passa porta lecture 2014

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patently obvious

A few years ago, someone at the office had a brilliant idea: What if everyone were to read the same book? We got to work on it. A lot of people were hired in order to make it possible and to find the book that everyone was going to read. Salaries started going up. And, because one thing always leads to another, to pay the ever-rising salaries, finding the book also became ever more urgent, just as the book itself became ever more indispensable. The business perspectives became much more interesting. But, obviously, it was still early days, a time of trial and error.

Little by little, we perfected the idea and came to understand that a book that everyone reads must necessarily reappear on a yearly basis to justify the bonus that our company had started offering annually. Ideally, there would be a book that everyone reads every semester – and, why not? – a book a month or even two or three a month. And, as such, the book that everyone reads, though always the same, must also appear to be many. A book that everyone reads unites, breeds consensus, and makes everyone think along the same lines, while thinking that their thinking is different and original. And, as such, being always the same, it creates no problems. We thought: If we manage to keep our project afloat, in a few years we'll have forgotten what it is to disagree. Disagreement is bad. Because disagreement leads to fighting. And fighting is a problem.

At the same time that we had our brilliant idea back at the office, someone in another company had another equally as brilliant idea: What if everyone were to do exactly the same thing, while thinking that they were doing things differently,

wouldn't it be easier and more natural to supervise the world and, consequently, find the book that everyone is going to read? And what if, in order for it to happen, we were to create a device by which the more people that read something, the more the same thing would be read, and the more people that saw something, the more it would be seen? Isn't it obvious? And wouldn't it be easier for all of us, at the office, to delegate the job of finding the book that everyone wants to read to this redundant, natural, obvious device? A device that merely expresses, so to speak, the will of its users, who are led to activate the device (all the while that they are, unwittingly, being used by it) thinking they're acting of their own free will?

     The problem is that, despite the brilliance of these ideas, no one knew exactly how to get this oh-so obvious and natural machine up and running. At the office, we've known for years that it's better not to publish books that create problems. Differences create problems. And, while exalting differences is considered the right thing to do, we at the office don't like problems. No one does. A few years ago, someone at the office said: If other companies give everyone what everyone wants, why does ours have to give everyone what not everyone wants? It's the law of supply and demand. Isn't it logical and natural? Logic and nature are the mothers of all things. Starting with the economy. And why not culture?

     A few years ago, someone at the office had another brilliant idea (we have a lot of brilliant ideas at the office): What if we were to use the language that everyone speaks, as it were, figuratively speaking, the language that everyone understands,

to get everyone to read the same book? Wouldn't that be logical and natural? And what if we could get people from all kinds of languages to write in fewer and fewer languages until we arrived at just one, the same language for everyone? Obviously, to pull it off, we'd have to offer a few perks. And what better perk than knowing you are writing in the language everyone is going to read, the language everyone understands? And what if, to win over the contrarians, who refused to write in this common language, we were to give them the impression that they were still writing in different languages? How?

All we'd have to do is propose that they write, in the same language that everyone speaks and understands, about their experiences in the places where other languages are spoken. Wouldn't it be fantastic? And, as a result, we'd also eliminate all need for translation to boot. All we'd have to do is let them reproduce in the same language, in our common language, the accent and local flavour of the other languages that not everyone speaks or understands. And what if we invented a name for all these accents incorporated into the same language, into a single language for everyone to understand? Something like multiculturalism? How amazing would that be? It would, at least, create a very positive impression. As if everyone in the world could be inside one and the same language. And, as such, there would be no problems. We don't like problems. Problems aren't profitable and they're a headache. As such, everyone would continue to believe in a completely different world, while in fact the whole world would be completely the same. And it would be more and more the same, while appearing to be

increasingly different, because everyone would read in the same language what was previously written in other languages that not everyone reads, with the advantage that we wouldn't even need to pay for translations.

Luckily for our company, and by dint of a fortunate coincidence, right when we were having our brilliant idea back at the office, someone in another company had another brilliant idea. They thought, at the other company: What if we were to create a mechanism and logic, with a mathematical and scientific basis, by means of which the more something is seen the more the thing will be seen and the more a person reads something, the more others are led to read the same thing, while thinking that they have arrived at the thing through their own effort and merit? How amazing would that be? They had this idea at another company. And, that being the case, we can't say it was the same idea that we had at our company, even though they were very similar. We can't accuse anyone of industrial espionage or plagiarism, because it wasn't the same idea; it was analogous.

Lots of brilliant, analogous ideas spring up at the same time. It's what we call synergy back at the office. We live in an era of synergies. And, like the mergers and acquisitions taking place around us, we thought that, just as we were looking for a book that everyone was going to read, we should also be a single company, comprised of all the other companies that had very similar ideas to ours, so as to better supervise the world and guide it on this adventure to find the book that everyone is going to read. And all this simply because our company's idea

and the other companies' ideas were analogous, simple and natural: the more people hear about something, the more they're going to talk about it. It's all connected. It's simple, it's human. And what is human, because it's natural, is always good. That has to be in the book that everyone is going to read, we thought at the office, because it's what everyone wants to believe. What is human is always good.

A few years ago, at the office, someone had another brilliant idea, in tandem with the previous brilliant ideas, comprising a broad overview: Let's make everything that is negative sound negative. Isn't it logical and patently obvious? As such, people will be turned off by criticism. Naturally, they want to hear good things. And we can give people just good news. And we're going to make people identify so deeply with this mechanism and logic created by our companies all rolled into one global company, based on mathematical and scientific formulas, a mechanism and logic as human and natural as people themselves, that, when the mechanism and logic are criticised, it will be the people themselves who feel offended, as if they were being attacked personally. And they'll fight back as if they were defending God and nature.

That was the brilliant idea we had a few years ago at the office, after merging with another company, while in yet another company, someone had the same idea, that is to say, an analogous idea. People go out into the world and think they're stumbling upon things by chance, but the things they stumble upon are only the things that other people have already stumbled upon before them, the things that people most

stumble upon. It is natural that two different companies should have the same idea at the same time. Because they're in sync with their time. They're in synergy. Of course this mechanism helped us a lot on our quest to find the book that everyone was going to read, simply because it made us stop looking, leaving the task to readers themselves. It was a truly brilliant idea, and analogous, so to speak.

After all, if they want to think the Earth is flat, why insist that it's round? Why contradict people if we can agree with them and what they believe to be natural? Why provoke the public? Why force them to see things that aren't obvious to the naked eye? Or that they don't want to see? How presumptuous is that, for heaven's sake? At the office, we think with the naked eye, along with the public, never against it. At the office, we're not presumptuous. And we don't want to create problems. We work for culture, for the good of others: We imagined that we could create a single benchmark of excellence for the book that everyone is going to read. I shall explain.

A few years ago, before our ideas, writers born on the periphery of the world could confront the world with their differences. They had a value, because they were different, but it was a lower, limited value, which we didn't fully recognize in the centre of the world. And, even though we tried to reduce their differences to something intelligible and palatable, limiting their translation opportunities until they understood exactly what they had to write in order to be translated and appreciated, they still managed to evade us. They continued publishing so many worthless things on the periphery of the

world! However, if those writers had to fulfil the same standards of excellence imposed on writers who, at the centre of the world, were subjected to the one and only language that we all understood, we'd be exporting quality and doing some good. Understand? Do you all follow?

Before we started having brilliant ideas at the office, any old idiot could offer up a platitude in another language, like 'culture is the rule; art is the exception', and everyone would applaud him. For the wrong reasons! For the wrong reasons! It was the Tower of Babel! A quagmire of ambiguity and misunderstanding. Of course culture is the rule. So, at the office, we thought: Long live culture! Everyone wants to celebrate culture. Onward and upward! Positive thinking. We represent the 99% against the 1%. We're on the side of culture. Art is the 1%, the exception. And we stand for the 99%. We stand for good, for democracy and culture, back at the office. I don't mean to brag, but I was the one who had the idea that we needed to invent a single benchmark for judging all the books that everyone reads. And what is the only benchmark capable of monopolizing the entire world without any more excuses for this or that? Excellence!

We thought: Excellence will do away with inequality, with this business of this and that difference, the relativism of this and that, which is merely a euphemism and an excuse for corruption and incompetence. That's what they have to give us on the periphery: corruption and incompetence disguised as difference. With excellence for everyone, it's all black and white. Either the book is good and everyone reads it or it's bad and not

everyone reads it. Excellence is objective and absolute. It doesn't require criticism, readers' opinions are enough. And the more opinions, the more excellent it is.

So, if someone asks what is good, what do I say? What about when I'm no longer here to say it? Just let people say that what is good is natural, and natural is whatever they believe. What? God isn't good? So what? And for people to believe in something, it has to seem believable.

No one wants to hear negative things, negative criticism. No! But with opinions it's a different story: you think in synergy. Even when you're running something down. And that's good, because it's collective. It's no longer the subjectivity of 1%; it's the objectivity of 99%. Of course everyone wants to be unique, but it isn't possible for everyone to be truly unique. Do the maths. It's enough to think you're unique, as everyone does, and continue thinking the same thing, as everyone does.

And that is why we are able to publish many books without compromising the uniformity of a single book, as long as they are all more or less the same or analogical or synergetic in their apparent differences. And the benchmark for evaluating these books and making them all more or less the same is the measure of their credibility. Allow me to explain. What do you people most believe in: the story of something that really happened or some crazy idea plucked out of one person's unique mind? What has the most resonance? What really happened and can be proven by everyone or the unnatural thoughts of a basket-case?

We want to believe what we're reading. We want flesh-and-blood characters. We want to believe what people tell us. No one wants to read books that cast doubt on what they are saying. Do you see? So, the benchmark is its realism. It has to make you believe it in order to be good. If you start questioning things, it's over. That's why it's important for everyone to read the same book and think they think differently, while thinking the same thing. That way there are no problems or disagreements. Realism can only exist if everyone believes at least minimally in the same things.

At the office, we know that everything should be positive and natural. But it would remiss of me not to warn you about the terrorists of the exception's surreptitious campaign against our realism and consensus, because you too need to be aware of the threat and protect yourselves against the little pest when it pops up. The terrorists of exception really do believe in uniqueness! And problems. They say that art should present problems, that art doesn't have to come up with solutions. They want to create problems! But the public wants solutions. No one needs any more problems.

They use language to cast doubt on what others are saying. Which is why they aren't just fools; they're dangerous. Their creed is difference and disagreement, as if that were possible. While, at the office, we work through pleonasms, the terrorists of exception work through paradox. And where will that lead? To a world of two or three geniuses, saying things that contradict what the rest of us think in consensus? That

contradict the things we believe in? Is that it? Since when is literature reflection? What about the pleasure of reading? Who wants to read things that aren't pleasurable?

Problems aren't pleasurable. How ironic. How contradictory. That's why we decided to fill the world with books that always repeat the same things, the same beliefs, in the one and only language that everyone understands and believes, even if the covers and authors look different at first glance. Meanwhile, a few losers, stuck in the past, insist on creating anachronisms, using contradictions and differences incompatible with the present. It seems that nothing can appease them or convince them that we at the office have already won and have the world eating out of our hands. They continue to fight what is natural. In the name of difference and exception.

And what is it they want? To create as many world views as there are books published? How is that even possible with the number of books we need to publish so that the world keeps heading in the same direction and we keep getting our pay checks? Do the losers want to offend the public and the public's taste at the expense of our bonuses? It's the public who say what art is and what literature is and what the truth is. We understand this at the office and we provide the public with the channels to express themselves and tell us what they want to read. We're proud of it. Readers are clients. And clients must be treated well. We give people what they want. We meet their demands. We provide them with validation via our realism. No one seeks contradiction and paradox. We're in the business of

certainty. And the terrorists of exception want to sow dissensus and doubt. There is nothing more unpleasant than doubt. Who wants doubt? And what is literature for if not to validate and to please? I ask: What for? What counterexamples might they offer? The impressionists? Modern art? Science? Is that it? Can I laugh?

Beware of people like that, because no matter what you give them, those who are independent and insatiable are never satisfied, they're never happy with the world and will never stop reading and looking for books that not everyone reads, books that still don't exist, books that have yet to be written and are like no other. You've been warned. Thank you.

Translated from the Portuguese (Brasil) by Alison Entrekin

Bernardo Carvalho (1960) is a prominent Brazilian writer and journalist. As a foreign correspondent in Paris and New York, for many years he worked for the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. Carvalho is a master at creating a mysterious atmosphere and raking up a suppressed past. Poetry and truth are inextricably linked in a game of perspectives and personalities. His novel *Nove noites* (2002, transl. *Nine Nights*) tells the story of a young American anthropologist who commits suicide in the Brazilian interior. Recently published novels of Carvalho include *Mongólia*, *O Filho de Mãe* (2009, *'Ta mère*, éd. Métaillié, 2010) and *Reprodução* (Companhia das Lettras, 2013). In September and October 2014 Carvalho will be working on a new novel during a residency at Passa Porta.

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