Utopia, Heterotopia, Dystopia – Water in Portuguese and Brazilian comics

Janek Scholz

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All over the world comics frequently depict utopias or dystopias in order to, as a widely accessible medium, highlight to a social grievance, potential and real dangers, as well as possible approaches to solving such problems. This happens, on the one hand, *in a historical way* with a clear reference to the lived here and now. On the other hand, anachronistic or fable-type settings are presented, with the story set in space or in invented parallel worlds. Water here is often used to create or to characterize alternative places (heterotopias) or fictive places (utopias and dystopias). It can be employed as a physical place (sea or river) or as a characteristic of a place or a point in time by means of which a particular mood is created (for instance, using rain). Böhme and Böhme write in their book *Kulturgeschichte der Elemente: Feuer, Wasser, Erde, Luft* of the utopian dimension of the real bodies of water:

An archaic fear of mankind is concentrated in the untamed sea. The sea carries the eerie and the tremendousness per se of the element of water. Utopias are always countries with a blocked-out sea – that is, the archaic ambivalence of water is erased. Only its giving aspect is realized: At the "stream, that is the water of life" (Apoc. 22.1ff), at the river of paradise thus lies the second paradise, the new Jerusalem, the utopia. Not only coincidence *condenses* the obsession in Columbus' head that the conquest of the sea is identical to finding the eschaton: in the New World, he identifies paradise, in Orinoco he sees one of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden (Gen 1.20ff). Because the sea itself is a deterritory, and thus near chaos, the domination of the sea will continue until today in its territorialization: with that, the ancient history of the fear of the sea ends (Böhme 1996. 60).¹

On the basis of this "archaic ambivalence towards water", we should refer to Vilém Flusser's considerations regarding the interplay between nature and culture to ask why water is an appropriate motif to open both utopian and dystopian settings. The present

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¹ My own translation.

contribution analyzes the use of water in two graphic novels by Rita Vilela (Portugal), in two chapters from the book *Daytripper* by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá (Brazil), and draws on illustrations by the Brazilian sketch artist André Diniz as well. The chosen examples are also compared and contrasted with French and English comic artists in order to attempt a heuristic approach to the role of water in graphic literature in general.

The sea and the ship

The sea is as a prehistoric space, a smooth space that existed for a long time without the influence of mankind:

The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favour of the production of properly rhythmic values, the pure act of drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal (Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 478).

In the theory of Gilles Deleuze and Féliz Guattari, smooth spaces are contrasted with striated spaces. Smooth spaces are pre-civilization and completely elude human influence. With the advance of civilization, however, humans created notches in the world to make it their own, be it via measurement, the construction of roads or urban planning.²

The city is the striated space par excellence; the sea is a smooth space fundamentally open to striation, and the city is the force of striation that reimports smooth space, puts it back into operation everywhere...outside but also inside itself (Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 481).

These notches help humans to orient themselves in the world. The sea, by contrast, remains a primordial natural power – a smooth space which man can never dominate in its entirety. In his essay *Pássaros*, Vilém Flusser writes that it is especially the three-dimensionality of air and water that fascinates us. Every attempt to conquer this three-dimensionality remains arrested in two-dimensionality and is thus doomed to fail. While

² This also occurs, Certeau emphasizes, via naming. Certeau notes that this process must be repeated constantly, so to speak, in order to ceaselessly celebrate "the civilizatory gesture" anew: "Ship voyages semanticized the holes in the universe [...] The journeys describe the great white sheet of the Pacific" (Certeau 2005. 135). In the mania of observation, measurement and naming, however, we see clearly how little control humans actually have over the sea: "One must observe everything and that which was *seen* far away must be *known* in London and Paris" (Certeau 2005. 139).

we can measure the sea, we cannot experience it as a fish in the water (or at least not for more than a limited period of time, which once again clearly reveals to us the impossibility of its territorialization).

In the comic *Tempestade* by Rita Vilela and Júlio Pinto (Angola), the reader meets the fisherman José, one of the last who still work in the sea. In the past he worked with "um dos melhores que o mar não devolvera", today he must rely on "rapazes que não sabiam sentir e respeitar as redes, o peixe, o mar". It is a baleful dependence, since this lack of respect for the sea leads to the sea rearing up. José sends the boys away to be saved, he himself fights against the storm. When Nuno realizes, that his master is being left behind, he swims back towards the boat to help him. When the boat capsizes, José only survives because of Nuno's ("o pior deles") rescue. The storm tested Nuno's loyalty, he was able to show courage and saved his friend as the hero of the story (Vilela/Pinto 2011). The dream of the conquest of the sea, however, ends with the revolt itself. The ocean becomes a hostile dystopia that brings danger and destruction when man oversteps its borders (One is reminded of the pillars of Hercules and the consequences that Odysseus was forced to suffer in Dante's Divina Commedia because of his passing this Non-plus ultra). In this black and white comic, all the panels are bright, with a white background. As soon as the sea becomes the protagonist of the story, i.e. during the storm, the style changes and the panels are filled with black. Only after the conquest over nature, only when friendship wins, the panels are back white again (Vilela/Pinto 2011).

The sea also demands its tribute in the second capital of the graphic novel Daytripper by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá. The protagonist Brás travels to Salvador to celebrate with his friend the festival venerating Yemanyá, the goddess of the sea. Brás bathes in the sea and swims to a boot where he discovers a young woman whom he immediately falls in love with. The two spend the day together and plan to meet the next day, at the height of the festivities. Yet on the following day, the young woman does not appear where they had planned to meet. After Brás has waited a while, he goes to the water and meets a fisherman. The fisherman promises to bring him to the woman, and both go out onto the open sea. Brás drowns and the story ends with the words "dessa vez ela exigiu muito mais do que a gente lhe ofereceu" (Moon/Bá 2013. Chapter 2.). Yemanyá is represented as a furious goddess who stands against humans when they do not appease her with their deeds. The mystification of water alludes to an important facet of its usage: Flusser stresses that culture must always be technology in connection with freedom, and particularly freedom in the sense of an independent ascription and interpretation. However, when this freedom is missing, we experience culture as alien, as it becomes technocratic. One way out of this alienation is to withdraw into nature, as something

mystical always lies in its impetuousness which humans can philosophize about. It is precisely this philosophizing that gives nature back its freedom:

A chuva que observo pela janela me dá uma sensação boa, porque me sinto libertado dela. Estou sentado em sala quente e seca, posso contemplar a chuva. Posso observá-la, não apenas para depois manipulála, mas também para julgá-la. Estou em situação que permite juízos de valores. Em situação de "disponibilidade" com relação à chuva. Em situação de liberdade. Posso convidar outros para entrarem em minha sala, a fim de discutirmos o problema da chuva. Lá fora está chovendo, e nós cá dentro, ao abrigo, discutindo como manipular a chuva para que seja boa. Isto é que é cultura. Não chuva manipulada e programada, mas chuva sujeita à discussão livre (Flusser 2011. 43).

The mystification of nature also presents a possibility to reclaim one's own freedom: "E tecnocracia [...] é anticultura. Em suma: cultura é tecnologia mais liberdade" (Flusser 2011. 43). Many stories tell of the endeavor for self-liberation. In *O Negrinho do Pastoreio* by André Diniz, the protagonist is seeking comfort in the mystery of water. The *Negrinho* is a young slave who works on a fazenda and regularly visits a river source to speak with Nossa Senhora Aparecida (Diniz 2012). Here, additional problem areas are opened up, such as the Christianization of the slaves and with it a deeper alienation, seeing as the Negrinho lacks the knowledge of the connection to the Orixás completely. Only a worker at the fazenda points the Orixá Oxum out to him – Orixá of love, prosperity and rivers. Nevertheless, the consultation with the water stands for the attempt to counteract the protagonist's felt alienation and to use the utopian power of the water in order to dream of a better life. In this context, suicide in water can be interpreted as (the most radical) form of self-liberation.

In his illustration of the poem *A Cachoeira de Paulo Alfonso* by Castro Alves, André Diniz depicts a young slave who plunges to her death in Paulo Alfonso's mystical waters. The reason for her suicide is the unequal distribution of rights between Whites and Blacks, as well as the lack of means to revolt against this inequality. Civilization in this story is contrasted with nature, whereas supposed progress through slave labor and unequal treatment are connoted negatively: "Pois não vês que morremos todo dia, / debaixo do chicote, que não cansa? / Enquanto do assassino a fronte calma / Não revela um remorso de sua alma? " (Diniz 2011. 40). Culture, in this case, means that a living being rebels against another, thus suspending the laws of nature. The protagonist knows no better than

to return to nature, though not to find solutions, but to withdraw from the situation entirely: "Abram-se as ondas como virgens louras, / Para a Esposa passar [...] Paulo Afonso! / Que turíbulo enorme! / Que sacerdote!" (Diniz 2011. 56f.). It is useful to refer to Rousseau here, who stresses equality of all individuals in their natural state and correspondingly views civilizatory inequality critically:

> Without my expatiating thus uselessly on these details, everyone must see that as the bonds of servitude are formed merely by the mutual dependence of men on one another and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to make any man a slave, unless he be first reduced to a situation in which he cannot do without the help of others: and, since such a situation does not exist in a state of nature, everyone is there his own master, and the law of the strongest is of no effect (Rousseau. 23).

In Castro Alves' text, there is a strong focus on Christianity. Presenting Paulo Afonso as Thurible brings a clear image of purity, comparing the waves with blonde virgins makes the reader think of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. The protagonist's suicide in the water is thus not so much an *ultima ratio* as a return to the mother's womb. Water as the origin of life is an aspect which we encounter again and again throughout intellectual history. In the philosophy of the Western World, Thales of Milet sees water as symbolizing the beginning of the world and the basis of all elements. This idea is closely linked to Sumerian mythology, where creation began with Nammus as the goddess of the primordial sea. In both the religion of Yoruba in Nigeria and in the Brazilian Candomblé, the goddess of the sea Yemanyá stands for maternity.³ In this reading, drowning is not so much the victory of a punitive, unforgiving element, but rather a final moment of rest and peace. Recall Ophelia in Shakespeare's Hamlet here. Her death in water is portrayed not in its expected tragedy, but rather as a moment in which Ophelia arrives completely complacent in the most primordial of elements, as is also conveyed in Sir John Everett's painting: Her clothes spread wide; / And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up: / Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes; / As one incapable of her own distress, / Or like a creature native and indued / Unto that element (Shakespeare. 3215-3221). This utopian function of water is complemented by a heterotopian function, as follows.

³ Nevertheless, it must be noted that reference to myths by modern society can always only remain a syncretic reading, seeing as they have not been constantly transmitted up to the present. Consequently, every mystification merely represents a selection of individual elements and a new synthesis of this mystification.

According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, utopias are, in name, spaces without a real place whereas heterotopias truly exist and are therefore also spatially tangible. In a heterotopia, reality is represented, discussed and reversed, time and space lose their meaning. Several spaces are united in it, several time systems and several orders, there are opening and closing rituals, access is thus restricted (Foucault 1992). There exist various forms of heterotopia: *heterotopias of crisis* are reserved for those in a phase of crisis. These crises cannot play out within society, they are externalized. Foucault names retirement homes and birth houses as examples. Individuals also be lodged in *heterotopias of deviation*, reserved for those who exhibit behavior which deviates from the norm; Foucault gives as examples prisons and psychiatric hospitals. Two further types of heterotopia are that of *illusion* and that of *compensation*. The latter denounces reality, the former perfects it (Foucault 1992).

Now, how are heterotopias related to the topic of water in comics? In his text, Foucault himself calls the ship a heterotopia par excellence: The ship reposes and navigates freely over the sea; it brings goods and persons from one port to another, from colony to colony and from one shore to another (Foucault 1992. 46). The shore must be seen as a border between nature and culture, as a demarcation between the two-dimensional world which humans inhabit and the three-dimensional oceanic space which birds and fish inhabit (water and air are both meant here, cf. Flusser 2011. 29). That ships must cross this natural space in order to reach the next cultural space is also the reason why ships and sailors pique such fascination in us: they are seen as the "greatest arsenal of imagination" (Foucault 1992. 46) of our time, which is nevertheless in danger because, "[i]n civilizations without ships, dreams dry up" (Foucault 1992. 46). Flusser (2011. 32) asserts a similar view: "Ao ter deixado de ser sonho impossível, o mito passou a ser sonho insonhável, mas persiste." Demystification via the advance of civilization thus does not prevent dreams' continued existence (though undreamable, seeing as reality catches up with the dream again and again). The ship represents a possibility to make this dream tangible, to live out the utopia in a concrete way (in the form of a heterotopia) and consequently to enable one to physically experience the mystical.

In Rita Vilela's comic *O herói*, an abandoned ship serves some children as a place to play and dream. The ship is part of the world's largest ship graveyard and symbolizes in its immobility the failure of the heterotopian function, as Foucault describes it. Yet seeing as dreams do not disappear, the mysticity that surrounds the ship is now resurrected by the children, in this way returning to the ship its role as a heterotopia of compensation. The protagonist of the story would like to be a superhero, yet his dreams are shattered by his mother who has suddenly reappeared and given him a view of reality (Vilela 2013). In

this story as well, the mystical/dreamy meets technocratic reality, which leads to alienation on the part of the protagonists and to a withdrawal into the utopian/heterotopian. When the protagonist remains, saddened, his uncle comes and points out to him that the ship has robbed him of his superpowers, though his friends do not have to know this, because it is not exclusively supernatural powers that make a hero. The heterotopia of the ship here bears a clearly positive aspect and serves as a heterotopia of compensation for the playing children, who refuse the technocratic-realistic view of the world.

An involuntary sojourn on a ship is the topic of the story *Chico Rei* by André Diniz. Chico Rei is a king from the Congo, however, he was enslaved here and sold to Brazil. The slave transport is involuntary and extremely violent, yet the ship can still be recognized as a heterotopia. The ship represents a place of slavery and brutality and thus a heterotopia of crisis and deviation, since both phenomena have no place in society (slaves deviate from the free white man and brutality is a moment of crisis). Additionally, the transport over the sea stands for an act of uprooting, of cultural extermination. In this scene, the sea devours numerous individuals and takes on a clearly dystopian character. Rain strengthens the intensity and the hostility of this situation, and it is only when the ship has reached Brazil the next day, and thus every link to the homeland has been cut as well as every possibility of reversal has been taken from the slave, that the weather and the sea settle down (Diniz 2009).

The forcible abandonment of the homeland is also dealt with in the story *Exodus* by Joann Sfar from France. In the story, a Moroccan rabbi accompanies his daughter to Paris in order to meet her fiancé's family. However, he is unable to relate to Paris or to France in general, and the forced exodus brings nothing but misfortune and frustration. Paris, a foreign city to the rabbi, is rainy and dreary; rain reinforces the act of alienation as a consequence of crossing the sea (Sfar 2014). In the following, I will take a closer look at the role of rain in the comic.

Rain and snow

A few stories were already mentioned above in which rain plays a decisive role. Note *Chico Rei* by André Diniz and *A Tempestade* by Rita Vilela. In *Exodus,* it became clear that rain and night bring misfortune, yet in the overwhelming majority of the stories, sudden rainfall has another function. The story *O Negrinho do Pastoreio* by André Diniz was already mentioned. The Negrinho, who finds comfort at the source of the river, must win a horse race for his coronel. In Diniz's version, however, he very consciously loses the race so that the prize money goes to the opposing coronel. The latter, for his part, is

magnanimous and has promised that if his rider wins, he will invest the money in the construction of houses for the poor in the region. The loss of the race has the consequence that the protagonist must look after a group of horses in the forest so as to not let a single horse out of his sight, and he must go without food and water. Nevertheless, the Negrinho decides to free the horses, not to force slavery and cruelty as his coronel does.⁴ This decision has serious consequences: The slave is beaten nearly to death and left alone in the forest. The coronel's daughter is good friends with the Negrinho and leaves the house in despair when she hears of his abuse. Afterwards, the coronel begins to search for his daughter when the Negrinho appears before him in the forest. Shaken to the core, the coronel remains in the rainy forest. The encounter has reformed him and the rain has washed away all old conventions. As a result, the coronel sells his farm and gives his money to the poor (Diniz 2012). This is the only situation in the story in which it rains. The climax, a turning point in the story, is especially emphasized by rain as the water of purification and reform. This symbolic charging of rain is reminiscent of the Catholic-Orthodox tradition of the holy water: The purifying water drives out all evil.

At the same time, it is irrelevant whether water comes in the form of rain or in the form of snow on the ground. A short interjection is required here to clarify the use of snow for the same purpose as just described: In a comic from the newspaper *Le monde diplomatique* from December 2010, Bill Bragg draws a lantern on a random street corner. The sidewalk is white and untouched, free from any sign of everyday human life. There follow the usual various events on an urban night: demonstrations, accidents, traffic and love. Drunken people come by, people on a bike or people taking their dog for a walk. At the end of the story, it begins to snow and the snow, just like the rain, erases all traces of human existence, so that at the end of the comic the corner is again as pure and unspoiled as it is at the beginning (Bragg 2010). Through the purifying water, the street corner was brought back into its original state.

One last example aims to further consider the function of rain as a purifying water as well as to measure the observations about Brazilian reality made thus far. The third chapter of *Daytripper* begins with the end of a relationship: The protagonist sits alone in an empty room, still surrounded by the traces of his old life, while a heavy rain is falling outside. He is in despair and asks himself what to do next. The following scenes are set throughout the night or on rainy days and only after a year do both the mental and meteorological situation change. Brás meets a young woman, falls in love with her and can

⁴ Diniz explains his version of the legend as follows: "Decidi adaptar a lenda [do Negrinho] justamente por não gostar dela! Claro que algo nela me seduziu. Mas discordei veementemente da visão simplista do personagem, que reforça o estereótipo histórico do escravo submisso, coitadinho, sem vontade própria , a quem só cabe o papel de trabalhar e apanhar. [...] Em todos esses meus trabalhos anteriores, o negro tem voz, tem atitude, e cada personagem é um indivíduo único, com vontades, aspirações, defeitos e qualidades únicas, particulares." (Diniz 2012. 59).

leave his despair (and with it the rain as well) behind him (Moon/Bá 2013. Chapter 3.). In this story, the authors also choose rain as a means to purify the world, life and the soul. Rain generally has a positive connotation in the book: Brás, the protagonist, likes the rain because it reminds him of his childhood when his family had a reunion in the countryside every year: "Brás loved the rain. / It reminded him of his childhood. / It kept the family closer." (Moon/Bá. 2013. 190). Rain is connected to intimate moments in the story in which the characters reflect on themselves. As Flusser (2011. 43) remarks: "A chuva que observo pela janela me dá uma sensação boa, porque me sinto libertado dela". This is the sort of self-liberation that was already discussed above. Flusser, however, also stresses the problem of the conquest and appropriation of nature by humans. In the case of the transience of rain, this ought to be less problematic, which possibly explains its fascination.

Conclusion

In the last chapter of *NATURAL:MENTE*, Flusser asks to what extent the European and Brazilian treatment of nature differ.

O europeu tende a refugiar-se na natureza para escapar às ameaças da cultura, e tal tendência não é recente (por exemplo, devida ao romantismo e semelhantes ideologias escapistas). Já os gregos e os romanos tinham o seu bucolismo. No Brasil, que sofre constante influência europeia, tal tendência para 'um retorno à natureza' não é desconhecida, mas é, como tanta outra influência importada, pouco mais que gesto vazio. O brasileiro, ao contrário do europeu, tende a aglomerar-se em centros densamente povoados para escaper às ameaças da natureza. [...] Tais tendências opostas correspondem a climas existenciais diferentes. O europeu se sente fundalmentalmente ameaçado pelo seu próximo: é o clima do ,homo homini lupus'. O brasileiro se sente fundalmentalmente ameaçado por forças extra-humanas. (Flusser 2011. 159-160.).

This analysis shows clearly what different functions water has in comics. From Flusser's perspective, a dichotomy is identifiable between rather European approaches (the retreat into nature) on the one hand, which conveys upon water (in the form of rain and rivers) a clearly utopian character in the stories presented here. Contrasting with this we have a rather Brazilian approach which views the sea as something eerie, uncontrollable. In its

coexistence with humans it turns out to be more sinister, unpredictable and thus clearly more dystopian than rain. Rain is deployed as a purifying moment, often in connection with the night, in order to mark an end and correspondingly a new beginning. The river corresponds to the idea of a "stream of life", a place where old transitions, religions and convictions can be experienced, and consequently an approximation of one's own ego to a supposed original state can be felt, since the goddess of water also acts as the goddess of birth. This is what the Böhmes mean when they speak of the giving aspect of water in a utopia. But "utopias are always countries with a blocked-out sea", because "the sea carries the eerie and the tremendousness per se of the element water" (Böhme 1996. 60). The sea is portrayed as Janus-faced: As the *alma mater*, the nourishing mother who gives the inhabitants of the shore fish, but at the same time as a moody, impulsive force of nature that the human cannot compete with. The ship voyages through this impetuous nature and, by doing so, is made a lived utopia, a heterotopia for humans in which freedom and participation in the three-dimensionality of the space appear in the outlines.

In an essay on the role of water in Brazilian film, Ute Hermanns identifies five functions of water in the Cinema Novo and in the new Brazilian cinema of the 1990s: water as an expression of social revolution, water as a symbol of great misfortune, water as a source of social and racial inequality, the sea as a new beginning and water as an element of extermination, oblivion and preservation (cf. Hermanns 2008. 126). Hermanns also speaks of the water shortage as a dystopian moment. Particularly interesting is Hermann's analysis of the film Os Narradores de Javé by Eliane Caffé, because in this film a dam project threatens to bury a village with a lively and tradition-steeped narration culture under the floods. Here, water thus stands for progress, media culture and the element of extermination, in contrast to the traditions and oral narration culture of the Sertão (Hermanns 2008. 136-139). This is precisely the danger that Flusser sees in technocracy, namely the overcoming of nature through technology, without the reflective instance of human freedom: "O 'progresso', se não for controlado por crítica de valores, pode ser mais perigoso que o imobilismo" (Flusser 2011. 43). The reversal of the utopia of the stream of life into a dystopia of the drying up of this stream, however, is not broached in the graphic novels discussed in this contribution. It is, nevertheless, discussed in Pedro Leite's educational comic "Falta d'Água". In seven panels, Leite shows Brazilian people, using water in different situations. The last panel is used to contrast the prior scenes: It is the only panel with a speech bubble, and it displays a TV-journalist, reporting on water shortage and assuming this very shortage being caused by missing rainfalls (Leite, without year).

Regarding the socio-political function of water in comics, which is worth further investigation, and by way of conclusion, I will refer to a picture by Xavier Coste which also appeared in Le monde diplomatique (December 2012). Coste's picture shows a natural and peaceful landscape, with a sea, a mountain and a fisherman. But the observer can also make out an underwater world that shows the city of Paris, frozen in the mass of water (Coste 2012). Here, two ideas come to mind: firstly, the dystopia of the destruction of the world by the threatening uncontrollability of the water which mankind is exposed to. Secondly, the picture nevertheless also stands for the utopia of a rebirth in a more primordial world in which all creatures of the Earth live in harmony with nature (very similar to the utopia which the biblical story of the Flood is based upon). Man is confronted with the natural power of the water that he would like to dominate, to notch, yet without knowing how he can master this task successfully. Coste's picture stands for destruction and a new beginning, for dystopia in the utopia and illustrates clearly why water represents such an outstanding motif for both utopian and dystopian settings alike, seeing as the entire ambivalence of modern man in dealing with nature is united in this element.

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