

Maria Manuel Lisboa.

***Essays on Paula Rego: Smile When You Think About Hell.*
Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019.**

OFF WITH HIS HEAD

At the end of *Essays on Paula Rego*, Maria Manuel Lisboa writes about a paradox in the artist Paula Rego's work. She notes that Rego has had enormous popular success. Her work sells. She has been accepted by the establishment. Collectors abound. Yet the world that she depicts could only exist with a reinvention of present attitudes to gender, marriage, and the family. Rego's work is always, Lisboa writes, about revenge: against men, against the church, against power, against violence, against conformity. There is conflict in all her work, conflict that the powerful willfully ignore, preferring instead to read her work for its visual command and in relation to the fairy tales and literary narratives that underpin her paintings and prints. Germaine Greer sees this struggle between the visual and the subversive as a violent personal vision fashioned in acceptable decorative terms.

Lisboa has collected here a group of prodigiously researched essays, most of them previously published as *Paula Rego's Map of Memory* (2003) but a few collected from academic journals. Only one is new (a sixty-page study of fairy tales that Rego loves), although Lisboa has extended and edited some of her earlier material. Lisboa is a professor of Portuguese literature and culture at the University of Cambridge, and her essays demonstrate broad knowledge of contemporary theory as well as British and Portuguese literature. In the book she has divided them into two sections: one on the contexts of Rego's art, the other on the work itself. The first section is the weightiest, and its essays are often used as a basis for deciphering the multiple meanings that Rego assigns to her work.

Typically, Lisboa begins each essay by laying the theoretical foundations of her argument. She works from a New Historicist perspective and intends to inscribe the visual text in history. Her defense of this position is outlined as a rejection of a textualist position in which meaning is seen as arbitrary and historical truth is determined as inaccessible. Most of her references are from the 1980s: Derrida, Habermas, Jameson, Bryson, and Schor. She analyzes sixty years of work and

concentrates on Rego's productions from the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout, she embeds examples and further commentary in the accompanying footnotes.

In one essay Lisboa writes about Rego's painting *The Policeman's Daughter* (1987), which features family, incest, and paternal power. It is among Rego's best pictures, of interest for its visual solidity and for the themes that circulate among other paintings she made in the same period. Lisboa provides a mental picture of the painting: "A girl or young woman sits in a room by a window without a view, alone except for a black cat, and polishes a man's boot, presumably that of the eponymous policeman and father. Light streams in through the window." Citing Ruth Rosengarten, who has written widely on Rego's work, she notes the sexual tension that provides a reading of incest (the daughter's hand inside the father's phallic boot) and the allusion within the authoritarian boot to state power. To clean someone's boots, Lisboa argues, signifies submissiveness to the point of abjection, an explanation that is important for non-Portuguese speakers. Other writers, Fiona Bradley included, refer to the image of the arm inside the boot in ways that recall Robert Mapplethorpe's photograph of fisting, with its references to anal sex, rape, and incest. Lisboa argues that Rego exposes the fragility of paternalistically defied power: the boot is polished; the male organ is manually stimulated and becomes the hole or anus into which the violating hand and female arm are brutally rammed, a humiliating sexual act. Lisboa is at her best here in a riveting and explicit analysis that reaches to the heart of Rego's provocation.

In 1997, after reading *The Crime of Padre Amaro* (1875) by Eça de Queirós, Rego created a series of sixteen panels and nineteen sketches that superficially illustrate the novel. The connection between the text and the images that followed were independent, one from the other. The anticlericism that Rego had touched on in prior work now became the central idea. Discussing this project, Lisboa calls on post-Freudian psychoanalytic readings to interpret pictures that only have a tangential relation to the novel. Contrary to mainstream Freudian thought, in which the Oedipal complex is said to favor the father over the mother, writers such as Julia Kristeva, Melanie Klein, and Nancy Chodorow see escape from the mother as less ominous than the dominion of the father. The son, who loves his mother and has depended on her from birth for well-being and survival, must abandon her, though he can never fully do so. The female is the good mother, the bad mother, and the powerless mother. As the character Amélia, she is the figure of Padre Amaro's desire. She is powerful and powerless. In *Looking Out*, Amélia stands before a window with her back to us. She sees what we do not

and controls what everyone else sees, thereby controlling all: interpretation, the gaze, and the viewer. In a final discussion of a painting done a year later, *In the Wilderness*, Lisboa links the image of a woman kneeling in a foggy seascape to Portuguese imperial dreams dashed by the death of Dom Sebastião and British victory in southern Africa. In the painting, Amélia kneels in an empty seascape, equal to an unsatisfied longing for empire. To this she adds, in her final words on the sins of the fathers, that Portuguese fixation on its lost empire is coexistent with a continuing resentment against the empire builders and the *retornados* who were coolly received in Portugal on their return in 1975 after defeat in Angola and Mozambique. The crime, then, was not only Padre Amaro's lust and the death of his son and the seduced Amélia. The insights that Rego brings to post-imperial Portugal are the truths of discrimination against women and racism against those from the "provinces."

Rego is never direct in her message, and Lisboa deftly guides us through the thickets of symbol and history by calling on feminist and post-Freudian interpreters. She leads us through the fierce debate and referendum on abortion in 1998 and final liberalization in 2007, allowed with restrictions and as a last resort. Rego made a series of ten pastels and fourteen sketches on the topic in which she verbally attacked the alliance between the Catholic church and the state. She also linked female pain, blame, and abortion to Portugal's totalitarian past. "It is unbelievable," she said at the time, "that women who have an abortion should be considered criminals." Lisboa has located the work that Rego made in 1998–99 in the context of voyeurism and the male gaze, feminist theory, and the erotic models that appear in male magazines. Of the eight essays, this one is the most fully and ardently argued, a battleground in which disagreement remains unresolved.

Lisboa's book reaches beyond the work of Paula Rego to engage profoundly with issues that mark our era. Her essays speak to us in various voices, certainly from ideology but also in the movement from the affective, emotional plane to meaning. Rego has discovered a true social sense in history and in our aesthetic response to her criticisms of gender inequality, violence, and hypocrisy. Lisboa finds in this work a basis for investigating history and gender with a consistent eye on the visual culture that has made Rego's art possible.

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