

Zola as Pornographic Point of Reference in Late Nineteenth-Century Brazil

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RÉSUMÉ:

Lorsqu'elle fit son apparition sur la scène littéraire, la fiction naturaliste fut, à tort, régulièrement représentée comme de la pornographie. Nombreux étaient ceux qui pensaient que les auteurs naturalistes écrivaient de la littérature pornographique sous le couvert de prétentions scientifiques. Aussi Zola eut-il à lutter toute sa vie contre sa réputation lascive. Au Portugal, Eça de Queirós en vint à reconnaître qu'il était inutile de se battre contre la perception généralisée selon laquelle la fiction naturaliste était malpropre et ordurière. L'éditeur anglais de Zola fut jugé et reconnu coupable de traduire et vendre des romans naturalistes français. Au Brésil, les périodiques rapportèrent ces incidents en reproduisant des colonnes de journaux et en répandant des jugements qu'ils s'étaient souvent appropriés. Des éditeurs et des libraires brésiliens s'associèrent pour annoncer les œuvres de fiction naturalistes licencieuses sous l'euphémisme "Lectures légères." Ces œuvres naturalistes étaient ainsi vendues et lues comme des histoires de sexe et de nudité. Quoique ce ne fût sans doute pas là son intention, Zola, figure centrale du mouvement, devint une référence incontournable pour les libraires et les lecteurs de littérature licencieuse. Nous nous proposons ici d'explorer le renom de Zola au Brésil au XIXe siècle et son statut de référence pornographique dans cette société.

Naturalism and pornography

It may seem odd that naturalist fiction was deemed pornographic when it first circulated, in Europe and in Brazil, but the evidence that this was so can be found everywhere in primary and secondary sources. Reading through notes, news, critical reviews, commentaries, bookstore advertisements, and the fiction of the period, we are repeatedly confronted with the perception that, when it came off the press, naturalist fiction circulated as porn. It wasn't about science or social reform, as traditional historiography claims; rather, it was about raw sex and the naked body. Naturalist fiction was typically announced, sold and read as stories capable of igniting sexual desire and setting the reader's body on fire. It was linked to pornography and its cousin masturbation. Its commercial success partially derived from that perception. In Brazil, naturalist books circulated covertly as erotic material among schoolboys, who found them precious, refreshing and liberating. As a rule, they were read in secret, hidden in trunks or locked away in drawers, despite being relatively cheap and easy to find.¹

It made sense. Both pornography and naturalist fiction were based on scientism and philosophical materialism. Pornography was one of the genres capable of describing the world of mechanized nature, atomizing and stripping the bodies, which came to be seen as mere matter in motion² – a belief that is noticeable in naturalism's investment in repetition, in biology and instinctual life. Like pornography, naturalism was viciously realistic and adopted the novel as

¹ Leonardo Mendes, "Biblioteca picante: o naturalismo como produto erótico," in Lucia Helena and Paulo César de Oliveira, eds., *Literatura, arte e mercado: XI Seminário Nação-Invenção* (Niterói: Instituto de Letras da Universidade Federal Fluminense, 2014) 83-95; Leonardo Mendes, "Livros para Homens: sucessos pornográficos no Brasil no final do século XIX," *Cadernos do IL 53* (2016):173-91.

² Margaret Jacob, "O mundo materialista da pornografia," in Lynn Hunt, ed., trans. Carlos Szlak, *A invenção da pornografia: obscenidade e as origens da modernidade* (São Paulo: Editora Hedra, 1999) 169-215.

its literary form.³ The same social energies that gave rise to the novel – individualism, relativism, empiricism and urban culture – contributed to the birth of pornography.⁴ Both the naturalist novel and pornography appealed to science as an intellectual authority and advocated the idea that nature was morally neutral.⁵ They both adopted a detached, scientific style that avoided judgment. The materialistic notion of nature evidently encouraged the erotic.⁶ If naturalism was to tell the truth about nature and bodily life, the representation of sex and nakedness were inescapable.

Indeed, the charge that naturalist fiction was pornographic was commonplace until at least the 1920s, in Europe and in Brazil. To view sex as a dominant force in human action was a provocation and a threat to the moral and political tone of society. Perceived as obscene, naturalist books faced robust resistance in Brazil. The influential critic José Veríssimo (1857-1916) was among many who informed against a subliminal “pornographic tradition” in naturalism.⁷ Portuguese writer Manuel Pinheiro Chagas (1842-1895) expressed a popular opinion at the time when he accused naturalist writers of writing licentious literature veiled by a scientific intent.⁸ He censured the “low pornography” of Zola’s work.⁹ For the radical Portuguese priest José Joaquim de Sena Freitas (1840-1913), naturalist fiction and pornography were a matter for the police.¹⁰ In his famous review of the Portuguese novel *O Primo Basílio* [*Cousin Bazilio*] (1878), by Eça de Queirós (1845-1900), the prominent Machado de Assis (1839-1908) bluntly called naturalism a shady and shameful art.¹¹ The perception that naturalism was obscene was so prevalent – even in literary circles –, that Eça de Queirós thought it was a waste of time to argue against it.¹²

Nevertheless naturalist writers resisted such appropriations and fought back. The association with obscenity undermined their standing in respectable society and challenged their claims of serious scholarship. The successful trial of Gustave Flaubert’s (1821-1880) *Madame Bovary* (1857) provided the defense argument.¹³ The intention was not to awaken the licentious imagination, but to expose and denounce society’s corruption (which included unruly sexual behavior), by means of observation and study.¹⁴ By condemning the effects of dishonesty – the adulterous Emma was punished with death –, the novel ensured morality. Thus the naturalist writer became “an experimental moralist.”¹⁵ The same reasoning could be applied to Zola’s *Nana* (1880) and Eça de Queirós’ *Cousin Bazilio*. Aiming at the elevation of naturalism from the low ranks of pornographic discourse, the so-called “pedagogical argument” was evoked by almost every naturalist writer and was uncritically assimilated by historiography as a matter of fact. As it tends to naturalize the dominant

³ Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Esses livros que se leem com uma só mão. Leitura e leitores de livros pornográficos no século XVIII* (São Paulo: Discurso Editorial, 2000).

⁴ Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁵ Aram Vartanian, “La Mettrie, Diderot, and Sexology in the Enlightenment,” in Jean Macary, ed., *Essays on the Age of Enlightenment in Honor of Ira O. Wade* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1977) 347-67.

⁶ Patrick Kearny, *A History of Erotic Literature* (Hong Kong: Parragon Books, 1982).

⁷ José Veríssimo, “O romance naturalista no Brasil,” in José Veríssimo, *Teoria, crítica e história literária* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1977) 179-202.

⁸ The same accusations had been leveled at popular medical manuals in the eighteenth century, showing how the appropriation of scientific sexual discourse as pornography (and the resistance to it) was occurring before the rise of naturalism. See Roy Porter, “Forbidden Pleasures: Enlightenment Literature of Sexual Advice,” in Paula Bennet and Vernon Rosario, eds., *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary, and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 75-98.

⁹ *O País*, Rio de Janeiro, 28 August 1893.

¹⁰ José Joaquim de Sena Freitas, “*A carniça*, por Júlio Ribeiro,” in Júlio Ribeiro and Padre Sena Freitas, *Uma polêmica célebre* (São Paulo: Edições Cultura Brasileira, 1935) 29-51.

¹¹ Machado de Assis wrote this review under the pseudonym of “Eleazar.” See Eleazar, “O Primo Basílio,” *O Cruzeiro*, Rio de Janeiro, 16 April 1878.

¹² *A Semana*, Rio de Janeiro, 16 April 1887.

¹³ Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987) 178.

¹⁴ Maria Helena Santana, “O naturalismo e a moral ou o poder da literatura,” *Soletras* 30 (2015): 158-71.

¹⁵ William Frierson, *The English Novel in Transition (1885-1940)* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942) 16.

writers' self-image, historiography traditionally confirms that naturalist novels were pedagogical, without considering the ways by which books could be appropriated and read by non-specialist readers and booksellers.

The sources suggest that the "pedagogical argument" was not taken seriously outside literary and academic circles. The Catholic Church, still a force to be reckoned with, was not impressed. It used the editorial pages of the weekly *O Apóstolo*, run by the Rio de Janeiro Prelacy and the Catholic Bookstore, to fight consistently, for decades, against the fallacious argument that naturalist fiction aimed at the improvement of society's morals. Conservative periodicals like *Jornal do Commercio* and *Jornal do Brasil*, in Rio de Janeiro, fought the same battles and judged the "pedagogical argument" an affront to people's intelligence. For booksellers and publishers, on the other hand, the misrepresentation of naturalism as lewd literature meant good business. It helped increase the sales of the dour "scientific novel," which readers could read selectively, highlighting the pornographic sequences only. Rarely did the "pedagogical argument" cross over to common readers, publishers and booksellers. It wasn't in their interest. If one wanted to buy a naturalist book, the place to look in the bookstore was the pornographic literature section.

As a central figure of the movement, Zola became an important reference of licentiousness in Brazil. In the naturalist novel *A normalista* [*The Schoolgirl*] (1893), by Adolfo Caminha (1867-1897), as well as in other literary works of the time, to be caught reading Zola was enough to ruin a girl's reputation.¹⁶ His name was evoked by the press as a means of pinpointing obscene and unlawful behavior in society. When reporting about indecency or a gruesome crime, journalists used expressions such as – in free paraphrases – "a disgraceful scene that seemed to have come out of a Zola novel," or "a depraved character that only Zola could have imagined and described." The expression "to speak sentences from a Zola's novel" was a euphemism for foul language. His work stood as a materialist counter-narrative to religious discourse. It stood for the unconventional, the libidinous and the rebellious. It was a place where one could find graphic descriptions of sexual activity and use these to titillate mind and body. In this paper, we will investigate Zola's renown in late nineteenth-century Brazil and his presence as a pornographic reference in that society.

The pornographic book

Starting in the 1880s, a new space for the circulation of pornographic literature gradually emerges in Brazil. It is tempting to conclude the shift had to do with the decline of the monarchy, its ideologies and cultural products, leading to the overthrow of Emperor Pedro II on November 15, 1889. Pornographic material had begun appearing in bookstore advertisements in major newspapers before the regime change. With caution, but surprised by the openness, writers began to comment on obscene literature in notes and chronicles. In Rio de Janeiro, new bookstores appeared, like the *Livraria do Povo* and the *Livraria Moderna*, which operated more openly in the pornographic book trade. New printing and binding techniques lowered the price of books. The increase in supply of titles, genres and prices popularized reading.¹⁷ Rio de Janeiro had 520 000 inhabitants, 8 theaters and around 20 bookstores.¹⁸ With a literacy rate of 50%, the city was home to thousands of potential readers. Publishing and selling pornography was a lucrative business. As in Europe, slowly, but surely, pornographic writing was becoming an industry in Brazil.¹⁹

¹⁶ Elisabeth Ladenson, "Literature and Sex," in John D. Lyons, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to French Literature* (Cambridge, US: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 222-40.

¹⁷ See Alessandra El Far, *Páginas de sensação: Literatura popular e pornográfica no Rio de Janeiro (1870-1924)* (São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2004).

¹⁸ See Décio Renault, *A vida brasileira no final do século XIX. Uma visão sociocultural e política de 1890 a 1901* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1987).

¹⁹ See Marcus, *The Other Victorians* and Jamie Stoops, "Class and Gender Dynamics of the Pornographic Trade in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain," *The Historical Journal* 58.1 (2015): 137-56.

It is not an anachronism to apply the word “pornography” to late nineteenth-century Brazil. The word was known then and used to mean either obscene language (especially in political discourse) or explicit representations of organs and sexual activity created to trigger bodily sensations in the readers.²⁰ Modern pornography is about gratuitous sex between activated and interchangeable bodies.²¹ The term was applicable to books that were thought to incite readers to have recreational sex, even if they were not produced for that end, like naturalist novels. Rather than a mode of representation, pornography can be seen as “a way of reading.”²² It is “any form of expression that somebody could find sexually stimulating.”²³ Pornography refers to “an interaction between reader and text, not to text or authorial intent alone.”²⁴ In a society with few visual depictions of sex and nudity, naturalist fiction was enough to make the heart beat and awaken the licentious imagination. It was one of the most sexually explicit discourses in that society.

Back then (as nowadays), calling a work or author “pornographic” was an insult and a form of downgrading his/her writing. The word “erotic” also appeared in the press and in critical reviews, but functioned in reality as a variant of “pornographic” or “obscene.” It did not imply an elevated or subliminal form of sexual discourse, as “erotica” came to signify after modernism.²⁵ In order to avoid the negativity (and unwanted attention) associated with those words, publishers used humorous expressions such as “Joyful Reading,” “Happy Books,” “The Bachelor’s Library,” or, the most usual, “Books (or Reading) for Men.”²⁶ Huge adverts with a large variety of titles appeared on the third or fourth page of major newspapers. Despite suggesting a patriarchal ban, labels like “Books for Men” served essentially to define the type of printed material on sale, marketing it as pornographic; this designation did not stop women from reading and appreciating these works.²⁷ There were options for all tastes and budgets. Following the lead of the Catholic Church, many condemned the visibility of these books, but the 1890 Penal Code did not prohibit the publication and circulation of pornography.²⁸

Zola’s celebrity in Brazil

Émile Zola was one of the most famous living writers of his time. Thanks to the increasing transatlantic circulation of printed matter in the nineteenth century, art and ideas could travel from Europe to Brazil (and vice-versa) in a matter of weeks, thus creating a tangible sense of a globalized community of shared tastes, feelings, mindsets and heroes.²⁹ Zola was a true international celebrity in the sense

²⁰ Lynn Hunt, “Obscenidade e as origens da modernidade,” in *A invenção da pornografia: obscenidade e as origens da modernidade* (São Paulo: Editora Hedra, 1999) 9-46.

²¹ See Jacob, “O mundo materialista da pornografia.”

²² Ian Frederick Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 11.

²³ Jerry Barnett, *Porn Panic: Sex and Censorship in the UK* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2016) 12.

²⁴ Chantelle Thauvette, “Defining Early Pornography: the Case of ‘Venus and Adonis,’” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 12.1 (2012): 46.

²⁵ While “pornography” would be defined by the transparency of sexual representation, “erotica” prizes aestheticism and verbal games. See Dominique Maingueneau, trans. Marcos Marcionito, *O discurso pornográfico* (São Paulo: Parábola Editorial, 2010). We reject this distinction because it reinforces conceptions of pornography as an inferior form of cultural production.

²⁶ See Leonardo Mendes, “Livros para Homens,” 173-91.

²⁷ In Britain women participated in the pornography market at this time, as distributors, consumers, and sometimes authors. See Stoops, “Class and Gender Dynamics of the Pornographic Trade in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain,” 137-56.

²⁸ The article 282 in Chapter V of the 1890 Brazilian Penal Code, “About Public Offenses to Modesty,” set a one to six month term of imprisonment for those who “offend conventional morals with impudent displays, obscene acts or gestures, practiced in a public place or attended by the public, that outrage and scandalize society.” It made no reference to pornographic material. My translation. Available at: Web. 30 Sept. 2014 <<http://legis.senado.gov.br/legislacao/ListaPublicacoes.action?id=66049>>.

²⁹ Márcia Abreu, “Fiction as an Element of Cultural Connection,” in Márcia Abreu, ed., *The Transatlantic Circulation of Novels between Europe and Brazil, 1789-1914* (London: Palgrave, 2017) 1-12.

that an image of his public *persona*, thanks to mass media, spread to many areas of his literary circle and country.³⁰ As a global personality, he attracted a lot of attention. An incredible amount of information about him circulated in nineteenth-century Brazilian periodicals, from all regions, ranging from personal gossip to literary and political quarrels. Zola's celebrity status turned his public *persona* into an international trademark that stood for many things: political upheaval, foul language and obscenity, but also republicanism, literary craftsmanship and social reform. He was loved and hated with equal passion.

A hallmark of celebrity culture is the attention paid to what happens in the famous person's private life.³¹ Nineteenth-century Brazilian readers could find abundant information regarding Zola's house, office, marriage, trips, disputes, income, diseases, social life and sudden death. Fame made Zola an easy target for swindlers, like the so-called journalist who stole eight hundred francs worth of objects from his office while waiting for his arrival for a fake interview.³² One could read that a coachman who wrongly accused Madame Zola of not paying for a ride, in Paris, was harassing her.³³ Fans could engage symbolically with the famous writer by worrying about his health, when they learned that Zola was losing his sight and that doctors had recommended complete rest.³⁴ Even a medical profile was available for the fiercest of admirers, in which one could find information about Zola's childhood and physical predispositions.³⁵

The writer's fame can be further attested by his presence as a wax figure at Rio de Janeiro's *Musée Parisien*, in the 1890s. The habit of immortalizing renowned people in wax started in France with Madame Tussaud (1761-1850), who famously unveiled her rendering of Voltaire in 1777.³⁶ The *Musée Parisien* was quite successful, despite its modest collection, which included celebrities whose names were teasingly kept in secret, as well as characters from everyday life, like "the fortune teller," "the shoe shine boy," "the indiscreet Englishman," among others.³⁷ With the affordable admission price of one thousand réis – equivalent to a cheap lunch in downtown Rio –, the museum attracted an average of two hundred people daily.³⁸ Madame Sylvie Daydl, from France, owned the venue.³⁹ She was connected to the Grévin Wax Museum, in Paris, and brought some of their collection to Brazil.⁴⁰ The sculptures conveyed an eerie sense of physical presence and were very alluring. Zola's figure was open to the public in April 1893. He appeared sitting at his desk, "with his major works scattered over it."⁴¹ Apparently he was the only writer to be bestowed such honour.

Zola's renown was put to the test during the Dreyfus Affair, in 1898. In the notorious exposé "J'Accuse," Zola clearly draws on his celebrity power to advance a political cause.⁴² The Affair was thoroughly reported in Brazil, in periodicals of every persuasion and region. The Catholic *O Apóstolo* called it "the Zola Affair," as an ironic denunciation of the major role played by the abominated writer in the polemic.⁴³ After Zola was sentenced to one year in prison and given a fine of three thousand francs, physicians, apothecaries and medical students from Bahia, in the north, started the *Club Emilio Zola*, as a center to raise donations

³⁰ Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2004).

³¹ Olivier Driessens, "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture," *International Journal for Cultural Studies* 16.6 (2013): 641–57.

³² *A República*, Belém do Pará, 6 April 1893.

³³ *Diário de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 13 November 1893.

³⁴ *Diário de Notícias*, Belém do Pará, 17 December 1890.

³⁵ *O Democrata*, Belém do Pará, 20, 21, 25, 29 April 1891.

³⁶ Kate Berridge, *Madame Tussaud: A Life in Wax* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 2006).

³⁷ *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 8 May 1892.

³⁸ *O Tempo*, Rio de Janeiro, 15 August 1892.

³⁹ *Almanak Laemmert: Administrativo, Mercantil e Industrial do Rio de Janeiro* (1894): 383.

⁴⁰ *Jornal do Commercio*, Rio de Janeiro, 6 April 1892.

⁴¹ *Jornal do Commercio*, Rio de Janeiro, 1 May 1893.

⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Susan Emanuel, *The Rules of Art, Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁴³ *O Apóstolo*, Rio de Janeiro, 13 March 1898.

to help pay for the penalty.⁴⁴ But others rejoiced when the writer suffered setbacks. On June 4 1908, when his remains were controversially placed in the Pantheon, the correspondent of Rio de Janeiro's *O País* in Paris, Xavier de Carvalho, interviewed people in the streets nearby. The predominant opinion in the crowd, he writes, was that Zola had defended Dreyfus for financial profit and had written only "pornographic books."⁴⁵

Hence Zola's books were available as "Joyful Reading" in Brazilian bookstores of every region, in French or in translations, usually imported from Portugal. They had the clandestine status of obscene material, but a reader with three or four thousand *réis* could easily buy a new copy of *L'Assommoir* (1877), *La Curée* (1872), *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873), *Le Capitaine Burle* (1882), *Germinal* (1885), *La Terre* (1887), *La Débâcle* (1892), and the highly popular *Nana* (1880), among others. They appeared side by side with apocryphal low-priced brochures like *Prowess of a Clitoris*, *How to Treat Women as They Deserve*, *Sketchy Tales that Send a Chill Down the Spine*, "and other works that help increase the appetite with some chili pepper, suitable for rust removal in cold weather."⁴⁶ In devastating commentaries, Zola was called "the degenerate Frenchman,"⁴⁷ but the majority of the men of letters thought that, albeit morally dubious, he was a modern genius.

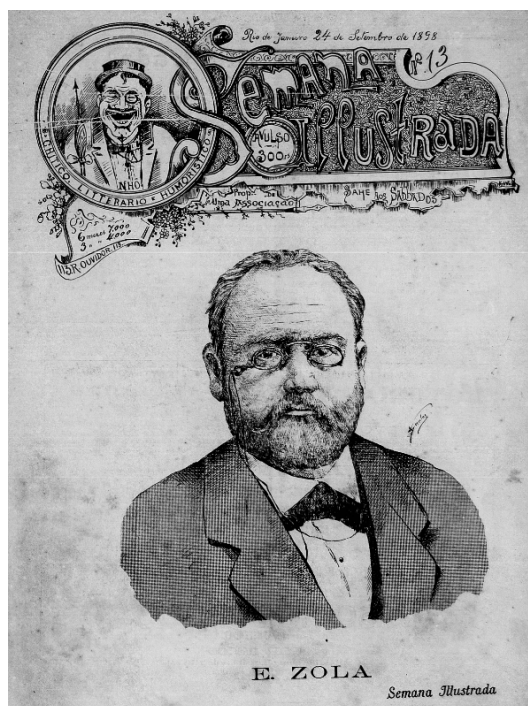


Fig. 1: Émile Zola on the cover of the weekly *Semana Illustrada*, Rio de Janeiro, 24 September 1898

⁴⁴ *Jornal de Notícias*, Bahia, 14 March 1898.

⁴⁵ *O País*, Rio de Janeiro, 26 June 1908.

⁴⁶ My translation. [{"...} e outras obrinhas para desenvolver o apetite com umas pimentinhas, próprias para desenferrujar no tempo frio"]. *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 5 May 1886.

⁴⁷ My translation. ["O francês degenerado"]. *Cidade do Salvador*, Bahia, 4 March 1898.

Zola as pornographic reference in Brazil

In columns of periodicals from all regions of Brazil, the utterance of Zola's name signaled lascivious behavior, sex and nudity. A note published in Rio de Janeiro's *Diário de Notícias*, in January 1890, regarding the curbing of prostitution and pimping, illustrates this pattern. Having recently deposed the monarchy and abolished slavery, the country was aiming at enacting measures to project a more civilized picture of the capital. Addressing the police chief by name, the journalist urges the authorities to arrest "the scoundrels whose vile instincts were perfectly described in Zola's *L'Assommoir*, the wretch for whom the word honour has no value and whose dignity can be bought for a price."⁴⁸ As another example among many, in the "Varieties" column of the same daily, the writer defines Brazilian love as "a volume of Casimiro de Abreu's poetry, on whose cover one can read: *Nana*, by Émile Zola,"⁴⁹ implying that the naturalist writer's work stood for the physicality of sex behind every amorous discourse. No wonder naturalist writers were repeatedly accused of reducing the art of the novel to commerce and the selling of sex.

Throughout the nineteenth and up to the twentieth century, the expression "French literature" evoked the limits of obscenity, with Rabelais, Sade and Zola cited as exemplary figures of literary inadmissibility.⁵⁰ Similarly in Brazil, the *Diário de Belém*, in June 1885, blamed the reading of French literature for the increase in public indecent exposures in Belém, capital city of Grão-Pará Province, in the north. The report complained about a male exhibitionist who frequently paraded naked in a bakery, after work, with doors and windows open for all to see. The writer speculates that the young man could only be one of Zola's "assiduous followers,"⁵¹ with no regard to morality and manners. The police should intervene and enforce the law, he demanded. In the same fashion, the daily *O Cearense*, from Fortaleza, also in the north, published in October 1888 the anecdote of a conversation between two customers, in a tavern. One, who was an admirer of naturalist writers, suggested that after Léon Gambetta's (1838-1882) death, Zola was cut out to be the next French president. The other replied: "God forbid! In no time Zola would strip the whole country naked."⁵² Again, Zola's naturalist fiction was outlawed or at least forced to become clandestine, like prostitution, nudity and pimping.

That perception was not limited to newsmen, greedy booksellers or unrefined readers. Artur Azevedo's (1855-1908) review of *La Terre*, published at the daily *Novidades*, in Rio de Janeiro, in October 1887, offers strong proof that even cultivated writers thought Zola went too far and became pornographic. Artur Azevedo was a very influential journalist, playwright, poet, short-story writer and critic whose opinion was important. He was the older brother of Aluísio Azevedo (1857-1913), who authored the canonical naturalist novel *O cortiço* [*The Slum*] (1890). Like Aluísio, Artur was no puritan and admired Zola. He conceded that *La Terre* was no ephemeral book and was worthy of standing next to *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, but its obscenity and foul language were uncalled for and added nothing to the "book's physiology." He suspected the sole purpose of these novels was to outrage the public and attract buyers. Sex and obscenity for their own sake constituted the definition of pornography. Azevedo warned that *La Terre* was a serious disclaimer of Zola's (and naturalism's) good intentions.

⁴⁸ My translation. [{"...} os miseráveis cujos instintos torpes foram perfeitamente descritos no *Assommoir*, de Emilio Zola, do desgraçado para quem a palavra honra tem valor nulo e a moeda traça o limite da dignidade"]. *Diário de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 13 January 1890.

⁴⁹ Casimiro de Abreu (1839-1860) was a major Brazilian romantic poet. My translation. [{"O amor do brasileiro é um volume das poesias de Casimiro de Abreu, em cuja capa se lê: *Nana*, de Emilio Zola"}]. *Diário de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 6 January 1890.

⁵⁰ See Ladenson, "Literature and Sex."

⁵¹ "Emilio Zola é francês; nós somos brasileiros." *Diário de Belém*, Belém do Pará, 3 June 1885.

⁵² My translation. [{"Deus nos acuda! Em pouco tempo punha a França nua em pelo!"}] *O Cearense*, Fortaleza, 25 October 1888.

He wrote: “Some pages prompt the reader to cover his nose. Others inspire a feeling of sadness among the master’s admirers, who are sorry that he would needlessly write such filth, he, Balzac’s glorious heir.”⁵³

The news about the trial of English publisher Henry Vizitelly (1820-1894), in 1888, for commercializing French naturalist novels, further enhanced the perception that Zola was a filthy writer. The story was reported in several Brazilian newspapers and blatantly associated the writer’s name with indecent literature and unlawfulness. In September 1888, in the daily *A Regeneração*, from Desterro,⁵⁴ in the south of Brazil, one could read that Vizitelly was being prosecuted in London for translating and selling editions of *Nana*, *La Terre* and *Pot-Bouille* (1882). In defiance, the publisher claimed to have sold millions of copies of the works, as evidence of the public’s interest. That did not stop the prosecutor from arguing, during the trial, that Zola’s novels were the three most obscene books ever to circulate in England. The English, he assured, did “well enough without the coarse and dissolute depiction of French vices.”⁵⁵

The defense lawyer begged to differ and claimed that Byron’s *Don Juan* and Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* were much filthier than Zola’s novels. In order to disprove him, the prosecutor read fragments from *La Terre*, whose crude language and violent sexual energy were considered by the general public to be particularly hard to stomach. After a while, the president of the jury stood up and asked him to stop, begging to spare people’s “ears from being stained by such indecencies.”⁵⁶ Eventually, Desterro’s *A Regeneração* reported that Vizitelly was condemned for publishing and selling Zola’s novels because they were judged indecent literature in England. He paid a hundred-pound fine and was asked to withdraw naturalist books from circulation. Apparently the bookseller didn’t oblige, because the next year he was tried and condemned again, sentenced to three months in prison and forced to declare bankruptcy.⁵⁷ This was happening in London, at the capital of modern civilization. No one could claim it was uncivilized to ban Zola’s books on the grounds of immorality.

Indeed, in the eyes of the public, Zola’s reputation as licentious writer made sense because he authored one of the international pornographic favourites of the period: *Nana*.⁵⁸ The story of the ups and downs of the Parisian courtesan was Zola’s most popular book in Brazil. It was a guarantee of realist descriptions of sexual activity and worked as a decoy for the sale of other works by the author. In May 1880, three months after it appeared in France, the Portuguese translation, in two volumes, could be bought in Brazilian bookstores for three thousand réis – a pricy book. Although the majority of Zola’s novels could be found in Brazil, in French or in translation, *Nana* was the only one to appear alone in bookstore advertisements, in large bold letters, as proof of the book’s attractiveness and importance. The publishers Félix Ferreira & Co., from Rio de Janeiro, prudently claimed “the excesses of realist language”⁵⁹ had been edited out. Still, the risk of scandal could be measured by the translator’s decision to sign the work with the pseudonym of Basílio de Brito, to protect himself, as pornographic authors do to this day.

⁵³ My translation. [“Algumas páginas dão ao leitor vontade de tapar o nariz; outras inspiram um sentimento de mágoa aos admiradores do mestre, que se lastimam de que, sem necessidade, escrevesse essas imundícies, ele, o glorioso herdeiro de Balzac!”]. *Novidades*, Rio de Janeiro, 18 October 1887.

⁵⁴ Nowadays Desterro is called Florianópolis, the capital city of the state of Santa Catarina.

⁵⁵ My translation. [“Os ingleses passam bem sem pintura grosseira e dissolvente dos vícios franceses”]. *A Regeneração*, Desterro, 20 September 1888.

⁵⁶ My translation. [“Poupai aos nossos ouvidos o mancharem-se com essas indecências”]. *A Regeneração*, Desterro, 5 January 1889.

⁵⁷ See Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*.

⁵⁸ See Leonardo Mendes, “The Bachelor’s Library: Pornographic Books on the Brazil-Europe circuit in the late nineteenth century,” in Abreu 79-100.

⁵⁹ *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 30 maio 1880.

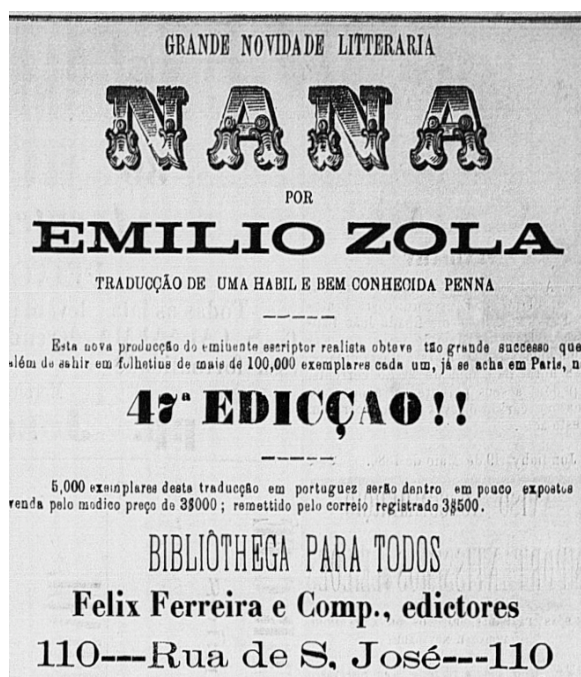


Fig. 2: Advertisement for the Brazilian edition of *Nana*, by Felix Ferreira & Co.⁶⁰

Nana was continually advertised as a “Book for Men” until the beginning of the century and was available in bookstores from all regions of Brazil. The book’s potential for pornographic consumption can be best understood when we read writers connected with the monarchy and the Catholic Church, like Visconde de Taunay (1843-1899), this latter author of the well-known regionalist novel *Inocência* (1872). Taunay claimed to hate Zola’s book, but ambiguously confessed he was hooked and read the “524 pages in one sitting.”⁶¹ He makes the traditional moralizing criticism of naturalism, denouncing and describing its obscenities, which functioned as a confession of pornographic appropriation and an invitation for the reader to do the same. One of *Nana*’s immoralities he denounced was lesbianism, a spicy topic until then restricted to clandestine literature or the libertine novel. Taunay came up with a description of *Nana* that could be applied to any pornographic work: it was, he wrote, “an endless orgy, with repeated episodes,” written and published to make a profit.⁶² *O Apóstolo* congratulated Taunay for “his condemnation of the famous *Nana*,” hoping the writer would continue to censure “these filthy novels that are imported from Europe and produce no result other than the demoralization of our youth.”⁶³

In October 1879, in Rio de Janeiro’s *Jornal do Commercio*, people could read that, in Rome, a performance of the drama *L’Assommoir* had been interrupted by the infuriated public, shouting, due to its obscenity: “Enough! Enough!”⁶⁴ The gazette *Gutenberg*, from Maceió, in the north, reported that as of December 1896, Zola’s books had finally been allowed to circulate legally in the United States, after years of censorship on grounds of immorality.⁶⁵ In

⁶⁰ *Correio Paulistano*, São Paulo, 21 May 1880.

⁶¹ Sylvio Dinarte (pseud. Visconde de Taunay), “*Nana*, por Emilio Zola,” in Sylvio Dinarte, *Estudos criticos*, Literatura e Filologia, vol. 2 (Rio de Janeiro: Typ. Leuzinger e Filhos, 1883) 3-20.

⁶² Dinarte 6.

⁶³ My translation. [“censura que fez da célebre *Nana*”]; [“esses imundos romances que da Europa são importados, e que outro resultado mais não produzem senão desmoralizar a nossa mocidade”]. *O Apóstolo*, Rio de Janeiro, 6 June 1883.

⁶⁴ My translation. [“Chega! Chega!”]. *Jornal do Commercio*, Rio de Janeiro, 5 October 1879.

⁶⁵ *Gutenberg*, Maceió, 20 December 1896.

October 1881, *O Apóstolo* gleefully relayed the news that, in Berlin and Vienna, copies of the German translation of *Nana* had been confiscated and destroyed. So it made sense for a note in Rio de Janeiro's *O Repórter* (April 1879) to state that Zola "was writing a comedy titled *Nana* as a sequel to *L'Assommoir*."⁶⁶ The story of Zola's prostitute, so it went, was no serious scientific novel; rather it was a comic, fragmented work, pornographic and pleasurable to read. *Nana* was a very successful book in Brazil. In his column for Rio de Janeiro's *Gazeta de Notícias* (1905), influential writer João do Rio (1881-1921) listed *Nana* as among the top ten list of requests at the National Library.⁶⁷

Conclusions

The sources suggest that, in late nineteenth-century Brazil, Zola was a celebrity of sex and obscenity. This can be verified in many other instances that have been excluded from this paper due to lack of space. The writer's omnipresence as a pornographic reference was a testimony to his naturalist novels' popularity in Brazil. Zola's name and books meant good business (and trouble). They pushed the limits of legality and appropriateness in print, including the realist representation of sex and the naked body, relying on pornographic discourse to set the characters in motion. For the first readers, journalists, publishers, booksellers, and even cultivated writers like Artur Azevedo, the evidences that Zola and his literature were pornographic was easy to spot. References to sex was there to trigger pleasurable sensations in the readers. In this regard, it could be argued that naturalist fiction helped pornography come "out of the closet" and become more popular and accepted, no longer the privilege of refined aristocrats with access to rare books.

In Brazil, *Nana* and *La Terre* were Zola's novels most closely associated with pornographic discourse. Thus, publishers and booksellers marketed them as "Joyful Reading." Despite describing tragedies, these books would somehow "drive away disgust, develop the nerves and activate the will."⁶⁸ "Joyful Reading" meant sex focusing on naked bodies, snubbing science, plot and drama. The books were associated with laughter and physical well being, in the tradition of Boccaccio's *novellas* and Rabelais' "triumphant lasciviousness."⁶⁹ They were able to arouse affection, accelerate the heartbeat and perhaps cause an erection and an orgasm, providing the reader with an experience of physical and mental satisfaction, of release and liberation. Notwithstanding his best intentions, Zola was a major provider of these pleasures to legions of readers in Brazil. As Artur Azevedo and other men of letters grudgingly conceded, Zola's obscenity did not diminish his stature as a powerful writer, capable of gratifying readers with diverse backgrounds and cravings. As such, Zola's alleged pornography should not be treated as a misunderstanding by unlearned readers – as traditional historiography tends to present it –, but as a dimension of his writing that was as important as (and should not be incongruent with) the scientific author we have rightly come to admire.

⁶⁶ My translation. [Emilio Zola está escrevendo uma comédia intitulada *Nana* para servir de continuação ao *Assommoir*]. *O Repórter*, Rio de Janeiro, 5 April 1879.

⁶⁷ *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 6 February 1905.

⁶⁸ My translation. [{"...} afugenta os desgostos, desenvolve os nervos e ativa a vontade"]. *A Pacotilha*, Maranhão, 3 July 1895.

⁶⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984).