

Science fiction during the Brazilian dictatorship

Roberto de Sousa Causo

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Abstract:

Many fictional works on the Brazilian dictatorship are filled with resentment. The characterization of repression from 1964 to 1984 in the novels have significantly diminished their literary and historical contexts. Some of the works utilized science fictional devices to condemn the military and the country's social conditions. In addition, there were a number of works that characterized a sense of technocratic utopia in the country which correlated with authors' lack of knowledge on the genre's themes.

Full Text:

The latest Brazilian dictatorship (we had a couple) started in 1964 and ended in 1984 - twenty years of military rule.

As with every abrupt change in a country's social context, that dictatorship divided society between those who supported it and those who opposed it. Of course, there was a borderline of people who could not commit themselves strictly to one side, due to a lack of knowledge of what was really going on - or to a superior knowledge of what was going on. The ones who supported it used the expression "1964 Revolution"; the ones who opposed it talked about the "1964 Coup d'Etat." One group called the regime "authoritarian," the other, "dictatorial" (which it certainly was). Anyway, the coming of the military into power was supported then by many conservative and nationalist areas of Brazil - including businesspeople, intellectuals, part of the (Roman Catholic) church, a huge number of the middle classes - and the North Americans (as many observers believe) - all concerned with the "Communist Threat" and the lack of a government center the country was suffering with at the time.⁽¹⁾ Resistance movements started as early as 1965 - some of them within military ranks, such as Col. Jefferson Cardim Osorio's Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional, or Armed Forces for National Liberation. In 1968 there was a great deal of street manifestation and rallies repressed by the government, which forbid public acts of political nature. In that same year right-wing organizations formed, such as the Comando de Caca a Comunistas, or Commando of Hunters of Communists. Even university students were divided between supporters and opponents of the regime, and also in 1968 both sides clashed in Sao Paulo, resulting in one death. American army captain Charles Chandler was killed in Silo Paulo by a guerrilla unit in that year too. And in 1969 a group of businessmen and industrialists sponsored a violent repressive action, the so-called Operacao Bandeirantes. The year 1969 was also the one in which the American ambassador Charles Elbrick was kidnapped by terrorists. And so on.

I was born in 1965, one year after the "revolution/coup," and went into the Army - what marks for me the beginning of my adulthood - in 1984, when the election of a presidential candidate, Tancredo Neves, from a party that opposed the military, put an end to the dictatorial regime. The years considered to be the worst in violent repression and abuse of authority (along with terrorist acts and guerrilla warfare), the '70s, I did not actively witness - I was just a child then, busily reading the Brazilian edition of the German sf series Perry Rhodan. My adolescence was in the '80s, when the military had already started a process of "opening up" which included the return of many exiled people - among them our current president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. It was called the "Amnesty process," which was started in 1979. Anyway, I may be the wrong person to write about those troublesome years - or may be a fair candidate to do it after all, depending on your point of view.

Just the same way in which history has buried Communism, it has also spread doubts on the reactions to the "Communist Threat" in those times. The '60s in Latin America were a sort of climax in the ripples of the Cold War atmosphere - ripples which have not yet smoothened down, as we see from some surviving rightist strong regimes. Nevertheless, the twenty years of military dictatorship in Brazil are not usually approached through a broader, global vision. Instead, we see that a lot of harsh feelings still exist, especially in intellectual circles - a recent military action in Rio de Janeiro's favelas had an almost hysterical response, bringing back a lot of old arguments. Sometimes the discourses that touch the subject of military rule or military presence in general society raise tones resembling those of class-struggle - on the lines of "the military against the people and justice" - when the issue rather calls for other ideological and historical approaches that could observe the period as part of a broader spectrum of political attitudes produced by the cold war.

The Brazilian dictatorship had a bit of everything other Latin American countries also under dictatorship exhibited - repression of civil action, torture, people going missing, censorship, terrorism, guerrilla. Yet most people agree that those dark products (are there any "lighter" ones?) of social struggle were not so intense here in comparison to other nations on the continent. This doesn't excuse the perpetrators of their crimes, however, and the revision of the period has just started in Brazil's still young democracy. Quite recently the Cardoso's administration, the President himself being a former political exile, started to pay a pension or indemnity for families of civilians killed by repressive forces and issued a book to be sent to schools everywhere, revising official history concerning civil-rights violations during that time. It is a strong step toward truth, but the Brazilian Armed Forces, contrary to the brave example of their Argentinean colleagues, still refuse to accept responsibility for their mistakes and crimes.

This will represent a barrier in the goal of integrating the military to the civilian society, and will cast a perennial shadow upon the military for years to come.

Some fiction and non-fiction works are now appearing, dealing with aspects of the repression and guerrilla, in a history with few heroes, regardless of which side you look at. One example of these is the clumsy movie *Lamarca*, which tells the controversial life of an army captain, Carlos Lamarca, who joined the guerrillas after returning from an UN (United Nations) mission in Suez. Another recent movie is *Que E Isso, Companheiro?* by Bruno Barreto, who now works in Hollywood. The movie was based in Fernando Gabeira's book of the same title (which means "What's wrong with you, pal?"). There is also the even clumsier novel *Xambioa: Guerrilha no Araguaia*, by Pedro Correa Cabral, who was a helicopter pilot for the military during the Communist guerrilla in the Araguaia river region in Central Brazil.

Many fictional works concerning the period often are so charged with resentment that their literary and even historical interest are diminished. Perhaps the best works will appear sometime in the future - a few decades ahead, when most harsh feelings have purified and people see history through sharper eyes.

Brazilian first fandom appeared around 1960-65. Author Andre Carneiro, who claims to have been a guerrilla (his role was that of bomb-builder), along with his then-wife,(2) tells in one of his columns in the semi-prozine *Somnium*, entitled "Ficcao Cientifica na Ditadura" (SF in the Dictatorship), of the difficulties the fans and authors sometimes had to gather at the time: after 1968 all public meetings had to receive an advanced permission by a proper authority. Carneiro also writes of an occasion in which he was arrested and one of his captors has read a book of his and enjoyed it, telling him so - what a surreal situation.(3)

A harsher situation was described by Carneiro in that same column - the arresting of a movie crew just because they passed three times in front of a police barracks while making multiple shots for a TV commercial. Carneiro worked with advertising and knew them.

Recently, in a panel about author Jeronymo Monteiro (who was the First Fandom's "soul-of-the-party" at the time) at V InteriorCon in Sumare-SP November 8-9, authors Nilson D. Martello and Walter Martins, plus Monteiro's daughter Therezinha Monteiro Deutsch, remembered another funny episode involving Carneiro the subversive. He was running from the police and thought of hiding himself in Monteiro's house in Mongagua, a place at Sao Paulo's (the state) coastline. At that time many different people used to hang around Monteiro's, and he had to tell Carneiro to go away, for one of these persons was a political policeman.

Oddly enough, Carneiro's first publisher was Gumerindo Rocha Dorea, who claims to have done the "Revolution." Dorea admits he quit after understanding the sort of atrocities the repressive apparatus was committing. I once asked him how he, who supported the coup against the Communist Threat, has also published a very inspiring account of Vietminh actions and tactics - a true handbook of guerilla warfare - in Vietnam. The fact is that Dorea had always kept a broader view than most of the coup supporters. The example of Dorea and Carneiro helps us to see while we may not agree with a particular decision in a troubled time like that, we must respect both for their personal choices of conscience in taking sides.

Today we see that the repression has cut some deep scars in Carneiro, and some of them appear only in his latest novella, *Amorquia*, although stripped of the context. (A mainstream story written by Carneiro, "O Sequestro," however, is an account of the kidnapping of a French ambassador by urban terrorists in the '70s, from the point-of-view of a female kidnapper.)

Anyway, he and his fellow writers have never had a word against the regime printed - understandably, as they would have suffered from the repressive agents. Also during V InteriorCon, Walter Martins revealed to the audience that any attempt to write some kind of utopian or dystopian sf would be barred at the publishing houses, which had resident censors standing there by government order.

Not until the '70s did the first novels and stories appear that using science fictional devices to criticize the military and Brazil's situation. They were absurdist, allegorical, dystopian works, in order to mask the criticism, but mostly this "incidental SF" was obscure and ineffective, so that we remember very few of them nowadays. The best known and most appreciated is Ignacio de Loyola Brandao's ecological dystopia *Nao Veras Pais Nenhum* (You Won't See No Country), which North American readers might know, as it also appeared in the United States(4): a clerk suddenly loses all his rights and is tossed into the unstable world of the underclasses, that include mutants and homeless people, wandering in an environmentally damaged world. Another example is Ruth Bueno's *Asilo nas Torres*, set in Saturn and concerned with a technocratic elite that inhabits the allegorical towers of the title. This elite's members live in constant need of pleasing their superiors, and resort to technological upgrading and novelty to do so - thus producing a technocratic utopia that is clearly in a dead-end.(5) These two novels deal more with some side effects of the dictatorship - the rising of that technocratic class, police brutality, bureaucratic arbitrary acts, etc. - avoiding a direct approach or overt criticism either to militarism or to the dictatorial rule.

Brandao is a self-declared mainstream author, just like most of the authors who produced this kind of fiction, which shows an almost total lack of knowledge of the genre's themes and motifs. This usually resulted in shabby science fiction - if not shabby literature as well. (Brandao's novel, for instance, shows A protagonist who suddenly develops

a hole in the middle of his hand, and yet that hand remains functional. The inclusion of this "magic realism" element does not merge effectively with the novel's realistic intentions and jeopardizes its extrapolative efforts.)

Ironically, when Frederik Pohl was in Brazil for the famous SF Symposium in 1969, the very first international meeting in science fiction's history, he probably subtly addressed the Brazilian situation by stating in a speech that during the McCarthy era in the United States one probably would find more truth and free expression in science fiction than anywhere else (Pohl, FC Symposio). But, as far as I know, Brazilian SF never really achieved a major relevance by employing the both powers of science fictional metaphors and allegories and the advantage of being a "ghetto" (as Pohl implied), in order to produce a strong criticism and document of those times.

The Brazilian modern fandom appeared in 1981-82, when the military started a process of opening up. The book that marks the modern phase of Brazilian science fiction is Jorge Luiz Calife's 1985 novel *Padroes de Contato* (Contact Patterns), an exercise in the Anglo-American hard SF tradition. One year later, Calife, in *Horizonte de Eventos* (Event Horizon), the second volume of the *Padroes de Contato* trilogy, deals with a paramilitary unit holding a coup in a generation ship, Brazil. Unfortunately Calife did not go full length in the concept of reenacting the Brazilian dictatorship in a distanced setting, and as a result the idea ends up feeling much too schematic.

Jose Antonio Severo's 1979 *A Invasao* (The Invasion) tells of a 1986 Brazilian invasion of the African country Angola (of Portuguese settling there as well as in Brazil), in order to free the Angolans from Cuban soldiers operating there. The novel caused some commotion at the time, by claiming the military would by then permit the return of the Communist Party to Brazil. Along with Severo's *A Guerra dos Cachorros* (The War of the Dogs), published in 1983, *A Invasao* is one of the few speculative fiction works dealing openly with the military at the time of the dictatorship, but with not-so-fine results due to its pulpish intentions. Another book deeply rooted in criticism of some military and nationalistic attitudes was *Silicone XXI* (Silicon 21), by former guerrilla Anfredo Sirkis. He produced a near-future detective novel, in which retired General Estroncio (named after the radioactive stuff, strontium) is killing transvestites with a laser pistol and plotting the raising of Brazil to a nuclear-power status. Estroncio dreams of bringing nuclear power to Brazil and is obsessed with all kinds of power - nuclear, political, and sexual - he has a huge implanted silicon penis, from which the novel gets its title. Sirkis makes fun of the military urge for power in a very effective way.

Perhaps many other works in that mode have been written, but direct casualties of censorship - a cancer growing in every single instance of Brazilian society at that time - are unknown in science fiction, Brazilian or foreign. Nevertheless, a part of Brazilian speculative fiction, in its visual manifestations, has suffered with censorship, especially in the horror field. R. F. Lucchetti, an author and screenwriter, recalls in a chapter in the book *R. F. Lucchetti e Nico Rosso* that some comic books he contributed to had suffered the ruling imposed by censorship - which, in this case, were aimed more against sex than politics. We also know that Jose Mojica Marins, the "Coffin Joe" performer and filmmaker, has had one or more of his splatter horror movies censored, exhibited in Brazil only years later. Perhaps visual arts were more accessible to the censor's intelligence...

A fine work of fiction dealing with the military at the time of our recent dark ages is the 1990 dark fantasy *A Mae do Sonho* (The Mother of Dream), by Ivanir Calado, who depicts the escaping of an anthropologist and a young Indian - the only survivors of a tribe slaughtered by a mining company in the Amazon jungles. They carry with them the whole lot of "spiritual defenders," magical entities that protected the Indians and now have only one to protect, gruesomely overreacting some times. The novel also offers sharp criticism of economic attitudes usually found during the dictatorship, and it was mostly rather capable of avoiding resentment. The military are depicted as a very narrow-minded bunch who can only add more destruction as they get in the way of the defenders.

The same does not happen in *A Mochileira* (Thundra) (The Hitchhiker), a 1995 short novel by Decio One, who wrote this UFO piece with good employment of the landscape of Brazilian southern regions. The work's main point of view is that of youngsters who, in the '60s and '70s, traveled through the country, always fearing repression, as they pursued an alternative way of life. Yet the fictional treatment given to the issue does not value the drama of that moment - at every instant the kids alert each other about the repressive forces, and such emphasis resembles a constant crying of "the bogeyman, the bogeyman!" It also presupposes a unique political understanding shared by all characters, and by the reader as well. The book, however, has drawn good comments from those who lived the period (not like me, I must warn you again), including important names such as Carneiro - who wrote the book's foreword - and Ivan Carlos Regina, the founder of the Brazilian science fiction anthropophagial movement within Brazilian science fiction.

Another example in the same line would be *Blecaute* (Blackout), by Marcelo Rubens Paiva, a short novel in the tradition of "the last man on Earth" stories, but closer to a sort of urban fantastic realism than to science fiction. Only three teenagers, who were exploring a cave, are saved from an unknown phenomenon that turned humankind into frozen statues. One of the teenagers wanders to a police station and sees the still image of a man been tortured in a cell. In another moment the author shows a strange fascination with the icons of police authority, as his characters get a police car and go running in Silo Paulo streets with all sirens screaming at full power. Maybe this is not surprising in Paiva's work; whose father was recently recognized by the government as a victim of violent repression - which makes me feel not so good in criticizing him. Perhaps it makes no sense to expect artistic moderation and intellectual distance from somebody who suffered a personal loss to dictatorship. Paiva

continues to pursue the subject in works outside the genre, showing a more mature view as time goes by. But recently he affirmed that terrorism had a determinant role in achieving a democratic situation and in the beating of the military, which is close to an exaggeration and to an endorsement of those terrorist activities. (Another exaggeration was pronounced by Ivan Carlos Regina, who once said in a fan meeting that the Brazilian military has never done anything positive at all for the country, forgetting the aid role all forces play in many underdeveloped areas of Brazil, such as the Amazon, to mention just an example.) It is more likely that it was the other way around, as some observers assert - that the clumsy, unprepared guerrilla movement justified a stronger and overreacting repressive effort from the military and its civilian allies. Brazilian fandom, as far as I know, has never actually suffered from censorship or repression - at least nothing close to the experience of our neighboring fandom in Argentina, which lost one of its main names, German Oesterheld, to repression.

In short, Brazilian science fiction, and to some extent Brazilian literature in general, has not yet faced (resulting in good artistic achievement, I mean) the hard task of dealing with the subject of the Years of Authoritarianism, as we call them - partly because Brazil's SF is too much attached to Anglo-American models that have little or nothing to do with our particular reality and history.

I have tried to convey in my stories something of the personal experiences of veterans of the '70s's armed conflicts. In my short story "Capacetes Azuis, Verdes e Amarelos" (Blue, Yellow and Green Helmets), there is a sergeant who is a veteran of the repression to the Araguaia guerrilla actions, which was the main location of Communist guerrilla warfare in Brazil. Now part of a Brazilian unit in the UN's Peace Forces operating in Africa, he is unable to forget the "rules of engagement" of his time at Araguaia, and to adapt to new ones. I have two more unpublished stories on the same topic - the perception of those who fought in these conflicts and later on are confronted with unexpected effects of their actions. But to understand enough of a time I have not actually lived in, I would need to research extensively. Even so, I would never be able to capture the exact mood of that time in realistic terms - thus I see science fiction as the better medium to those who wish to investigate it from the viewpoint of another generation or in a highly allegorical setting.

Why should we need to face this sad subject at all? Of course, because we must understand the past in order not to repeat it. But more than that, we must shape the future. I may not have shown here enough sympathy for those who lived and suffered through those years. As a science fiction writer I intend to look critically at the past and present, to be able to project my sympathies to those who will live in the future. Indeed, I extend my sympathies equally to those who were tortured and executed by the State under dictatorship and to those who were killed or injured by terrorism. Yet, I really get the shakes when I think about the future my son will live in. Again, Frederik Pohl wrote, "the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history - unless we view history, both past and present, as a science-fiction story" (Pohl, "Game Playing" 72). He was joking, of course, or saying to his SF audience what a powerful tool science fiction really is, when it comes to social criticism and historical dramatization.

During one hundred years of being a republic, Brazil has only had a handful of civilian presidents who finished their terms. This is not just a young democracy, but also a young country, a young people. We must not pretend we are a nation with the same basis that older, European nations have. The understanding that this is an incomplete country must open our minds to the idea that it is a nation to complete, still to be created, to be shaped, and to be put in an upright position through a lot of effort. I believe fiction - science fiction particularly - has a great deal to do with a emergence of a critical view important to this effort.

To write this essay I interviewed my wife, Finisia Fideli, who is also a science fiction and fantasy writer. She is eleven years older than I am and spent the heaviest years of the military regime as a young medical student. She has seen the repression in her college campus, seen the blitzes and the military apparatus parading the streets in search of "subversives," she has seen censorship used against the arts and ideas, seen friends and professors being arrested and tortured. But she has also seen her father having a submachine gun pointed to his face as guerrillas stole the money for his factory employees' wages - the money to buy food for the workers's children - for the sake of the "cause" that ultimately intended to free them. She knew a professor who was arrested, tortured, and exiled because a competitor accused him of being a Communist, with the aim of getting rid of him and taking his office. She has seen more than I could imagine to put in the pages of a story, and her heart is darkened by what she has seen and heard and lived through. And yet I can think of people who have lost relatives, or who were tortured and humiliated. That pain should never happen again, and yet it still happens.

Finisia understands that there are no winners or heroes or righteous parties when, she says, the monster in us breaks loose. Just as happened in the fascist years in Germany, Italy, and Spain, the atmosphere of exception - when some are more human than others - seems to set free all evil creatures we nurture within us. It happened here. It is happening in Africa, in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Who knows where it will happen tomorrow? We must face it, record and remember it, and understand it, in order to avoid it.

I have seen some stuff myself, and that is why I say that sort of pain still goes on in Brazil. The echoes of those times - and of even earlier episodes in Brazil's young life - are sticking around. Recently a military policemen (here the regular law enforcement is done by a kind of paramilitary police) just executed a disarmed criminal, in front of TV cameras. Later on he was absolved by a law system that still sees outlaws as rats to be exterminated. Even

more recently, nationwide TV has shown a gang of paramilitary soldiers extorting, beating up and even shooting at people for a poor area in Sao Paulo's outskirts. I have myself seen a father and his little son being coerced by a MP (Policia Militar, paramilitary) soldier holding a shotgun just because the man dared to ask a couple of policemen to move away from the place they were illegally parked. The military police still think they are doing what they used to do during the exception regime, having to report to no one.

Yet, I am probably the only writer in Brazil trying stories about the military. I don't think my stories are well received here, because of all that has happened in those twenty years. But I believe that stories are a way to get people closer to each other and to get facts seen outside their traps of resentment and social division.

Stories must also help Brazilians to understand and change the way they see their institutions. The emphasis on traditional institutions by rightist forces in the 1960s and 1970s has created a sense that individuals should free themselves from institutions - which is ultimately an adolescent view. Democracy demands that we, as citizens, should make the institutions work decently and correctly, always respecting individual rights.

To leave behind a cruel past does not mean to forget and to detach oneself from the world's things - but to control them, to enforce the best, to transform what we see as wrong, to find new solutions.

Notes

1. It is because of all this support that some call it a revolution instead of a coup. An interesting fact is that in 1965 the International Monetary Fund granted Brazil a sum of US\$125 million - a powerful endorsement to the military rulers, who at that time had already openly violated political and civil rights.

2. Carneiro's wife had a direct involvement in ambassador Elbrick's kidnapping.

3. See Krabbenhoft.

4. See Lindstrom.

5. Pohl writes:

"And it is a kind of science fiction which in that miserable half decade that we call the McCarthy period in the U.S., was responsible for the fact that science fiction magazines [were] very nearly the only free press that existed in America.

"When presidents and newspaper editors, persons of great influence and importance, were running for the air-raid shelters, science fiction magazines were saying anything they pleased. To be sure, it was always usually said in the form of allegory, or it was late in the future, or in another planet. And one reason why we were so free from criticism may well have been that nobody understood what we were talking about. Nevertheless, there has been no subject political, social, sexual, religious, whatever that I can think of, that cannot be and has not been discussed in science fiction stories. It is the world's stronghold for free speech" (147).

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