

Dossiê

A arte como transfiguração da realidade

The art of storytelling and the duty of the storyteller:

Paula Rego and Martin McDonagh, a visual and literary dialogue

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Abstract: Martin McDonagh's play *The Pillowman* (2003) has directly influenced Paula Rego's compositions that bear the same name (2004-05). I propose to look at the work of both artists in the light of a shared conviction: the belief that "the first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story". There lies the right of the storyteller. And the freedom of the artist is to reject becoming a "legislator of mankind"

and to elude censorship through strategies that involve the ambivalence of the absurd, as well as transgression. Rego claims that the overpowering presence of the world of instincts, the grotesque and the abject in her work, are "naturally" there, as something moving and palpitating at the heart of the very reality she depicts.

Keywords: Storyteller, absurd, grotesque, transgression, censorship.

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A arte do contador de histórias e o dever do contador de histórias: Paula Rego e Martin McDonagh, um diálogo visual e literário.

Paula Rego criou em 2004-05 um conjunto de composições (pastel e litografias) inspiradas na peça de Martin McDonagh *The Pillowman* (2003), à luz de um princípio partilhado por ambos: “o dever do(a) contador(a) de histórias é contar uma história”. Este pretensamente inocente axioma

assenta no princípio da rejeição da função social do artista enquanto “legislador” da Humanidade, face à sua liberdade e ao seu direito de iludir a censura e rejeitar o autoritarismo. Daí o recurso estratégico ao grotesco, ao absurdo e à transgressão, que tanto a artista como o dramaturgo privilegiam declaradamente na sua estética.

Palavras-chave: Contador(a) de histórias, absurdo, grotesco, transgressão, censura.

My painting is like an interior story
(Paula Rego, cited in Lacerda, p. 3)

The first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story
(Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, p. 7)

Is fiction (and art) an imitation of reality or is it the opposite? And how does fiction/art affect (if at all) reality?⁽¹⁾

The play *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh (2003), first presented at the Cottesloe, *The National Theatre* London, in November 2003, directed by John Crowley, is an allegorical parable of the “dangerous” power of literature – a semi-burlesque, grotesque, Kafkaesque, or any other form of “esque” play, as its protagonist ironically claims (p. 18). The Portuguese version of

1. I am indebted to the comments and suggestions I received by many colleagues while working on this essay. I want particularly to thank Professor Claus Clüver who kindly read an earlier version and offered me thoughtful questions and essential insight which I incorporated in the present version. I also want to thank Professor Noël Carroll (2011) for discussing the play with me and sending me his own essay: Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* or the Justification of Literature, *Philosophy and Literature* 35 (1), 168-181. As always, I am extremely grateful to Paula Rego's family to allow me the reproduction of the artist's works included in this essay. I particularly wish to thank her son, Nick Willing. An earlier version of this essay in Portuguese was published in my volume on Rego. See Macedo, A. G. (2010). *Paula Rego e o Poder da Visão: A minha pintura é como uma história interior* (pp. 130-144). Cotovia.

the play, *O Homem Almofoada*, was translated and directed by Tiago Guedes, and it had its *première* at *Teatro Maria Matos*, in Lisbon, in September 2006; the following year, in September 2007, the play was performed at *Teatro São João*, Porto.⁽²⁾ This was Tiago Guedes' first incursion in the theatre as director, being primarily a film director, while inversely Martin McDonagh already had a firm career as playwright before he launched himself into film.

The Pillowman has a complex and somewhat paradoxical plot which deliberately I will not attempt to summarize, since the sequence of stories that compose its narrative thread permanently challenge each other and elude any conclusions. Rather than attempting (in vain possibly), to disclose all the "puzzles" of the play (a word used by the protagonist), I will just suggest that it revolves around the character of a writer, Katurian, whom we first encounter at a "police interrogation room", charged for crimes he claims he has not committed, but which he vaguely understands are related with the supposed "children stories" he has written, which would be more aptly described as mock or anti-fairy tales, such is the vision of childhood that pervades them. In fact, most of the tales are horror stories full of abject details, which the reader comes to know in a dismal scenery that inverts the traditional idyllic situation of fairy tale readings, as these are read aloud to us by the police agents during the writer's interrogation process. And why is Katurian, the writer, incarcerated? Here lies possibly the most important narrative twist of the play, deeply imbricated in the metaphorization of horror and fear of each of the tales, and expanding to the whole allegorical dimension of the play as a political narrative. In all their matter-of-fact pragmatism, the police are, clear and bluntly, after what they call "the real meaning of these stories and the writer's motivation" (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 14-15), which they assume can only be political, since in "real life", real crimes have been perpetrated modelled after these narratives. Later in the

2. The play received wide critical interest in Portugal. A review by Helena Simões (2006) underlines the coherence of the dramatisation achieved through the representation of the detached cruelty which produces an effect of impersonality where the materiality of the body of the actor is subdued under the rhythm of the fictional representation. As an example of these theatrical effects, the author signals the use of an animation, the screening of the story "The Girl who wanted to be Jesus", which contributes to make the link from the fiction to the imaginary of the writer as character present in the space of the performance. According to Simões (2006), the performance emphasises a mixed register of "authenticity and theatricality" (the play between fiction/reality pervading the text), and it shows that the body of the actor is able to penetrate the spirit of the text and make it "speak" beyond words or concepts (p. 34).

play we hear, through yet another shocking revelation of the writer's ulterior motivation, told in the form of a personal story in Katurian's own voice, a flashback of his childhood memories – that his horror vein is rooted in his childhood, while listening to his brother being tortured by his own parents in the room next to his, as part of their perverse “educational” plan to boost his already lively imagination and thus make him into a writer.⁽³⁾

Paradoxically, if literature engenders real crimes rather than imaginary/fictional victims created by the writer's imagination, then, one could only infer that literature is *truly* powerful. Here lies the sombre allegorical pun of this play, anchored in its somehow amoral morality. Despite the gore content of his stories and the possibility of their having caused “real” crimes, Katurian, surrogate author, actor and main protagonist of the play, is tragically decided to sacrifice his own life and that of his mentally handicapped brother to save his stories from being destroyed, since, as he repeatedly claims throughout his narrative, “the first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story” (McDonagh, 2003, p. 7). Hence, as theatre critic Michael Billington (2003) writes in a review of the play,⁽⁴⁾ it is not so much the personal experience of Katurian that is at the core of these mock-gothic tales but, more precisely, the “dangerous power of literature”. And he adds: “Martin McDonagh is playing with big issues to do with literature's power to outlast tyranny, rather than writing from his experience” (Billington, 2003).

Likewise, as Paul Taylor (2003) argues, the play is “a pitch black comedy” which raises profound questions: “Can art corrupt and cause damage? Is it parasitic on suffering and does its survival count for more than human life (including the artist's own?) [...] How better to frame a writer suspected of dissidence than by reducing the relationship between art and the world to the crudest model of cause and effect?” (n.d.).

The play has also been called an “imaginative *grand guignol* in a scary police state”. The critic, Michael Coveney (2003), asks: “Should writers

3. In the Portuguese stage version of the play, the director Tiago Guedes chooses to offer this biopic tale to the audience at the end of the performance, in a naïf manuscript version, as if written by a child, to raise spirits from the dense atmosphere of the play, he adds. (I interviewed Tiago Guedes by phone on the 6 October 2007).

4. The reviews here quoted were accessed through internet from *NewsBank, inc. UK and Ireland newspapers* (pages not identified in most cases). It proved not just critically useful but also sociologically revealing to read through the reviews of the play in the daily and weekly newspapers following its *première* in London.

be brought to task for dealing in violence, child abuse and blasphemy? Tupolsky [who calls himself the “bad cop” in the play] has one answer: it sends a good signal” (pp. 17-18). Indeed, most of the reviewers and critics of the play called attention to its extravagant imagination, its bizarre and often disturbing moral content.⁵⁾

A second kernel of this play which works as an extended allegory – taking Katurian as a postmodern variation of Scheherazade, relentlessly telling his stories, not so much to postpone the moment of his impending death, but to save his stories from being destroyed, has to do with extreme forms of both denouncing and challenging censorship. Katurian’s defence of his tales with his own death, despite their abject or objectionable content, is simultaneously unsettling and moving. His Borgesian(-esque) labyrinthine tales of primeval fears and childhood nightmares are in themselves dramatizations of the power of storytelling, mirror images of the traditional gore, therefore inscribing themselves in a tradition of children’s narratives, although challenging and subverting it to an almost intolerable degree. As Victoria Segal (2003) sums up in a sharp review of the play, “unsentimental as the best fairy tale, making jokes about the unthinkable. It is an attraction-repulsion dynamic [...] a brash delight in saying the unsayable” (n.d.), she argues.

The responsibility of the writer for the tales he engenders and the art he creates and therefore the moral duty of the storyteller, are the crucial issues in the play. In a syncopated language and a dizzying rhythm that combines the succession of brash dialogue between Katurian and his two jailers, and the epiphany moment of storytelling which functions as a metanarrative and a suspended (fictional) time in the global time of the dramatization, the play relentlessly asks disturbing questions on the concept and the value of authorship and creativity in everyday world. On the one hand, where does the authority of the writer lie, what are its limits and what is the borderline between freedom of speech, immorality and therefore censorship; on the other hand, what about the authenticity of literature and its moral duty: should the artist be a legislator of mankind? And finally, what is the nature

5. An essay by Nicholas Addison (2006), focuses almost exclusively on the issue of sexuality in the play and in Rego’s pictorial vision of it. Despite the undeniable importance of sex and sexuality in the play as well as in Rego’s triptych, we believe that these should not overshadow other equally central issues in both works, such as the play of domination, the political games of power and subversion of hierarchies, which writer and painter relentlessly examine and challenge.

of the fiction-effects the writer creates in the “pseudo-real” world of literature, or otherwise, what is (if any) the social impact of literature, which is equivalent to ask, what is the power of literature?⁶⁾

“Detective Tupolski”, as he pompously likes to call himself, voices these concerns explicitly in the play, when he explains to Katurian why he is blindfolded in a police interrogation cell, accused of some dismal crimes he repeatedly claims to know nothing about (“I’ve never done any anti-police thing, I’ve never done any anti-state thing” (McDonagh, 2003, p. 5): “Why would there be a linkage, your stories, you being taken here? It isn’t a crime, you write a story”, Tupolski says. “That’s what I thought”, replies Katurian. “Given certain restrictions...” Tupolski adds: “The security of the state, the security of the general whatever-you-call-it. I wouldn’t even call them restrictions.” “I wouldn’t call them restrictions”, seconds Katurian. “I would call them guidelines”, says Tupolski. “Guidelines, yes”, repeats Katurian (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 6-7).

To die for his stories... the perversion of censorship consists in taking the storyteller literally, in seeing literature/art as an illustration of reality, and therefore forcing the writer/artist to confess (and die for) a crime he has not committed – an issue which the story “The Three Gibbet Crossroads” splendidly allegorises (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 17-18). There are three criminals each in an iron gibbet: one has got “murderer” written outside on a placard, another “rapist”; the third, left to starve to death in his iron gibbet, knows he is guilty, but does not remember the crime he has committed. When a highwayman comes along and looks at the three criminals, he ignores the rapist, sets the murderer free and, without a word, “raises his gun and shoots him [the third criminal] through the heart” (McDonagh, 2003, p. 18), for the nature of his crime was unnameable.

“What are you trying to tell us in this story?” asks Tupolski the writer. “I’m not trying to tell you anything. It’s supposed to be just a puzzle without a solution”, answers Katurian to the infuriated cop. And he adds in a candid, matter of fact manner, which camouflages the pervading irony

6. See Martha Lavey’s (2006-2007) (critic and theatre director) insightful review of *The Pillowman*, in the American theatre journal *Backstage*: “He (MM) addresses, through the vehicle of his playwriting, the concerns that his playwriting invokes: what is the responsibility of the playwright? How does an individual’s imagination – how does the artist? – articulate with the common good? Is that parameter legislatable? Should it be?” (n.d.).

that characterizes the whole tone of the play: “That’s something-esque. What kind of ‘esque’ is it? I can’t remember. I don’t really go in for that ‘esque’ sort of stuff anyway, but there’s nothing wrong with that story. Is there?” And Tupolski replies: “No, there’s nothing wrong with that story. There’s nothing in that story you would say the person who wrote this story is a sick fucking scummy cunt. No. All this story is to me, this story is a pointer” (McDonagh, 2003, p. 18).

Such is the censor’s perplexity before *the duty of the storyteller* – to “tell stories”, however grim they might be, and consequently to hold *responsibility for them*. A true dilemma? An absurd quest? An answerless, unfathomable perplexity? I propose that we keep these questions in mind, throughout our debate on the leitmotifs of the play.

In this respect, one could argue *The Pillowman* is beyond doubt a *Borgesian-esque* tale, akin to Jorge Luis Borges’ tale “The Secret Miracle” (1981),⁽⁷⁾ where a Jewish writer from Prague, Jaromir Hladik, is arrested by the Gestapo and condemned for a crime he claims he knows nothing about; however, unable to refute any single charge, he cannot escape his death sentence (pp. 118-124). Like the *Pillowman*, this is a self-referential, palimpsestic narrative, in which the writer’s moral quest is grounded in the responsibility to his oeuvre alone, no moral duty or social aim involved. As Michel Foucault argues in the essay “Language to Infinity” (1986), where he closely interprets Borges’s tale, to write is always a way to “postpone death”, since language is a labyrinth, a continuous play with mirrors where “doubles reverberate”.⁽⁸⁾ It is the creation of literature (its “irreality”, claims Borges) that justifies the writer, and not the “effects” (moral or otherwise) of his writing. The protagonist of Borges’s tale, Jaromir Hladik, only asks God to grant him the time to finish his last work: “to finish this drama which can justify me and justify you, I need another year. Grant me these days. You to whom the centuries and time belong” (Borges, 1981, p. 122). Hladik as well as Katurian are arrested for a reason unknown to them, (is it because he is a

7. This tale is a brilliant analysis of the value of literature and its immateriality, and at the same time an allegory of the function and social authority of the writer.

8. “Writing so as not to die, as Blanchot said, or perhaps even speaking so as not to die is a task undoubtedly as old as the word. [...] We know that discourse has the power to arrest the flight of an arrow in a recess of time, in the space proper to it” (Foucault, 1986, p. 53).

Vide also in this context Foucault’s (1986). A Preface to Transgression. In, *Language, counter-memory, practice* (D. Bouchard Ed.): Cornell U.

Jew? wonders Hladik, as Katurian asks himself exactly the same question).⁹ Both fight for the preservation of their work, rather than the preservation of their lives, and neither of them fights his destiny. Hladik is sentenced to death “*pour encourager les autres*” (Borges, 1981, p. 119, *sic*), as a sort of irrefutable paradox. As for Katurian, he repeats Tupolski’s phrase, “‘The first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story’, and I believe in that wholeheartedly [...]. ... that’s what I do, I tell stories. No axe to grind, no anything to grind. No social anything whatsoever. And that’s why, I can’t see if that’s why you’ve brought me in here, [...] unless something political came in by accident, or something that *seemed* political came in, in which case show me where it is. Show me where the bastard is. I’ll take it straight out. Fucking burn it. You know?” (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 7-8).

Having reached this far, it does not seem rhetorical to claim that we are confronting a moral tale on the infectious power of literature. Duality and ambivalence pervade this multilayered narrative contaminating it with ethical questionings: the double writer/actor Katurian, tellingly called *Katurian Katurian*; the clownesque double “bad cop”/“good cop” (Tupolski/Ariel); Michal (Katurian’s “inferior brother”), the real perpetrator of the crimes that Katurian (his twin soul) fictionally created and for which he is being charged with murder. An endless labyrinth of inverted mirror images, out of which no final conclusions can be drawn: “It isn’t a crime, you write a story”, says Tupolski; “That’s what I thought”, replies Katurian; “Given certain restrictions...” , backfires Tupolski (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 6-7). “I’m not trying to say anything...” , says Katurian. (McDonagh, 2003, p. 12) “You can draw your own conclusions”, he claims (McDonagh, 2003, p. 11). As the stories follow each other it becomes clear that Katurian, the writer whose place of work is the Kamenice abattoir, is in jail not for any concrete political crime but, like Jaromir Hladik, for the reverberation of his words – that is, “*pour encourager les autres*”.

Notwithstanding, Tupolski, the “bad cop”, is clear about his own motivation: “We like executing writers. Dimwits we can execute any day. And we do. But you execute a writer, it sends out a signal, y’ know? I don’t know which signal it sends out, that’s not really my area, but it sends out a signal. No, I’ve

9. “He (Hladik) was unable to refute a single one of the Gestapo’s charges; his mother’s family name as Jaroslavski, he was of Jewish blood, his study on Böhme had a marked Jewish emphasis, his signature had been one more on the protest against the *Anschluss*” (Borges, 1981, pp. 118-119).

got it. I know what signal it sends out. It sends out the signal: DON'T... GO... AROUND... KILLING... LITTLE... FUCKING... KIDS" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 30).

The narrative becomes more evidently self-referential in Act II when Michal starts confronting his brother Katurian, as responsible for the horror tales he (Michal) enacted: "All the things I did to all the kids I got from stories you wrote and read to me. [...] It was all your fault. Well, mostly your fault" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 51). Although the succession of ambivalent situations creates comic scenes even when the atmosphere is densely tragic – the murdered children, Katurian and Michal's impending death sentences –, Katurian claims in a moment of *pathos*: "If they came to me right now and said, 'We're going to burn two out of three of you – you, your brother, or your stories', I'd have them burn you first, I'd have them burn me second, and I'd have it be the stories they saved" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 53). Offering a new twist to the narrative, Michal unsuspectingly counter-argues Katurian's "insane" statement: "I think it is us you should be worrying about, Katurian, not your stories. [...] They're just paper" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 53). And further on Michal, like any little child before going to sleep, begs his brother, "Tell me a story. [...] And then I'll forgive you" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 63). He wants "The Little Green Pig", the story of a pig who was "different from all the other pigs, because he was bright green. Like, almost glow-in-the-dark green", he adds (McDonagh, 2003, p. 64); a story about the joys of being "a little bit different, a little bit peculiar" (McDonagh, 2003, p. 65), amongst the anonymous multitude of pink pigs.

PAULA REGO'S SERIES *THE PILLOWMAN* – A "VISUAL DRAMA"⁽¹⁰⁾

I propose to discuss now a visual correlate of *The Pillowman*, the composition created by Paula Rego in 2004, which is directly inspired in the play and bears the same name, allowing the artist to evoke her own visual memories and childhood reminiscences. It all started "by accident", the artist claims in interview in her usual matter of fact way (Macedo, 2010, pp.

10. Paula Rego (2006), see catalogue of the exhibition which took place between 11 October – 18 November 2006.

43-49),⁽¹¹⁾ Rego saw McDonagh's play, recommended to her by one of her daughters, and liked it so much she decided to make her own *Pillowman*. "I thought it was wonderful! I understood it all so well, it was extraordinary! I asked his agency if I could use the title *The Pillowman* for a work of mine, and they said 'No problem!' [...] "It started to involve me more and more. He started to look like my father. I bought him a striped shirt and sat him on the chair where my father used to seat. The beach on the background is Estoril, on the coast of Lisbon. He is dying of prostatic cancer"⁽¹²⁾ (Macedo, 2010, pp. 43-49). [Fig I] "I only saw him (MM) three times", she adds. "He came to my exhibition (at Tate Britain in October 2004), liked it very much and then sent me a book with his stories", (amongst which is the one which inspired her *Shakespeare Room* [pastel, 2005 and lithograph, 2006, Fig II]) (Macedo, 2010, p. 140).

McDonagh went to Rego's studio to see the puppets she makes, some of *papier maché*, others of cloth, and which then she dresses up and uses as models in her paintings,⁽¹³⁾ and he brought her more stories, she claims.

According to Rego, *The Shakespeare Room* was not a published story but an exercise McDonagh gave the actors, "a true story about a scientific experiment with little monkeys: can anyone become Shakespeare when locked in a room with a typewriter and nothing else to do?..."⁽¹⁴⁾ The pastel composition and later the lithograph in a triptych bearing the same name, stand as a symbolic parody of both maternity and female creativity. Given Rego's personal history, her late maturity as an artist, her family story, but also her healthy resilience and vital irony, the composition offers the viewer the tension generated by this often insurmountable schism experienced by many women artists.

The pastels and lithographs in this series were all inspired by McDonagh, the artist claims. However, *The Fisherman* is rooted in a family story, it's the "Holy Trinity" (father-daughter-Holy Spirit), the artist claims,

11. As reported by the artist in an interview she gave me on the 26th February 2007.

12. Extracts of two interviews I had with Paula Rego at the Marlborough Gallery on the 2nd November 2006 and in her studio in London on 26th February 2007.

13. For a very insightful essay on this topic, see Miller (2006).

14. As reported by the artist in the interview previously referred, 26 February 2007. The "Shakespeare Room" is also clearly an allegorical parody of maternity and creativity.

which scenery is the Estoril beach, on the coast near Lisbon. The image represents a crossing between an evocation of Rego's past, her childhood memories of Portugal, her loving complicity with her father, and the dark imaginary she shared with McDonagh's *Pillowman*, as herself the creator of oneiric narratives centred on the universe of children (see notably her early series of illustrations *Nursery Rhymes* [1994], imprinted with a strong Freudian edge) (Rego, 1994).

But the stories are not a sheer "illustration of reality", in the same way as Rego's images aren't either. Both artists refuse that mimetic representation. "It isn't a crime, you write a story" says the detective to Katurian in McDonagh's play (2003, p. 6), but suddenly it becomes so, and the writer is forced to confess to crimes he has not committed, but which nevertheless his stories "seem" to illustrate. The perversion of censorship consists in the creation of an impasse, a *cul de sac*, that coerces the writer into a false confession. The symbolic message is thus made clear: literature, and art in general, however abject or absurd it may be imputed to be, rather than legitimate power, questions it; the highest form of perversion lies not that in the artist who tells perverse stories, but in the traps of censorship itself, as truth masqueraded.

As Katurian sardonically remarks: "A great man once said, 'The first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story'. Or was it 'The *only* duty of a storyteller is to tell a story?' [...] I can't remember, but anyway, that's what I do, I tell stories. No axe to grind, no anything to grind. No social anything whatsoever. And that's why I can't see why you've brought me in here, I can't see what the reason would be, unless something political came in by accident, or something that *seemed* political came in, in which case show me where it is" (McDonagh, 2003, pp. 7-8).

On her turn Rego, an artist who acknowledges to revisit literature – novels, fairy tales, folk tales, legends or myths – as well as the often cruder version of reality transcribed in daily newspapers as a continuous source of inspiration for her disquieting work, claims a concise view of her own *art poétique*:

The stories go with the picture... I mean *the stories make the picture*. You do it with images. To know what images to put in there, you have some sort of story [...]. A composition is a visual equivalent to *emotions*. If I were an

abstract artist I wouldn't need to have figures in there. The figures, though, not only make a whole scene by their movement, they also bring their own stories (Rego, 2001).⁽¹⁵⁾

The artist often comments on her own paintings, as she did in relation to the series *Father Amaro* (1997), drawn on the late 19th century Portuguese master of realism, Eça de Queiroz, claiming, “Visual things, formal elements, make what I call a story” (Rego, 1999); as she did in relation to *Celestina's House* (2000-01), which visually elaborates on the popular female image of the procuress (inspired by two Renaissance Iberian authors, Fernando de Rojas and Gil Vicente), or in her composition *Wide Sargasso Sea* (2000), inspired by Jean Rhys's eponymous novel, as in the series *Jane Eyre* (2003), a visual evocation which challengingly intertwines Brontë's Victorian novel and its contemporary dramaturgic rewriting by *After Mrs. Rochester* by Polly Teale (2003) (Rego, 2003).⁽¹⁶⁾

The grotesque and the abject are naturally in her work, Rego claims, and she doesn't see people or the situations they are involved in as grotesque or abject, but rather as moving (see notoriously her *Dog Woman* series, 1994). This fact is crucial to understand the proximity between both artists, McDonagh and Rego: it is not the reality in itself that is abject or grotesque, but rather what people choose to see and make of it.

Hence Katurian, in the universe of *The Pillowman*, when asked “What are you trying to tell us in this story?” simply replies: “I'm not trying to tell you anything. It's supposed to be just a puzzle without a solution” (McDonagh, 2003, p. 17). But would it all then be gratuitous, sheer absurd? Certainly not. There is a firm refusal from both artists to impose a moral value on their art and to set themselves in the position of the legislator, but ideological concerns, i.e., issues of “domination, or rebellion and domination; or freedom and repression; suffocation and escape”, to quote a

15. Paula Rego in interview with Edward King in February 2001. Vide the catalogue of the exhibition *Celestina's House* (Rego, 2001). For a more detailed discussion of this series, see Macedo 2005, pp. 177-191.

16. For an analysis of this curious interface of novel, play and visual evocation, see the chapter by Macedo, A.G. (2010). O 'Poder da Visão' ou *Em Busca de Mrs. Rochester*. In *Paula Rego e o Poder da Visão*. Cotovia. pp. 85-93.

phrase by the painter Vic Willing (1988, pp. 7-8), Rego's late husband,⁽¹⁷⁾ are a powerful presence in their work. When, in 1988, Rego had her first retrospective exhibition in Lisbon, at the *Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation*, one of the reviewers of this exhibition identifies her work as characterized by an "obsessive thematic", traversed by signals of history and quotidian life, sadistic gestures, theatrical ruses and perverted little girls ("The Vivian Girls", 1987), exhibited "without the slightest moral judgement" (Rodrigues, 1988, pp. 62-63).⁽¹⁸⁾ The same critic added: "Rego's painting shows only, no philosophical or metaphysical issues involved" (Rodrigues, 1988, pp. 62-63), it dwells on theatrical magic, the pleasure of experimentation and a relentless desire for freedom. Ever since, Rego's work kept reasserting the principle of a healthy moral detachment, both inquisitive and challenging, regardless how crude are the issues her art directly confronts.⁽¹⁹⁾ Transgression is undoubtedly Rego's favourite territory, exhibiting a stern, disquieting frontality against established powers, which she openly claims: "my favourite subjects are the 'games' originated by power, domination and hierarchies. They make me always feel like setting everything upside-down and reversing the established order of things" (Rego, as cited in Pomar, 1996, pp. 19-23).⁽²⁰⁾ It is not surprising thus, that the artist recognized herself in the controversial fictional universe of McDonagh's, where the moral judgement of the public on the "amoral" behaviour of his protagonists and the content of the stories is continuously challenged and somewhat suspended, *vis a vis* the even cruder version of the truth and the picture of reality daily offered by the legitimate power institutions.

17. I am here quoting the words of Vic Willing, Rego's late husband, from 'Inevitable Prohibitions', a Preface to the catalogue of the exhibition *Paula Rego* (London: Serpentine Gallery, November 1988), 7-8.
18. See Rodrigues (1988, pp. 62-63) review of Rego's work. Rego's first *solo* exhibition in England was in 1981 at the *Arts Council*, sponsored by the AIR Galley. A review of this exhibition by John McEwen, Rego's first and most devoted biographer and critic, states that this show both established and consolidated her position in England and marked her forthwith as "a star of the English, as well as the Portuguese and international, art scene" (McEwen, 1981, pp. 58-59). In his review, McEwen (1981) stresses the "vitality" of Rego's art, its theatrical quality "with much humour and not a trace of whimsy [...]. No sides are taken, no conclusions drawn" (p. 59).
19. See Rego's frequent denouncing of war crimes, from the Portuguese colonial war in the 60s to the war in Iraq ("War", 2004); torture ("The Interrogator's Secret Garden", 2000) or female victimization ("Untitled" [1998-1989], on illegal abortion), the traffic of women, "Cargo" (2008) and the series on "Female Genital Mutilation" (2009).
20. For a longer analysis of this topic in Rego's work see Macedo (2001, pp. 67-85).

In both artists, visual memory and the evocation of a phantasmagorical reality – either through visual or narrative recreation and the re-visitation of the past – are so intricately tied in the “tales” each of them re-enacts, that the viewer/reader cannot tell one apart from the other. Disturbing childhood memories, a stifling world of social, religious or political repression, censorship, whether interior or exterior, violence and injustice emerge time and time again in the work of both artists, as inverted mirror images of an estranged, nightmarish reality come true.⁽²¹⁾

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IMAGES

COURTESY OF PAULA REGO'S FAMILY

Paula Rego

Fig. 1 – *The Pillowman*, 2004 (Triptych)

Pastel on board, 180x120 cm



Fig. II – *The Shakespeare Room*, 2005
Pastel on board, 110x120 cm

