



## THE IMAGE OF BRAZILIAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN BRAZILIAN COMICS

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### Abstract

Discusses how Brazilian culture and society are presented by Brazilian comics. The works of Brazilian artists Maurício de Sousa and Ziraldo Alves Pinto are specifically analysed. Focuses on how Brazilian horror comics and Brazilian underground comics mirror the society.

### Key-words

Comics – Brazilian culture; Comics – Brazilian society

### Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that comics have spread up and developed within the communications industry. Being mass media, it is possible to say that they accompany the general trends of the cultural industry, bringing to their readers an average view about daily events. In this sense, it is reasonably safe to assume that comics have the tendency of disregarding the regional or local characteristics of their public in order to reach a higher percentage of the potential readers. At least theoretically, to comics – as to all other mass media in general – the more comprehensive the subjects they deal with, the bigger the possibility that their products will reach more people. Considered from this point of view, it is safe to conclude that mass media avoid controversies or subjects relevant to very specific social groups. Alternative media, like community newspapers, local television channels and underground comics have traditionally filled that kind of gap.

However, no mass medium can elaborate its products or disseminate them to a totally apathetic society. In the case of comics, it would probably be a mistake to imagine them as artistic displays totally alien to the social reality where they have been created. Notwithstanding the development level of the comic book industry, it is possible to argue that comics artists are definitely influenced by the society where they live. As far as comics products are concerned, the possibility of any author's personal point of view reach the final reader is much greater than in other mass media (e.g.: the movie productions or the television programs).

On the other hand, as they are increasingly produced within an industrial framework in which the standardization of the product is more important than qualitative distinctions, comics frequently dilute specific features of the society and culture where they have been created. Furthermore, the introduction of the so-called "production teams", in which several artists act as simple workers in a chain – sometimes not even identified to the readers's eyes – can result in a product showing scarce compromise with its local environment. This happens largely because many creators have the objective of expanding their market farther than territorial or cultural frontiers, aiming to distribute

their work to other countries or having them transposed to other media. The influence of the society are much difficult to be seen in this kind of comics, as even geographical references can be totally omitted of the stories.

This paper aims to take a close look to this matter, discussing how the phenomenon occurs in the Brazilian context.

## **1 – Comics and social dynamics**

Fortunately, there is no extreme situations in what regards to comics. It is perfectly possible for a comic book to be totally inserted in the mass production process and at the same time continue dealing with the cultural reality of its country. Of course, it is always easier to defend that any comics, as a consequence of being produced within the mass industry framework, will have little to do with supporting the national identity, or rather, the society in which they were created. Considering this, we would have to conclude that the reality we find in a comic book we buy in any newstand will have little to say about the reader's day-to-day problems.

That is not so. At least, not necessarily. The matter cannot be resumed in yes/no alternatives. In fact, it is increasingly evident that the way a comic story will echo the reality of its country will depend on two factors: 1) the specific moment in which it is brought to public knowledge; and 2) the kind of society in which it was created. This will include both the level of nationalism which permeates that society and the development of its publishing industry. A third consideration would concern the way that one specific title is inserted in the comics publishing industry.

The history of comics brings us several instances in which titles that were produced in a country with prominently industrial characteristics were able to show the peculiarities of that society. In this sense, it is important to have in mind that **L'il Abner**, by Al Capp, and **Pogo**, by Walt Kelly, for example, could never be originated in any other social reality than North America's: the first, for dealing with a very peculiar environment and showing a way of facing life and society which, even if showed as a caricature, represents its fundamental credo; the second, for focusing on a specific historic event, the Macarthism, which only in North American territory had such a terrible impact on people's lives.

It is interesting to notice that, differently from thousands of others, the above mentioned authors had such a control over their creative proposals that they could develop a discourse which was able to escape from the constraints of the industrial production. And, in fact, they were not alone: during the 80s, in the same country, authors like the Hernandez brothers, although working in a different level, were capable of producing a work of similar distinction. However, it is necessary to recognize that all these authors are exceptions within the great flow of comic books and stories produced during decades by the North American comics industry. Of course, we cannot forget that the United States is the main pillar of a huge world comics industry always eager to maximize their profits as well as disseminating its culture, its way of life and its ideology.

## **2 – Brazilian comics look for their independence: the cases of Maurício de Sousa and Ziraldo Alves Pinto**

In many ways, the huge comics industry in United States has always represented great obstacles for the survival of comics's authors in developing countries. It has happened in the following manner:

1. as North American comics stories deal with global matters, there are very few cultural barriers for their acceptance and dissemination – in fact, most of them need only a good translation in order to be understood by other readers;
2. economic factors make easier their predominance in developing countries - they reach the new markets already partially paid in their native country (for the producer, the new markets represent only additional profits to be incorporated);
3. frequently, they are accompanied by advertising support, or rather, promotional schemes which can go from films and cartoons for TV to t-shirts, toys and a large variety of artifacts in order to make the new characters familiar to the public even before the arrival of the real comic book to the newstands. This reality results in adverse circumstances for comics artists of developing countries: the Brazilian comics history, for instance, has showed the preponderance of North American comics, both in what regards to comic strips published in newspapers as to comic books.

Due to all these factors, we can see that some artists in developing countries try to reproduce the style and the narrative structure of North American comics as a strategy for survival, intending to compete with them in the same level of narrative.

This model of production has appeared at different moments within the Brazilian comics environment. Sometimes, they present a better artistic quality; in others, they are little less than sad pastiches of alien productions. Older Brazilian readers can still remember the so-called "Brazilian super-heroes" published in the 60s and 70s with titles such as **Escorpião (Scorpion)**, **Targo**, **Hur**, **Fikon**, **Super-Héros**, **Raio Negro (Black Ray)**, etc., which tried to situate in Brazilian territory characters with strange powers and facing villains of very poor imagination. Most of them were badly written copies of North American super heroes. The **Black Ray**, for example, had a powerful ring which he could use in different manners and which he had received from a visitor from other planet when he crashed into the Earth (any similarity with DC's **The Green Lantern** is not a coincidence).

On the other hand, in order to face the invasion of North American comics companies, autoctonous industries also have the tendency of adopting their systematic of production, de-characterizing what of national could exist and be disseminated by their comic characters.

The greatest example of this tendency in Brazil, as far as a good part of its production is concerned, is the artist and businessman Maurício de Sousa. Having dedicated several decades of his life to the production of comics, Maurício can be considered the best succeeded Brazilian artist in the field. He is perhaps the only author who has been able to have all his life directed almost exclusively to comics and is now the head of a huge team of pencillers, inkers, writers, layout artists, letterers and colorists who work on the production of several monthly and fortnightly comic books, as well as merchandising activities, advertinsing and cartoons. Putting apart any moral judgements about his art, we must recognize that **A Turma da Mônica (Mônica's gang)**, Maurício's main group of characters, has been responsible for a significative change in the reading habits of the Brazilian children in the last thirty years: the increasing abandom of Disney's characters.

However, although this can be considered as a victory for Brazilian comics, it is also important to recognize that **A Turma da Mônica** has left the Brazilian environment out

of its stories in order to become a group of characters with global features (one example of this characteristic is the acceptance of a character who has a permanent appetite and is always eating something in a country where millions of children have nothing to eat during most of the time). On the other hand, although this search for universal themes has become the characteristic of his most popular group of characters, Mauricio cannot be blamed for putting his country totally apart of his artistic production. Another of his characters, the peasant boy named **Chico Bento**, one of his first creations, still continues to be published in its own magazine, bringing to public knowledge the reality of the Brazilian country people and focusing on specific characteristics of our society.

The greatest counterpoint to Mauricio de Sousa in Brazilian comics seems to be Ziraldo Alves Pinto. Having obtained a popularity similar to that of the **Monica's** creator, Ziraldo, in a way, has refused to embrace the universalism in his stories in order to look for the characterization of the Brazilian reality. He has maintained this point of view even when, pressed by physical impossibility or personal commitments, he had to use other artists in his stories. It is possible to imagine that this has happened because the author, even when deciding to contract other artists for the continuity of his work, has not gone too far away from his comics activities. Having the control over the new production, he was able to guarantee that his original intentions would go on by other artists's work. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine that it happened because of the author's political option.

From Ziraldo's extensive production in comics and comic strips, the group of characters which he organized around the **Pererê**, his most important series, are a very characteristic example of his search to mirror Brazilian reality and society by the use of comics.

The **Pererê**, appearing in a moment of intense nationalism and coinciding with the establishment of the automobile industry in Brazil, the inauguration of Brasilia and the developmentist euphoria of President Juscelino Kubtscheck's period, brings a group of character which could exist only in Brazil, with characteristics peculiar to Brazilian reality and its people. For example, in this group are characters like **Pedro Vieira** (an armadillo), **Moacir** (a small turtle, called "jabuti" in Brazil), **Geraldinho** (a rabbit), the **General** and later **Professor Nogueira** (an owl), **Boneca de Piche** (a very typical Afro-Brazilian child, whose name was the title of an old carnival song), **Tuiuiu** (a little indian girl who was named after a bird from the swamps of the State of Mato Grosso), **Galileu** (a Brazilian leopard), **Compadre Tonico** (a hunter) and, of course, the **Saci Pererê** himself, a folkloric being which Ziraldo portrayed as a child (CIRNE, 1975).

Besides the characters, it is also important to emphasize that the subjects aborded in the stories of **Pererê**, both in the first as in the second period in which they were produced, have always been very regional and focused on matters peculiar to the Brazilian cultural heritage. Among the several and memorable **Pererê's** stories, one can refer to the one named "**A Paçoca**", in which it is told how **Compadre Tonico**, in order to catch **Galileu**, invites him to make a "paçoca", a traditional Brazilian food of the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo. In other story, titled "**Um pai para o Saci**" ("**A father for the Saci**"), the main character asks himself about his paternity – as a mythological being, he does not have a direct progenitor – and, after several peregrinations, concludes that he is the son of "the Brazilian people's imagination"; in this way, the direct relationship between the comic/folkloric character and the society which gave birth to him is made evident by the author (VERGUEIRO, 1991).

### 3 – Horror and underground comics: two ways of representing Brazilian society

Out of the universe of children's comics, it is possible to state that the thematic environment in which industrially produced comics better portrayed the Brazilian reality and culture has been in the field of horror comics. This genre has been introduced in Brazil during the 30s, with the character **Garra Cinzenta (Gray Claw)** by Francisco Armond and Renato Silva, who merged horror and mystery elements. However, the genre has only been developed in Brazil when the comic book **Terror Negro (Black Terror)**, edited by Editora La Selva, had to stop the publication of North American comics because this kind of comics had stopped in its origin (due to the campaign against comics in United States). In this way, little by little Brazilian horror comic magazines began to be locally produced, bringing characters which were more closely related to our popular imagination. Even when based in mythological characters, as the **Werewolf** and the **Vampire**, Brazilian classic horror seems to be distinguished by several peculiarities, exploring the unexpected, the counterpoint between real/supernatural world, instead of having its standpoint on horrible or repulsive scenes, the prominent characteristic of the genre in other countries (and explored to its exhaustion by the film industry in movies like **Friday 13<sup>th</sup>**, **Halloween**, etc). Perhaps one could even state that the most prominent names in Brazilian comics, as Flavio Colin and Julio Shimamoto, have appeared in horror stories.

On the other hand, the so-called "Brazilian underground comics" have been characterized by a radical position against the themes and the language adopted by the comics received from other countries. For understanding this extreme posture, it is important to understand the historic moment in which underground comics have appeared in Brazil, the end of the 60s. In that decade, the political situation in Brazil was very difficult: the intellectuality, as well as all other levels of society, were suffering the authoritarianism of the military government which had taken out its presumed democratic cover. General elections have been suspended and had no perspective of returning, governmental acts taking out legislative mandates were being promulgated, a censorship process had been introduced in the Brazilian press and the military repression was very hard on the streets. All seemed to sign in the direction of worse moments, in which the cultural creation would be inevitably eliminated, strangled without any effective possibility of reaction. The intellectual resistance began in 1969, with the weekly newspaper "**O Pasquim**" and continued with the magazine "**Balão**" ("**Balloon**"), this last one produced within the University of São Paulo, and several others which suddenly appeared and disappeared, leaving their sign of protest and dissatisfaction. Several artists who later would be distinguished in the Brazilian comics and cartoons environment appeared within this framework, like Fortuna, Paulo Caruso, Luis Gê and Henfil, whose work represent Brazilian comics's cry for autonomy. In this sense, the best example of a comics character is the leopard **Glorinha**, by Henfil, a faithful and dedicated agent of the **COLIQUAMA** – the "**Comando de Libertação do Quadrinho Nacional**" (the "**Command for the Freedom of Brazilian comics**") – which was always metalinguistically eating the comics characters produced by United States and other countries... (CIRNE, 1982).

#### 4 – The present

Recently, humor comics have become the thematic space in which the Brazilian reality and culture have been better characterized. It has emerged principally among a group of artists in the city of São Paulo who have been published in newspapers and magazines directed to young adults. Some of the best things that can be found in the Brazilian contemporary humor comics have been produced by authors like Laerte Coutinho in his masterpiece **Piratas do Tietê (Pirates of the Tietê River)**, Angeli in **Chiclete com**

**Banana (Chicle with Banana)**, Glauco in **Geraldão** and Fernando Gonzales in **Níquel Náusea**. All of them show the Brazilian reality under an urban point of view, in the eyes of unsatisfied and contesting youngsters.

Besides the above mentioned trends, Brazilian children's comics have always had a tendency of portraying celebrities from the artistic and sports world as comics characters. However, this kind of characters appear in comics in order to give support to the mass production system, rather than as an initiative towards the portraying of a local reality. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that when characters well know and publicised by other media are transcribed to comics, principally when such products are later disseminated out of the Brazilian territory, they can be seen as a symbolic transposition of the Brazilian reality to the comics, even though this transposition is better appreciated by foreign readers than by the Brazilian themselves. It is what happens, for example, when people from other countries read stories with characters like **Pelézinho** (based in the world famous soccer player Pelé) or **Senninha** (based in the Brazilian Formula-1 racer Ayrton Senna).

The Brazilian current comics also show a return to the native production of super-heroes adopting the structure of North American comics. Recently, several new comic books bringing different super-heroes have appeared in the Brazilian newstands. Those titles, although produced by artists who were born and grown in the Brazilian territory, reproduce the thematics, the view, the anatomy and the idiosyncrasy of the characters, as well as the format of the pages of the North American comics. In this manner, they try to reach a public already used to those elements. Sometimes, linked to these publications are authors which have had the opportunity to produce comics for the North American comic books and are trying to reproduce in Brazil some of the practices of the other market.

Generally, the comics artists involved in those publications try to navigate in the same ocean where Marvel's and DC's heroes navigate (or perhaps we should say that they are trying to fly in the same air...). In fact, the characters of these comic books have names like **Mitzrael**, **Warbreed**, **Killbite**, **Blue Fighter** and normally live in Manhattan or Los Angeles. In general, the polluted air the inhabitants inhale in the metropolis of São Paulo or the "favelas" of Rio de Janeiro are very far from their pages.

Of course, there are exceptions to this discouraging panorama. In this sense, it is important to highlight the comic stories produced by Paulo Garfunkel and Libero Malavoglia, called **O Vira Lata**, which portrays Brazilian society's marginal groups, reproducing their problems, difficulties, anxieties and frustrations. But it is, however, an isolated production, which unfortunately has found few possibilities of being distributed out of a selected group of fans, even though it is a work of undoubtful artistic quality.

## Conclusion

One conclusion that we could take from these thoughts about the presence of Brazilian society and culture in Brazilian comics is that it is not an already lost or even a finished battle. Brazilian comics still seem to have a long way to go both in terms of the development of a strong infrastructure which can face imported production as in what regards to the development of our artists. Decades of predominance of the comic "made in USA" cannot be surpassed in a few months. Much effort still has to be made, much water will have to go under the bridge before the heroes with superpowers and the BANGS, PLAFTS, BOOMS of their adventures can be replaced by characters with more

similarities with the reality of an undernourished and exploited people and by onomatopéyas which can sound more agreeably to ears that are used to the Portuguese language.

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