

**WHY JOÃO CEZAR DE CASTRO ROCHA'S WRITING MATTERS –
NOT ONLY TO ME**

**POR QUE A ESCRITA DE JOÃO CEZAR DE CASTRO ROCHA IMPORTA – NÃO
SOMENTE PARA MIM**

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht¹

ABSTRACT: In his most recent book “*Leituras Desaturizadas: Tempos Precários, Ensaio Provisório*,” João Cezar de Castro Rocha talks about some of the authors and topics that have emerged as most central in his work over the past two decades: about Machado de Assis and about Shakespeare, about cultural journalism and chess, about museums and about the present state of Literary Criticism. But in spite of the innovative perspectives that he wrests from his subject matters, the book is above all a quest for new forms, more precisely a quest and an experiment about new forms of writing through which Literary Criticism and the Humanities at large could, in the future, engage with a new extra-academic readership and thus also make a (perhaps decisive) contribution toward their own institutional and intellectual survival.

KEYWORDS: João Cezar de Castro Rocha; *Leituras Desaturizadas*; Criticism

RESUMO: Em seu livro mais recente, *Leituras Desaturizadas: Tempos Precários, Ensaio Provisório*, João Cezar de Castro Rocha fala sobre alguns dos autores e tópicos que surgiram como mais importantes em sua obra, nas últimas duas décadas: Machado de Assis e Shakespeare, jornalismo cultural e xadrez, museus e o estado atual da Crítica Literária. No entanto, a despeito das perspectivas inovadoras que ele obtém de seus materiais de trabalho, o livro é acima de tudo uma procura de novas formas, mais precisamente uma busca e uma experiência de novas formas de escrita, através das quais a Crítica Literária e as Humanidades em sentido lato poderiam, no futuro, envolver novos leitores não acadêmicos e assim também produzir uma contribuição (talvez decisiva) para sua própria sobrevivência institucional e intelectual.

KEYWORDS: João Cezar de Castro Rocha; *Leituras Desaturizadas*; Criticism

¹ Stanford University, EUA.

In his most recent book *“Leituras Desaurizadas: Tempos Precários, Ensaio Provisórios”* João Cezar de Castro Rocha talks about some of the authors and topics that have emerged as most central in his work over the past two decades: about Machado de Assis and about Shakespeare, about cultural journalism and chess, about museums and about the present state of Literary Criticism (one day I would love to see him write about soccer, with the passion and competence that I know from our – until now – private conversations).

But in spite of the innovative perspectives that he wrests from his subject matters, the book is above all a quest for new forms, more precisely a quest and an experiment about new forms of writing through which Literary Criticism and the Humanities at large could, in the future, engage with a new extra-academic readership and thus also make a (perhaps decisive) contribution toward their own institutional and intellectual survival.

Both the book’s title and Valdir Prigol’s introduction describe this very intention: Prigol identifies some of the discursive techniques and strategies with which João Cezar, as an author, makes the reader become part of his analyses and arguments. At the same time, the title announces how this may take place, if at all, in a historical environment where we seem to have lost all traditional certainties (“tempos precários”), where we no longer believe in the quasi-transcendental status of the cultural objects that we enjoy and respect (“leituras desaurizadas”) and where, for all these reasons, whatever we write or say has a status of being provisional (“ensaios provisórios”).

But perhaps all these concepts are not strong and specific enough (after all, there are rules of authorial modesty) to capture in depth why Castro Rocha’s practice is much more than yet another desperate – and yet in anticipation hopeless – attempt to give some badly needed relevance to our work in the Humanities.

*

João Cezar and I have a long story. I first met him as a graduate student in the early 1990s when I gave a seminar on the early work of Heidegger at UERJ where he made his way through the program in Comparative Literature, earning a living as a professional chess player. A few weeks later, back home at Stanford already, I received a transcription of what I had said that I found clearly superior to my own presentation, with João’s simple question of whether I would give him my permission for publication in the then legendary *Cadernos da Pós* whose editor he was. Given the quality of this text, I hesitated a moment asking myself whether a Yes for publication under my name would do him a favor – and then agreed under the condition that we would have a conversation during my next visit to Rio. This was the beginning of João’s truly brilliant four years as the first South American student in the doctoral program of Comparative Literature at my University, a time that many of my colleagues and even Gerhard Casper, then Stanford’s President, still fondly remember.

Our new student showed us how much we all had to learn not only from the classic texts of South American Literatures but, above all, from the contemporary intellectual life on the Subcontinent. At the same time and in every sense of the word, he was the most generous friend of his peers – and yet always concerned about and grateful for any gesture of generosity that he received.

One day João Cezar indeed asked me what he could do to compensate for what he had received – and my casual answer said that, if he was happy with what I had done for him, he should just do the same for his own students one day. We both have never forgotten this exchange, even through some difficult years of our friendship, and it turned so truly emblematic for me because today I see in João a generosity (about the only “virtue” that I care about) that

is visceral, authentic and, above all, that extends beyond his students to the readers for whom he writes. In other words: there is a beautiful lack of any “strategy” or “pedagogical good will” in João Cezar’s attempts to awaken new interest in our work.

*

But what precisely did I mean when I wrote that we needed a different (“less modest”) description of the present cultural situation where João’s impulse of generosity unfolds its impact? In the first place and referring to the “precarious times” in which we are working, I believe that we have arrived at a dramatic threshold behind which the legacy of Enlightenment that has accompanied Western cultures for a good two centuries as a viable normative horizon seems no longer pertinent in our confrontations with some new political and existential challenges.

It appears no longer sufficient today to quote Kant, Hume, or Rousseau as if they had “solutions” for us – and yet we need to admit that we are not able to replace them. At the same time, and I sense that João Cezar is among the most advanced colleagues in struggling with this second problem (above all throughout his re-thinking of Shakespeare’s work), at the same time it has become evident that the historical world view, as it had shaped our relation to past, present, and future, no longer functions well enough to provide us with experience, orientation, and projects for a future that appears to be full of threats slowly approaching humankind.

Finally – and this may only hold true for the expanding global middle class – the new electronic technologies, together with other changes in our lives, have provided us with a degree of individual choice and freedom that seems to turn into the existential overload of a “universe of contingency” to which we react with a desire to hold on to some certainty that we do not have – but that a new generation of dangerously charismatic leaders are only too happy to offer.

One of the options that I see in our post-Enlightened and post-Historical present, without any safe solutions (let alone “ideologies”), is a rediscovery, both in the everyday and in contemporary thought, of the physical dimensions of human life, a rediscovery standing in contrast and tension to the extreme status of de-materialization and quasi-mathematical rationality that has come over us with the progressive digitalization of life.

At least among intellectuals, we have therefore become eager to concentrate on all those aspects of our existence that cannot be fully redeemed by our mind. What had become, since the rising age of Rationality after 1700, the exceptional aura of “aesthetic experience,” as an experience in which the mind and the body were converging, has now turned more common again – and has thus lost its traditional aura.

Whether we want it or not, we find aesthetic layers in practically all everyday phenomena and situations today, in food, fashion, and sports, in our average behavior, in politics, and in the broad horizons of product design.

For disciplines like Literary Criticism, Art History, and Musicology, this “de-auratization” entails a dissolution of what used to be the borders of their “fields” and also a new uncertainty about their content and status. Even for individual or collective work of high intellectual quality, we can no longer be certain what its institutional position might be – not to speak of its potential “usefulness.”

*

How can we manage – and how can we dare – to reach out, as João Cezar is actively doing, beyond the borders of the academic Humanities in order to engage readers outside our own professional world with true generosity? Such attempts are happening today, as the title of João's most recent book mentions, in a situation where our questions, discourses, and possible claims for answers are more "provisional" ("precários") than ever before because we are increasingly aware how the Humanities and Literary Criticism have lost their traditional status and prestige within the public sphere.

But surprisingly and as if confirming a statement by Friedrich Hölderlin, Hegel's friend and perhaps the most towering presence in the history of German poetry, surprisingly and confirming Hölderlin's intuition that in the "most threatening moments of our existence visions of rescue will appear," we can see two dimensions of a new interest in our intellectual work arising.

If in the electronic age and its ever accelerating rhythms of news distribution, the function of the print media, including daily newspapers and magazines, can no longer be to "inform" and "keep us posted," then opinion pieces and cultural sections, that is texts of contemplation and reflection, must have acquired a more central status and a fresh interest.

But we also see, at least in the college programs of some major American universities, that students majoring in fields of the "hard Sciences," in Business, Law, Medicine, and electronic engineering now all of a sudden like to add to the profile of their studies secondary concentrations in different fields of the Humanities, above all in Philosophy and Comparative Literature. They do so, we hear, not out of a desire for "compensation" and "light entertainment" but because they are convinced that a participation and competence in our so very different intellectual style will make them more competent and more efficient in their future professional practice. In other words: simultaneously to our worries about an institutional vanishing of the Humanities, a new and largely unexpected fascination for what we are doing begins to shape up.

*

Nobody has recipes based on which we might react to this new interest coming toward us from outside the Humanities but I certainly do not know of any colleague who has gone further in this reaction than João Cezar de Castro Rocha with the authentic generosity of his discursive experiments.

Let me thus emphasize in concluding that his "Leituras Desaturizadas" are much more about the very process of thought, reflection, and active (secular) contemplation than about possible results. Many – if not most – of his positions remain profoundly (and deliberately) ambiguous, after exposing himself to the sheer complexity of certain phenomena in question, because he has understood how the very absence of an obligation to reach well-shaped and definitive conclusions belongs to the rare privileges of the Humanities.

Particularly interesting, moving, and timely in this sense are his pages on the *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes* in Rio de Janeiro which, far from being uncritical, refuse to formulate a final negative verdict on the dated patriotism that used to permeate its exhibits. I enjoyed a structurally similar ambiguity between the friendly irony with which João Cezar comments the stubborn refusal of Garry Kasparov, "the greatest chess player of all times," to acknowledge his defeat against a computer program, and João Cezar's own melancholia about this defeat.

Even the probably greatest achievement to date of his intellectual work, the attempt at a mutual positioning between the world of Shakespeare's dramas and the legacy of South American cultures, condensed in exactly one hundred pages of "Leituras Desaturizadas," belongs to the intellectual gesture and style that privileges process over results. As readers we become part of that mutual positioning as a potentially endless genealogy, rather than being assigned to ethically and even ideologically "safe place."

Late in my own intellectual trajectory or, to be more precise, after the end of its institutional articulation due to retirement, João Cezar has convinced me that the generosity of initiating intellectual movements and reactions resonance without knowing where they will lead us is the one option for the Humanities at large and for Literary Criticism in specific to pursue in their both precarious and inevitably provisional present. And this is why João Cezar's writing so matters – not only to me.

Works Cited

ROCHA, João Cezar de Castro. *Leituras Desaturizadas: Tempos Precários, Ensaio Provisórios*. Chapecó/Recife: Argos/Editora da Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 2017.

Submetido em 05/01/2019

Aceito em 20/04/2019