The climactic power struggle becomes an increasingly lopsided affair: the young hitman may have set out with weapons and the surprise factor, but Tarquinio disarms his would-be assassin both literally and figuratively, in a ruthless display of both verbal and physical domination. In addition, the reader, having already been primed by a number of innuendoes, cannot fail to notice that this domination is heavy with sexual undertones, and it culminates in what can hardly be interpreted as something other than rape. Later, the old statesman, motionless and unseen, stares at his victim as he gets up and puts his clothes back on, and the story ends with him drily ordering the young lad back to Lisbon, as he hands him back his unused guns and adds a single rose (P. Morand, Lorenzaccio, p. 151).

In Morand’s novella, Tarquinio’s assertive, self-assured, predatory nature appears to echo Sand’s portrayal of Alexandre, whereas this story’s ‘Lorenzo’, who remains unnamed until the end, is all but unrecognisable. This gritty Lorenzaccio shows the dark side of persuasion, its sinister underbelly, in much more vehement terms than any talk of ‘corruption’ in Musset ever manages to do. Seduction, when paired more explicitly with predation, sheds its idealised veneer of harmless mischief and comes across as a merciless force. First, seduction seeks to abolish the difference between the charmer and their victim, and then, after this is accomplished, predation re-establishes that difference. Yet there is no mere return to the status quo, as there is a vile twist: an annihilation of sorts, not material but in some ways a more thorough one than any gun might be able to inflict. Something – be it power, innocence, self-worth or dignity – is lost, most likely irrevocably so.

Thus in the final scene the rose, usually a symbol of (the ideal of) seduction, becomes an ironic token, a jeering reminder, a most subtle coup de grâce.

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ELISA SCARAGGI

Canudos reloaded:
Vargas Llosa’s La guerra del fin del mundo as na adaptation of Euclide da Cunha’s Os Sertões

In 2009, on the 100th anniversary of Euclide da Cunha’s death, Brazilian TV programme Observatório da Imprensa devoted an entire episode to the life and works of the great writer. In the last part of the programme, the presenter says:

The writer was immortalised as one of the greatest names of our national culture and his great work, Os Sertões, was converted in a stunning archive: it originated dozens of reportages, books, academic works, essays, short films, movies and even a TV miniserie. This is a story whose ending has not been written yet.

These words demonstrate how, for more than a century, Euclides da Cunha has been a source of inspiration for writers and artists in general. Moreover, they show how his work on the War of Canudos, considered a milestone of Brazilian literature, has been adapted several times and to several media.

In this paper, I will focus on just one adaptation of Os Sertões, that is Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel La Guerra Del Fin Del Mundo.

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100 anos sem Euclides is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbBpH8ttdNE [accessed 17 February 2016]

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Portuguese, Italian and Spanish are mine.

3 Henceforth called just La Guerra.
The press and local authorities, for social and economic reasons, did not look kindly upon the people of Canudos and started to portray the jagunços as insane fanatics and dangerous anti-republicans that would restore the monarchy with the help of foreign countries. They created an irrational climate of hysteria nationwide, forcing the young Brazilian Republic to intervene. There was no place for the jagunços in the modern Brazil they were building: jagunços represented the past and all the backwardness linked to it, while the Republic was guided by the ideals of ordem e progresso. However, the venture turned out to be more difficult than expected. The jagunços did not surrender despite inferior forces; they fought bravely and repelled three expeditions before succumbing to the fourth one. After many deaths on both sides, on October 1897 Canudos was razed to the ground and soldiers perpetrated a brutal massacre against fighters and civilians. Conselheiro died some days before the final attack; his body was exhumed, his head removed and displayed to the public.

The War of Canudos, a story of resistance and tenacity against state violence, ended up resembling a myth. The courage of the people who took part in it, the puzzling figure of Conselheiro, and the apocalyptic atrocities that the war provoked entered the collective imagination. Further, the mythical qualities of this conflict can also be attributed to Os Sertões, the book by Euclides da Cunha, who had joined the last military expedition as a journalist. Indeed, there is something extremely fascinating in the story of a multitude of downtrodden people, deeply pious, who chose follow a man and to die fighting for him and for his ideals. It defies logic to think of these people struggling and resisting with rudimentary weapons against armed troops and heavy artillery, without any hope of victory, until the very last man was killed. In fact, as Euclides da Cunha says:

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4 Brazil was the last country in the Western world to abolish slavery; it legally ended in 1888, when Isabel, Princess Imperial of Brazil, promulgated the Golden Act (Lei Áurea). As slavery had been abolished under the monarchy, sertanejos had serious suspicions that the Republic could reintroduce it.

5 Literally, order and progress. The words appear on Brazilian national flag since the proclamation of the Republic in 1889. They are a clear derivation of Comte’s motto: L’amour pour principe et l’ordre pour base, la prospérité pour but.

6 Considering that the whole population of Canudos was exterminated, the deaths are estimated to be in the range of 30,000. (STAVANS 2010)
Canudos did not surrender. The only case of its kind in recorded history, it resisted until the last man was down. It had been conquered inch by inch in the literal sense of the words. It fell on October 5, at dusk, when its last fighters fell dead, every last one of them. There were only four left: an old man, two full-grown men, and a child, facing a raging army of five thousand soldiers (Da Cunha 2010, p. 921).  

1.2. Plagiarism or rewriting?  

Almost a century later, this story bewitched Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa. He had never heard of Canudos until 1972, when Paramount asked him to write a screenplay for a movie on the war in the sertão, which was to be directed by Ruy Guerra, an important representative of Brazilian Cinema Novo. Vargas Llosa had already drafted a version of the screenplay when the movie was called off but, by that time, he was so hooked on the whole story that he kept working on it. As he affirms, he read everything that had been written on the argument, starting from Os Sertões:  

“I started researching, reading, and one of the first things that I read in Portuguese was Os Sertões, by Euclides da Cunha. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life as a reader. It was like when I read The three musketeers or Moby Dick when I was a boy. It was like bumping into a milestone book, a fundamental experience. Astonishing, really; one of the greatest books that have ever been written in Latin America (Setti 2011).”  

After four years of work and a month of travelling around the sertão, in 1981 Vargas Llosa published La Guerra. The novel is an attempt to recreate the context of Canudos, a large-scale effort to give voice to the people who were involved in the war: from Conselheiro’s followers to Bahian politicians, from soldiers and military leaders to civilians who got caught in the fury of the battle. Divided into four parts that correspond to the four military expeditions, the novel is populated by a myriad of characters. Some of them are a product of the author’s imagination (Galileo Gall, Baron of Canabrava, etc.) while others are inspired by historical figures (Conselheiro, Moreira César, etc.). However, it is clear from the start that Vargas Llosa’s intention is not to be meticulously accurate to history, but rather to create a fictional narrative. Referring to the people who helped him collect historic material and documents, Vargas Llosa affirms: “I explained that I was not writing a novel true to history, but that I really wanted to know history, let’s say, to be able to lie being aware of it” (Setti 2011).  

The novel had a great audience response and the author considers it to be among his best works (Setti 2011) but, of course, there have been some very harsh critics. Some of them had a quite political tenor, as for example those formulated by Edmundo Moniz, who argued that Vargas Llosa misinterpreted the true spirit of the rebellion characterising the jagunços as religious fanatics rather than peasants fighting for a piece of land. He went so far as to say that La Guerra was “one of the greatest falsifications of all times” (Leite 2012, p.2). Negative criticism, however, focused on Vargas Llosa allegedly plagiarising Euclides da Cunha: even outstanding scholars and representatives of the literary world such as Portuguese Nobel prizewinner José Saramago accused him of writing a poor and bad imitation of

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1 All quotes are taken from the 2010 English translation of Os Sertões by Elizabeth Lowe, entitled Backlands: The Canudos campaign and published by Penguin.

4 The story of this failed film adaptation is controversial. Ruy Guerra declared that Vargas Llosa plagiarised his idea without giving him any credits for his success. In an interview in 2005, Guerra argued that it was his idea to create a story about a European anarchist who happened to be in Bahia and eventually got entangled in the war of Canudos. It is evident that he is referring to Galileo Gall, one of Vargas Llosa’s most important characters. Vargas Llosa never confirmed, and Guerra often repeated that he has a very low opinion of him. For more information: http://www.royguerra.com.br/entrevista.php?id=26&detalhes=1 [accessed 1 November 2017].
Os Sertões. These accusations are likely motivated by a sense of devotion to a classic literary work, considered perfect and therefore untouchable, but also by a certain irritation caused by the intrusion of a Peruvian writer in a space that presumably belongs to Portuguese-language readers and writers on both sides of the Atlantic.

2. Setting criteria

Rather than a plagiarism, Vargas Llosa's novel is an adaptation of the classic by Euclides da Cunha. This assertion, however, is questionable. In fact, is it possible to characterise a novel as an adaptation of another literary work even if the latter is based on a true story? If we answer positively to this question, are we establishing that an author has some sort of 'copyright' on a historical event just because he wrote about it first? It is a problematic issue: after all, and especially when it comes to historiography, the category of authorship is less obvious than one may think. Moving on to our specific case, is it possible to draw a direct correlation between Os Sertões and La Guerra if the author of the presumed adaptation affiliates he read all the bibliography available on Canudos, apart from da Cunha’s book?

It is useful to set some criteria to establish what to consider an adaptation. Having a definition is essential because, as Linda Hutcheon argues, everyone has a theory of adaptation so, potentially, there are as many theories as people in the world (Hutcheon 2013, p.xiii). Adaptation implies transferring elements of a source text into another text, thus involving also a shift of spatio-temporal context of production and reception, plus a shift of media or genre, if we stay – as in our case – into the limits of one single medium. In agreement with Julie Sanders, when talking of adaptation one refers to «an interrelation between texts which is fundamental to their existence» (Sanders 2006, p.8). This does not mean that knowing the source text is indispensible to the understanding of the adaptation, as this is a complete text and can perfectly stand by itself; nonetheless, it is true that it can enrich the potential for the production of meaning.

Some aspects of Hutcheon's theory are also worth mentioning here. Her contribution to adaptation studies goes far beyond the shrewdness of the sentence quoted some lines above. Probably her main achievement is to prove wrong those who believe that a derived text carries some sort of stigma of inferiority. Hutcheon studied adaptation across all media and developed a deep reflection on this practice and the resulting cultural products. Her notion of adaptation, then, includes things such as video arcades, biopics, theme parks and adaptation of historical events. Some of these cases could seem a bit of a stretch but, at a deeper analysis, they do fit into the classic model of adaptation as a process involving transferring elements from text to text (Meneghelli 2012, p.3). Sticking to this basic concept, we can undeniably reaffirm that La Guerra is an adaptation, instead of a plagiarism or an ‘inadequate copy’. Yet, our main question stays open, as one could doubt whether La Guerra is an elaboration of the many historical sources we have on the War of Canudos or an adaptation of da Cunha’s book.

It is easy to prove that Vargas Llosa transcribed Conselheiro’s prophecies almost directly from da Cunha’s account and that he integrated in his novel many of da Cunha’s meditations on the proliferation of rumors about Canudos (Booker 1994, pp. 82-85). The information about the military corps fighting in

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10 For example, Hutcheon mentions in her work that «the German television movie called Wannekeferren (The Wannee Conference) was an 85-minute film adaptation scripted from the actual minutes of the 85-minute meeting held in 1942» (Hutcheon 2013, pp.17-18). We wonder how should we characterise, then, the state park at the battlefield in Canudos as it is «completely organised by quotes from da Cunha’s text» (Johnson 2005, p.358); is it an adaptation of Os Sertões or a rememberance of the war?

11 For example, del Barco, poet and literature professor at the University of Seville, used these words to define Vargas Llosa’s novel. More information at: https://elpais.com/diario/1999/08/22/cultura/651276098_850215.html [accessed 1 November 2017].
2.1 Cultural value and legitimation

In various occasions, Vargas Llosa acknowledged his great debt to da Cunha. He not only declared an enthusiastic appreciation of Os Sertões, but he also dedicated his novel to the Brazilian writer,14 and wrote an article titled precisely My debt with Euclides.15 In this article, Vargas Llosa praises da Cunha, but he also states that historical themes are part of the common experience and they can be used by whoever wishes to do so. I do not discuss this principle, nor do I want to question the originality of Vargas Llosa's work. Yet, in this case, I believe it is crucial to consider the cultural value of the source text. Let's make an absurd example:16 if someone should write a novel on the history of the war of Troy, even if he used historical and archaeological sources, wouldn't it be considered as a remaking of the Iliad?

Although it is not the only one, Os Sertões is an essential — I would dare to say the essential — book on the War of Canudos. Without it, the history of the uprising would have probably been forgotten just as many other massacres perpetrated by the Brazilian State have been. Since its publication, Os Sertões has been a fundamental text for Brazilian culture: first, it was a best-

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14 Just an example taken from the account of the third expedition: "We will eat lunch in Canudos," he shouted. (DA CUNHA 2010, p.227). "Tomorrow we will lunch in Canudos," he hears the colonel say. (VARGAS LLOSA 1984).

15 The dedication in the book says: "To Euclides da Cunha in the other world and, in this world, to Nilópolis".

16 Mi breve con Euclides is a reply to the accusations of plagiarism and it was published on August 26th, 1990. It is possible to read it online at: http://elpais.com/diario/1990/08/26/opinion/845621619_8562131.html [accessed 1 november 2017].

17 After all, the comparison may not be so absurd: the first critics of Os Sertões spoke of it as "a new Iliad" (WASSERMAN 1993, p. 464) and da Cunha himself referred to Canudos calling it "jaguarípo Troy" (DA CUNHA 2010, p.218).

18 Sanders declares that "the vocabulary of adaptation is highly liable" (SANDERS 2006, p.3) and that words such as interpretation, version, rewrite, remake, re-vision and so on are all part of it.

19 One of the issues that da Cunha pointed out is that, at the time of Canudos, the Brazilian Republic already existed but a Brazilian nation, meant as a community of people, had yet to be created.

20 Vargas Llosa's theory of the war of Canudos is that it was "a total misunderstanding (VARGAS LLOSA 1984)" because all parts concerned were blinded by their own fanaticism, whether for Latin America in the 1980s, as in many countries left-wing insurgents fought against rightist dictatorships. As he declared: "Our history is tarnished with this incapacity to accept divergences (SETTI 2011). Vargas Llosa is known for his neoliberal positions.
2.2. The man, the land, the battle

*Os Sertões* is much more than an account of the war: it is also a geography treatise, a (pseudo)scientific essay on the characteristics of Brazilian races, a collection of folklore, a reflection on the role of journalism. Da Cunha, who apart from being a journalist with literary ambitions was also a military engineer imbued with the scientific knowledge of his time, and showed a strong faith in the theories of environmental determinism. This is translated in the three-part division of the book: *A terra* (the land), *O homem* (the man), *A luta* (the battle). To understand the war of Canudos, da Cunha thought it was necessary to analyse the environment and the people who lived in it.

Although there are not specific separations as in da Cunha, *La Guerra* is organised around the same three elements. We notice it when the author introduces a character: first, he makes a brief description of his/her life, then he shows how the character interacts with the *sertão* and with other *sertanejos* and, finally, he recounts which was the character’s role in the war. *La Guerra* shows a great fascination with the natural environment that, just as well as in *Os Sertões*, it’s not simply a setting: it is a real character «passionately portrayed as savage and abundant, treacherous and protective, deadly and life giving» (STAVANS 2010, p.31). Vargas Llosa admitted that the landscape had not particular relevance in the first draft of the novel, but this radically changed after he visited the *sertão* and realised how it influenced people’s lives (GUTIÉRREZ 2009). This conclusion is not far from the spirit of da Cunha’s text, whose title already tells us a lot about the predominance of the environment. Euclides did not ignore the great influence nature had on the *sertanejos*, and considered those people «the very bedrock of our race» (DA CUNHA 2010, p.902), precisely because they succeeded to survive taming such a hostile land.

Occasionally, in both books, the reader has the impression that the land and the man blend into one. The battle scenes are a perfect example: the *jagunços* are camouflaged in the *sertão*, they melt in it and, by doing so, they become invisible to the soldiers. I will point out just a couple of excerpts taken from both books:

After three hours of fighting, the attackers had not advanced even a foot. At a distance of only five hundred yards they had not seen a single man from the enemy lines. They had no way of estimating how many there were. The tallest hills, which jutted out in a buttress-shaped spur over the plain, seemed deserted. The blazing sun beat down on them. Every detail of the physical environment around them was clearly visible. (Da Cunha 2010, p.645)

On a slope above the artillery, over the tangled bushes on the edge of a clearing, twelve faces with nervous, darting feline eyes scanned the area. They were the faces of twelve men hidden in the bromeliads. No one saw them; they could not be seen as they slowly stood, turning their backs with arrogant indifference on the twenty quiet battalions. (Da Cunha 2010, p.760)

They had been riding through a dense stretch of caatinga, amid breaths of searing-hot air, for half an hour, when suddenly the guide began to peer intently at the foliage around them. "We’re surrounded," he whispered. "We’d best wait till they come out." [...] Gall tried in vain to see any sign that would indicate that there were human beings close by. But, a few moments later, men armed with shotguns, crossbows, machetes, and knives stepped out from among the trees. (VARGAS LLOSA 1984, p.197)

"Shh, shh," she heard voices say at this moment, as though the bushes and the cacti had started to speak (...) She spied the soldiers. Her heart skipped a beat on seeing how close they were. (...) Wasn’t it incredible that so many soldiers should pass by without discovering that there were jagunços so close that they could almost touch them, so close that they were almost stepping on them? (VARGAS LLOSA 1984, p.293)
One could say that both books are focused on how the man and the land, combined in an ancestral union, try to resist to the advance of modernity. To strangers, they appear mysterious and almost supernatural, and therein lies the reason of their enchantment.

2.3. Writing history

As mentioned before, Vargas Llosa was explicitly writing fiction rather than history, but what about da Cunha? Is it possible to classify Os Sertões as a proper history book? Some critics think that «the highly literary style of his book – the so-called falar difícil of Euclides, his recherché mode of expression – stamps it, not as history, but as some kind of fiction, a sort of historical novel» (Amory 1996, p.668). Others refer to it as the first Brazilian epic, placing it once again in the realm of literature (Mac Adam 1984; Wasserman 1993). Actually, Os Sertões’ nature is hybrid. Surely, da Cunha aimed to be as faithful to truth as his means allowed him to. However, his way of narrating the events, his style and his language are highly literary. As Beals affirms «the book is a great document, which, though not a novel, reads like fiction» (apud Booker 1994, p.80). Os Sertões and La Guerra appear now closer than ever, also because by reinscribing a work of history in an overtly fictional form, Vargas Llosa inherently calls attention to the kinship between the narratives of history and the narratives of fiction, suggesting that the line between the two is not as strict as we might like to believe. And Rebellion in the Backlands is the ideal focus for such a project, since da Cunha’s book already challenges the boundary between fiction and history through its own highly literary presentation of the historical events it describes (Booker 1994, 79).

However, there is a difference that cannot be overcome. Da Cunha was an eyewitness to the events of Canudos and his narration has the authoritativeness and the solemnity of someone who experienced history on his own flesh. To fill this gap, Vargas Llosa creates a character clearly inspired by Euclides da Cunha, the nearsighted journalist, who is on the battlefield until almost the very last day and who wants to write a book on Canudos. There is some irony around this character. As he loses his glasses during the fight, the myopic journalist cannot see anything at all and his information about what happens comes from what other people tell him. Vargas Llosa questions the authoritativeness of da Cunha’s book by suggesting that eyewitnesses are not reliable, as historical accounts are subjective elaboration rather than transparent reports of the events.

It is true that Euclides da Cunha suffered from a certain amount of nearsightedness, as his eyes were blinded by his faith in the ideals of the Republic and the pseudo-scientific racist convictions of his time. What actually surprises us is how da Cunha cast off his blinders and saw clearly that the fight was a civil war, a massacre that could have been avoided. In fact, he had no doubt about what he saw in Canudos and he said it already in the introduction of Os Sertões: «in the most basic meaning of the word, it was a crime. Let us therefore call it to account» (Da Cunha 2010, p.69).

The appropriation of the figure of Euclides da Cunha by Vargas Llosa is further evidence of the fact that La Guerra is deeply interrelated with Os Sertões, in a way that is fundamental to its existence. After all, as Amory declares «it is in the nature of a classic not to be superseded, though [...] it may be refuted, supplemented, improved on, or even in one instance disregarded for the sake of a ‘non-Euclidean Canudos’» (Amory 1996, p.685).
References

Primary sources

Secondary sources