



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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*The Book of
Chameleons: José
Eduardo Agualusa on
Duplicity, Tribute, and
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Caveat lector: Reader, beware!

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We should not judge a book by its title.

The Book of Chameleons
only mentions chameleons once.

“Lies [. . .] are everywhere. Even nature herself lies. What is camouflage, for instance, but a lie? The chameleon disguises itself as a leaf in order to deceive a poor butterfly.” (122)

In many ways this is not a book of chameleons, and those who open it expecting it to be so will be disappointed.

We may wonder what other deceptions
or tricks the book has in store for us,
what else in it is not quite what it seems.

The Portuguese original
(*O vendedor de passados*)
literally means “The Seller of Pasts.”

The book's past life in its original language has been gently erased and replaced, in its rebirth for an English-speaking readership.

“At its heart this is a book about a number of characters whose personalities—whose stories—keep shifting from moment to moment; whose true personalities and stories are impossible to pin down.”

(Daniel Hahn)

It is apt that the story shifts yet again as it moves into a new language.

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In English it *is* now a “book of chameleons.”
Its new title may lead us to read it slightly differently: new language, new book.

There are at least two ways of thinking about the “doubleness and duplicity” that, as Rita Maria Knop and Virgínia Carvalho de Assis Costa observe, are indelibly “inscribed in the novel.”

On the one hand, we could think about them in terms of treacherous mendacity and deception.

“He lies to it, saying, *Don't worry, my dear, can't you see I'm just a very green leaf waving in the breeze*, and then he jets out his tongue at six hundred and twenty-five centimeters a second, and eats it.” (122)

Here, the dissimulation is a trick or a trap, designed to put us off our guard and make us easy prey for the ruthless hunter.

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We should therefore always beware that the real thing still lurks behind the mask.

On the other hand, however, we might think about the ways in which dissimulation also creates something new that, as with the translated novel, has its own reality, a life of its own.

“To a great extent every translation is a re-creation. This isn't something that bothers me, rather the contrary.” (Agualusa)

There may be times at which we cannot easily distinguish between the “original” and the “copy,” or when the double comes to be more lifelike, more real, than the thing on which it is modelled.

This novel cannot quite decide between these two conceptions of doubleness.

For much of the time, in part in homage to the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, it suggests that a mask can have as much as if not more reality than what it masks.

But its somewhat surprising (and violent)
dénouement indicates by contrast that
beneath it all, things stay the same.

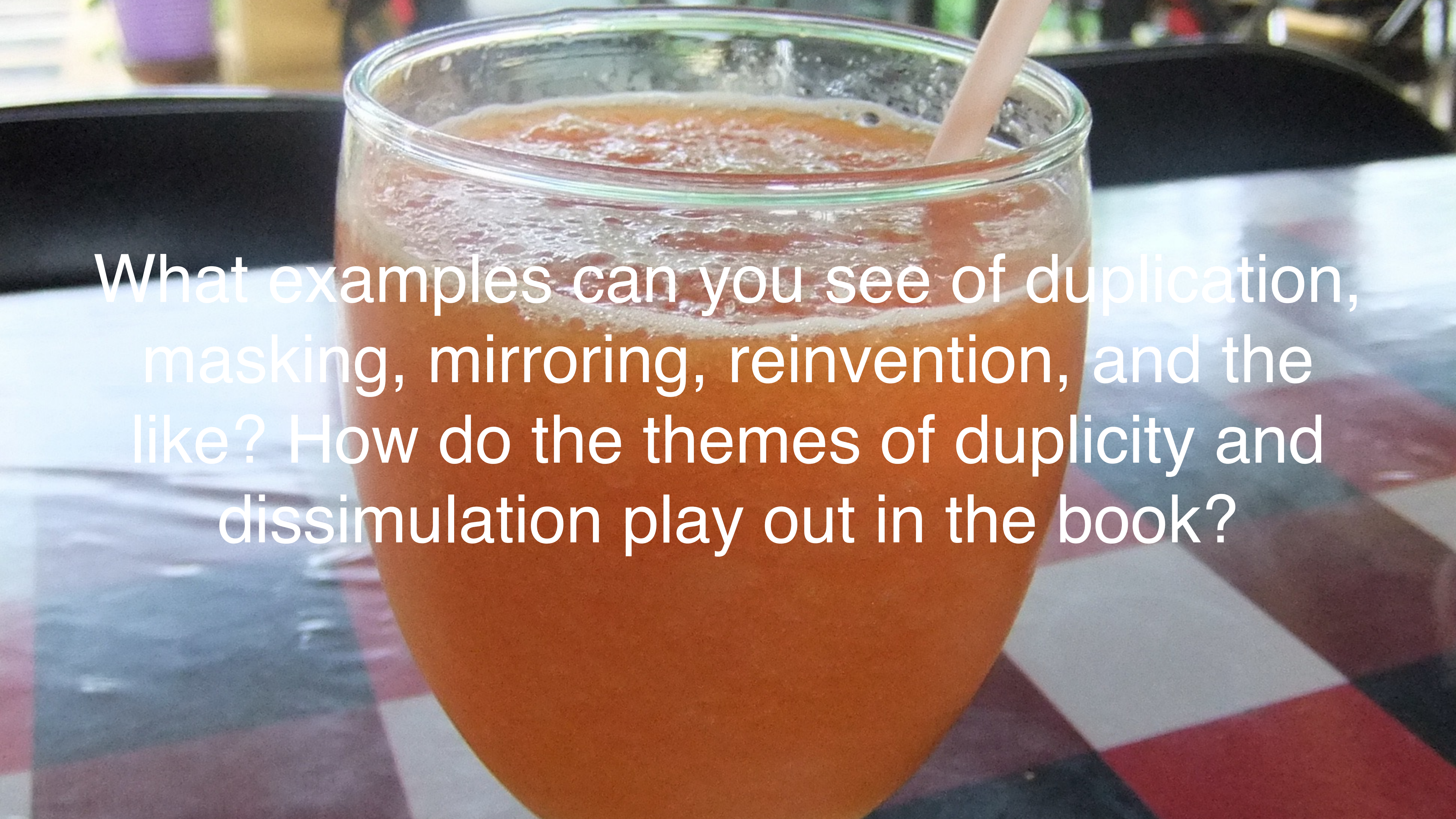
But its somewhat surprising (and violent) dénouement indicates by contrast that beneath it all, things stay the same.

In the end, the book seems to conclude, the truth will catch up with us, as we can never escape our pasts.



THE POWERS OF THE FALSE

What examples can you see of duplication, masking, mirroring, reinvention, and the like? How do the themes of duplicity and dissimulation play out in the book?

A close-up photograph of a tall, clear glass filled with a golden-brown beer, topped with a thick head of white foam. A light-colored straw is inserted into the beer. The glass sits on a red and white checkered tablecloth. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a bar or restaurant setting with other glasses and a dark surface.

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Félix Ventura is a collector and dealer of second-hand books on the one hand.

Félix Ventura is a collector and dealer of second-hand books on the one hand.

And he is a “seller of pasts” on the other.

“There was a whole class, [. . .]
a whole new bourgeoisie [. . .] whose
futures are secure. But what these people
lack is a good past, a distinguished
ancestry; diplomas. [. . .] He sells them
a brand new past.” (16)

“The creature’s amazement
annoyed me.” (3)

“You’ve really got terrible skin, you know that? We must be related. . .” (4)

The gecko, too, is double in that he remembers a past life as a man, and in his dreams he once more takes on human form and interacts with Ventura (who likewise dreams of the gecko-[re]turned-human) and other characters.

“My dreams are almost always more
lifelike than reality.” (46)

“My dreams are almost always more lifelike than reality.” (46)

It is unclear which is his “second life,” and which his first.

“He wanted more than just portraits and anecdotes. He needed a new name, authentic official documents that bore out this identity.” (17)

“He had an identity card, a passport, a driver’s license, all these documents in the name of José Buchmann, native of Chibia, fifty-two, professional photographer.” (38)

“Cape Town reminds me of a plastic palm tree. I tell you, it’s an impressive city—so clean, so tidy. It’s a fraud that it suits us to believe in.” (135)

“Félix was alarmed. He held the watercolor carefully between his fingers, as though he were afraid that the unlikelihood of the object could compromise its solidity.” (134)

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Somehow his fiction has
gained material weight.

“If I were to be born again, I’d like to be something completely different.”
(Jorge Luis Borges)

“In my book Borges is reincarnated in Luanda in the body of a gecko. The gecko’s memories correspond to fragments of Borges’s real life story. Somehow I wanted to give Borges a second chance.” (Aqualusa)

We may come to see Buchmann's adventures to be a rewriting of Borges.

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“Buchmann has the acquired initials of the blind librarian precursor.”

(Bernard McGuirk)

“I am not sure which of us it is that’s writing this page.” (Jorge Luis Borges)

“Félix would sew fiction in with reality dextrously, minutely, in such a way that historical facts and dates were respected.” (127)

Borges is the writerly ghost
haunting this entire novel.

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haunting this entire novel.

The entire game of doubles, in which the
priority of copy over original is thrown into
doubt, is quite evidently copied from
Agualusa's Argentine precursor.

“an offering or gift rendered as a duty,
or as an acknowledgement of
affection or esteem” (“tribute”)



HISTORY'S REVENGE

“I'm not even sure that I am a photographer.
I collect light” (51)

“I'm not even sure that I am a photographer.
I collect light” (51)

“Oh, my friend, I don't have the words
to describe her—everything
about her is Light.” (117)

“Enough! I don't want your memories to pollute this house with blood. . .” (75)

“Where there is light,
there are shadows too.” (117)

“I’m forced to make my way across
the discomfort of the daytime, running
along walls till I find a deeper crack,
a deeper damper crack where I can,
once again, rest.” (105)

“He emerged from a sewer that apparently
he’d made his home.” (74)

“An ancient, vengeful god, wild haired, with suddenly lit-up eyes.

““I’d like to introduce you to my friend Edmundo Barata dos Reis, an ex-agent of the Ministry of State Security.”” (143)

“Arrested in the early sixties, accused of trying to establish a bomb-making network in Luanda, he spent seven years in the Tarrafal concentration camp in Cape Verde.” (144)

**“A communist! Would you believe it?
I’m the very last communist south
of the equator. . .” (144)**

“It’s a shirt from the Communist Party of the USSR. I put it on the day they fired me, and I’ve never taken it off since. I swore I wouldn’t take it off until Russia went back to being communist. And now I wouldn’t be able to take it off even if I wanted to. Like a skin to me—you see? I’ve got a hammer and sickle tattooed on my chest now. That won’t come off.” (146)

He is a double of the post-colonial moment,
a reminder of a past that the ruling party,
the MPLA, would rather have us forget.

“The president has been replaced with a double. [. . .] They’ve put a double in his place, a scarecrow—I’m not sure how to put it—a fucking replica.” (145)

“So, we have a fantasy president now?
[. . .] Yes, I’d suspected as much. We have
a fantasy government. A fantasy justice
system. We have—in other words—a
fantasy country.” (145)

The very land they are living in is an illusion, both its present and its history little more than a tall tale, no more real than the fake genealogies that the seller of pasts concocts.

“A ghost. A demon. . .” (157)

“The revolution was under threat.
There was a band of nobodies, a gang of
irresponsible petits bourgeois who
tried to seize power.” (158)

Barata dos Reis's dark past
has caught up with him at last.

We have returned to the chameleon's mode of and *raison d'être* for duplicity: as a trap to lull the unwary into false confidence before inflicting a fatal blow.

At this point the Borgesian playfulness
and ambiguity fades, in favour of
realist explication.

“I needed Félix himself to believe in my life story. If he believed it, who wouldn’t? And today, I honestly believe it myself. I look back now, back into my past, and I see two lives. In one, I was Pedro Gouveia, in another José Buchmann. Pedro Gouveia died. José Buchmann returned to Chibia.” (172)

There is a sense that some of the experimentation and ambition of the novel has here been betrayed.

It is no wonder that after this, his final dream, the gecko / Borges promptly dies, killed by his mortal enemy, a scorpion.

It may be nice to think we can reinvent ourselves, construct new pasts and precursors, and fiction encourages us in this fantasy.

It may be nice to think we can reinvent ourselves, construct new pasts and precursors, and fiction encourages us in this fantasy.

But there are scars that simply will not fade.

Such devastation leaves ghosts that cannot be wished away, whether by the government's embrace of market neoliberalism or by ordinary men and women who might hope it had all been a dream.

No more illusions: not everything can be dressed up or denied, or not for long, before the real returns with a vengeance.




MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



CATERING

Mónica Perea



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