

Karl Erik Schøllhammer. *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction*. Trans. Marco Alexandre de Oliveira. London: Anthem Press, 2020. 132 pp.

What is contemporary Brazilian literature? And why should we care about contemporary Brazilian literature? These are two of the main – though not the only – questions that organize *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction*, Karl Erik Schøllhammer's sophisticated and timely discussion of present-day Brazilian literary expression.

Schøllhammer, a Full Professor (professor titular) at the Department of Language and Literature at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica in Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), has an extensive critical oeuvre that touches upon some of the main themes in contemporary Brazilian literature. His publications encompass topics such as memory studies (*Literatura e Memória* 2006), the interface between literature and media (*Literatura e Mídia* 2002) and how literature engages violence (*Linguagens da Violência* 2000). Schøllhammer's works on contemporary Brazilian literature, such for example his books *Cenários Contemporâneos da Escrita* (2013) and *Ficção Brasileira Contemporânea* (2009, 2011), are must-reads for any scholar working on present-day Brazilian literature. To this list, one must add Schøllhammer's most recent publication, *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction*.

Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction is both a synthesis and an expansion of Schøllhammer's inquiries into Brazilian literature. While the book touches upon some of the themes that Schøllhammer developed in texts such as *Literatura e Realidade(s)* (2010), it also explores new lines of inquiry. Specifically, the author probes into the role that affect plays in Brazilian fictions nowadays. In conjunction with this examination, Schøllhammer also investigates how contemporary Brazilian fiction is poised at the intersection between referentiality – be it individual or that of a collectivity – and formal innovation. Though

these two analytical strands at times develop separately, as in Chapter 2 (“Realisms in Question: From Realism to Post-Realism”), which reveals the debt that contemporary Brazilian literature owes to modernism, they also come together to answer the question that haunts many literary critics: What is the importance of literature?

Like any thorough and well-grounded study, *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction* begins by clearly defining the terms that will guide the discussion in the book. As such, Chapter 1 specifies the meaning of “contemporary,” an exercise that, unfortunately, is not often undertaken by scholars who work with so-called contemporary literature. Schøllhammer eschews the facile definition that comes with chronological periodization. Instead, he opts to conceptualize the contemporary vis-à-vis two main themes that feature prominently in recent Brazilian literature: historical time and the presence of lived (authorial) experience within the text. Much like most of the other chapters in the book, these three investigative axes converge to answer the question of how literature might be relevant for our experience of the social world. Though Schøllhammer maintains a well-founded critical distance from the idea that literature can directly affect referential reality or, conversely, that fiction unproblematically reflects referential reality, the author nevertheless recognizes that the writings of certain authors (Schøllhammer cites Fernando Bonassi, Marcelino Freire and Luiz Ruffato) communicate the “desire to speak about and with the real as a way of achieving an effect of critical presence that supposes the revival of historical projects aimed at social commitment and intervention” (4). Schøllhammer illustrates this imperative through his analysis of two novels. Paulo Lins’ *City of God* and Paulo Scott’s *Nowhere People* (*Habitante Irreal*). Whereas the first text is a patent example of the “desire to speak about and with the real,” the second novel is a much less obvious choice. Schøllhammer’s dissection of Scott’s text is, therefore, a delicate and profoundly intelligent analytical exercise, one that whets our appetite for what is to come in the following chapters. If there is a weak spot in this book, it is that Schøllhammer’s analysis of the literary texts themselves leaves us wanting for more. But not because they are incomplete. Instead, the author’s reflections about individual novels are deeply insightful without getting bogged down by particulars (which would go beyond the book’s scope).

Reality, more precisely, the interface between contemporary fiction and historical realism, between representational realism and anti-representational realism, is the topic of the book's second and third chapters. Schøllhammer deftly introduces us to some of the main theories of realism, providing the reader with an informative overview of the ideas by renowned literary theoreticians such as Erich Auerbach, Hal Foster and Jacques Rancière, among others. He then exemplifies how certain contemporary works (in particular, the texts by *mineiro* author Luiz Ruffato) constitute an example of what Schøllhammer calls "anti-representational realism." For the author, this mode underscores the "the traumatic, the indexical, the affective in attention to the performance of the real" (viii). Schøllhammer contends that while this emphasis turns away from the "strictly mimetic" (28), it nonetheless allows for greater veracity of the text since the affective and indexical have a more profound effect on the reader.

Schøllhammer's attention to the affective dimension of literary texts – and his definition of the affective as that which generates a sensible impact on the reader, something that lies in the realm of the sensory, that precedes emotion – is truly innovative. Though "afeto" has gained a certain popularity in literary scholarship, the word nonetheless can be rather spongy, assuming many meanings without truly conveying a particular idea. Not so in *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction*. Schøllhammer takes the trouble to clearly explain what the concept signifies and its relevance for contemporary Brazilian fiction. Indeed, Chapter 7 provides one of the most powerful definitions of the affective that I have come across recently.

One of the many strengths of *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction* lies in how the author can share his vast erudition with the reader. Of course, one will read this book to learn about contemporary Brazilian literature. But the text is so much more than a compendium of recent Brazilian fiction. Schøllhammer manages to adroitly weave together many analytical strands that range from the tension between aesthetics and anti-aesthetics (Chapter 7) and Brazil's insertion in the global literary market (Chapters 4 and 6). *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction* is, therefore, a tutorial (*aula*) in Brazilian literary history and in literary theory ranging from the classics (Auerbach, Lukács, Foster) to more recent scholars (Rancière, Agamben, Žižek, Ludmer). Schøllhammer has an enviable talent to explain

complex concepts in straightforward and clear language without watering these concepts down. This is to say: he respects the reader's intellect. Marco Alexandre de Oliveira's apt translation from the Portuguese conveys this skill and consideration. In this manner, *Affect and Realism in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction* educates us about Brazilian fiction and literary theory and instructs us on how to write generously and affect (pun intended) through literary scholarship.

Leila M. Lehen

Brown University