points in *Diomedes*, as when the detective dreams of Enigmo in the beginning of "O dobro de cinco" (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 21). For her part, the girl who embodies the soul of Lisbon always materializes in a cloud of smoke (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 294-5, 365-6).

Even the sequences in Lisbon, which are supposed to represent Diomedes' escape from the dead end in which he found himself, depend on the same control of the gaze that I have discussed above. The empty bottles and the garbage are replaced by the Jeronimos Monastery and the Santa Justa Elevator, depicted from below so as to display their overwhelming monumentality. These buildings are shown from a calculated angle, just as the carefully planned takes from *film noir*, which were put together so as to achieve a very precise effect. Our gaze remains attached to objects which are presented with the intensity of a fetish. There is no escape from the spectacle of the façade of the Jeronimos Monastery, which is registered in all its detail in a single panel that fills a whole page, and which acts as the simulacrum of a photograph. Later, in Diomedes' office, when the detective expresses his disenchantment, objects of this kind still appear with the fake casualness in which they are usually displayed in *films noir* – a fake casualness because they seem to be minor details in the corner of the frame, when in fact they are filled with the promise of deeper meanings. That is the case, for instance, of the perpetually turned off lamp which appears by Diomedes' side while he speaks (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 393-394); or of the seedy poster for one of Enigmo's performances which Diomedes dramatically tears off from the wall (this happens in a panel

immediately following the one in which the striped pattern on the sofa is shown and before another panel in which Enigmo's silhouette can still be seen on the wall, as if it were the leftovers from a dream) (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 397).

The girl who embodies the soul of Lisbon can also be seen as a displaced version of the *femme fatale* who appears so frequently in *films noir*, to the point of becoming one of its typical elements. Soon after he sees her for the first time, Diomedes claims he feels something strange, which might be "a tal da paz…" ("what they call peace…") (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 305). The girl is clearly an object of desire; Suellen's husband had steadfastly searched for her, and, as Diomedes points out, she conveys a sensation of calm. Just as the *femme fatale*, however, she is also an object of sexual desire: her tight-fitting and almost transparent dress reveals her body. For Diomedes, she does not seem to belong to this world, and looks rather like a saint. On the other hand, she also seems to be dead (p. 296), which points to the demonic aspect of the *femme fatale*. Her expression is often serene, but sometimes it is angry or cruel. She embodies, therefore, the moral ambiguity of the *femme fatale*, who frequently fluctuates between apparent innocence and perversity. This ambiguity is represented by yet another visual element: although Diomedes declares her dress is white (p. 361), in some panels it seems to be black (p. 365). This simple expedient is also used in some *films noirs*. Lana Turner's character in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* alternates between white and black outfits in order to signal her moral fluctuations between being the victim of an insensitive husband and a cold-blooded murderess. Jane Greer's character wears clothes that look like a nun's habit in the last scenes of *Out of the Past*, but this is precisely the moment in which her greed and her treacherous nature are fully revealed. More importantly, the power of the *femme fatale* comes from the fact that she corresponds to an idealized image created by the protagonist himself, and part of the suspense in *film noir* lies on finding out whether he will resist the power she has over his own imagination (Fluck, 2001, p. 394). The same can be argued about the Lisbon girl, who is also an idealized image of the soul of the city. As the *femme fatale*, she is the projection of a desire, in both a figurative and a literal sense: she is the image projected by an apparatus built by Enigmo inside Saint Geroge's castle. Just as the *femme fatale*, she is nothing more than an

image projected on a screen. The fascination both of them exert, then, is the fascination created by cinema itself.

Moreover, in the last pages of *Diomedes*, we see the protagonist put on his suit and his hat, shut the door to his office, walk down the corridor and address the artist himself, in a sequence that faithfully reproduces the visual grammar of *film noir*. The last panels of the graphic novel show Diomedes' silhouette outlined against the light coming through the door, in a tilted angle that is one of the mannerisms of this style. Finally, this image is gradually reduced, as if it were being shot by a receding camera (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 408).

Despite Diomedes' disenchantment, then, the narrative ends with the reestablishment of the fascination of cinema and, more particularly, of *film noir*. Neither Mutarelli nor his protagonist seems willing to relinquish this fascination. The narrative closes in a circle. At the level of plot, the traditional promise of detective stories is fulfilled, despite all the episodic meanderings of the narrative, for Diomedes does find Enigmo's whereabouts. The notion of inflexible fate is confirmed, even though in order to achieve this, the author must intervene directly in the story, under the guise of his double, the artist Zigmundo. At the level of style, the narrative is even more tightly closed within itself, for there is an emphatic return to *noir* aesthetics. Dream and nightmare are fused, just as reality and imagination. In fact, the two terms in each opposition turn out to be equivalent, and the narrative revolves around itself, caught by the fascination with its own aesthetic model. As it often happens in *films noirs*, we end facing a dead end. There is something harrowing about this. *Diomedes* points to the dangers of fascination, only to surrender to it. It is a narrative on disillusionment which never forsakes enchantment. Even worse, it shows that disillusionment was already an illusion, for it was an integral part of the repertory of *noir*. "A soma de tudo" beckons with a way out from a claustrophobic world, but soon denies this possibility, not because the kind of magic Diomedes was looking for was an imponderable excess that he could never touch, as the character himself argues (Mutarelli, 2012, p. 399-400), and not even because it simply did not exist. On the contrary, it had always existed: it was there from the beginning, in the glamour of the style consistently reasserted throughout the narrative, even at the points in which it seemed to fade.

This is the real trap in *Diomedes*, the one from which there is no escape: the questions this graphic novel raises and the themes it develops prove

to be false, since they are the fruit, above of all, of the conventions of *noir* aesthetics. The excess of meaning of its objects turned into fetishes ends up leading nowhere. In my opinion, this is not a weakness. On the contrary, it is in this point that *Diomedes* reveals its true efficiency. It confronts us with Diomedes' nihilism, but shows this nihilism is an illusion, for it is part of the aesthetics of the narrative. Something is always sliding to the side, something that, like the magic Diomedes desires so much, is always out of our reach. There is a more desirable place, another Lisbon, but this alternate place sends us back to the point of departure. Hugh Manon (2005, p. 37-8) argues that the main task of the *noir* detective is not to confirm the truth, but rather to make sure there is a truth to be confirmed; *noir* revolves around the issue of the enigma, of the disquieting possibility that behind the mystery there is only an absence of meaning, that no matter how hard one looks, it may be impossible to see what happens in reality. *Diomedes* revolves around an enigma of this kind. Just as its protagonist, we find ourselves captured by the conventions of its style. There is no way out, for in a world in which all the markers of reality are aesthetic elements, everything leads back to form, and only form can be perceived with any certainty. Our gaze, just as our desire (including our desire for knowledge), is manipulated and frustrated. But we linger because of the fascination of magic – even though we know it is nothing more than a trick.

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abstract/resumo

The shadow of the world: excess and imprisonment in *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente*, by Lourenço Mutarelli

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The aim of this paper is to examine the way the aesthetics of film *noir* is appropriated by Lourenço Mutarelli in his graphic novel *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente*. Torn between an attempt to represent the real and a strong impulse towards stylization, this aesthetics acts as a structuring element of the narrative, creating a world characterized by excess and degradation, from which apparently there is no way out.

Keywords: film *noir*, contemporary Brazilian literature, graphic novel, Lourenço Mutarelli.

A sombra do mundo: excesso e aprisionamento em *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente*, de Lourenço Mutarelli

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O objetivo deste artigo é examinar a maneira como a estética dos filmes *noir* é apropriada por Lourenço Mutarelli em sua narrativa em quadrinhos *Diomedes: a trilogia do acidente*. Dividida entre a tentativa de representar o real e um forte impulso de estilização, essa estética age como elemento estruturador da narrativa, criando um mundo caracterizado pelo excesso e a degradação, do qual aparentemente não há saída.

Palavras-chave: filme *noir*, literatura brasileira contemporânea, história em quadrinhos, Lourenço Mutarelli.