



## Futurism and Genre Genesis in Brazilian Science Fiction

### Futurismo e gênese de gênero na ficção científica brasileira

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#### Abstract

The recent emergence of futurism movements seeking agency over the imagination of the future often has the communities of readers and writers of science fiction as one of its pillars. Its proponents seek to stake their claim on a new movement by mobilizing the SF community and the memory work of fandom but whether they can achieve enough critical mass to enact broader collective action is uncertain. Taking as example the sertãopunk subgenre of Brazilian SF, this paper will discuss the internal coloniality of Brazilian regionalism that resulted in the creation of a spatial identity for the northeast region now being challenged, before arguing that political intent is merging with genre intervention to form one infrastructure of futurism.

**Keywords:** Brazilian Science Fiction; Futurism; Genre Studies; Fandom.

#### Resumo

O surgimento recente de movimentos futuristas buscando ter voz sobre a imaginação do futuro, frequentemente usam as comunidades de leitores e escritores de ficção científica como um de seus pilares. Seus proponentes querem assumir a autoria de um novo movimento, mobilizando a comunidade de FC e o trabalho de arquivamento dos fãs, mas há dúvidas se conseguirão atingir massa crítica suficiente para efetuar mudanças coletivas mais amplas. Tomando como exemplo o subgênero sertãopunk, este artigo discutirá o colonialismo interno do regionalismo brasileiro que resultou na criação de uma identidade espacial para a região Nordeste, que agora é questionada, e argumentará que a motivação política vem se fundindo com intervenções no gênero na FC brasileira para formar uma das infraestruturas do futurismo.

**Palavras-chave:** Ficção Científica Brasileira; Futurismo; Estudos de Gêneros Literários; *Fandom*.

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## Introduction

Sertãopunk emerged in Brazil very recently as a science fiction (SF) subgenre proposing a speculative aesthetic that empowers the culture, geographies, and peoples of the country's northeast region while rejecting stereotypes. This proposition carries some resemblance to the goals of Afrofuturism, an aspect its own creators recognize, as well as a direct relationship with digital culture. Through a mapping of the historical and political context of Brazilian regional prejudices, connected with an analysis of the fandom activism involved in sertãopunk, the process becomes fertile ground not only for discussing genre dynamics within contemporary SF but also the mechanics of today's futurisms as politico-aesthetic social movements<sup>2</sup>.

Antonio Gramsci's *Southern Question* essay from 1926 offers a starting point to consider the northeast of Brazil as a spatial construction of identity, as proposed by Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. in *The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast* (2014). The relationship between Gramsci's considerations about Italy and the northeast has been explored before (SANTOS, 2017) and this essay argues that it serves well the historical context of Brazil and the spatial construction hypothesis<sup>3</sup>, which are critical to perceive the decolonial motivation that fuels sertãopunk. Gramsci wanted to find a way of overcoming internal divisions and encouraging the creation of intellectuals from the working classes who could mediate an understanding of the need for revolution. In the process, he realized the role that Italian intellectuals of the underdeveloped south had played in convincing migrant workers to agree with hegemonic thought imposed by the industrialized north and their allied elites in the south, which made the working-class act against their interests (CONELLI, 2019). Internal colonialism played a role back then and in today's Brazil: like those in the north of Italy early in the twentieth century, Brazilians from the wealthier parts of the country stereotype and hold prejudice against people from the northeast as a way of escaping their inferior position in the global colonial order by making the regional "others" their subalterns. A scene in *Bacurau* (2019), a movie that has been connected to an emerging aesthetic of a science-fictional Northeast (ARAÚJO, 2020), illustrates this relationship clearly: when the southern Brazilians who are guiding the gang of foreign white hunters preying on the inhabitants of the namesake northeast town try to argue that they are different from the locals because the south of Brazil is white, they

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<sup>3</sup> Santos later sought to use the Gramscian framework to challenge Albuquerque Jr.'s propositions about the Northeast.

are met with a resounding laugh.

Like Gramsci's southern Italian intellectuals, previous artistic movements in Brazil also sought a voice in regional representation. During the 1920s, while writers and artists in southeast Brazil embraced modernism and Italian futurism (SARTOR, 2012), being inspired by European avant-garde movements to propose cultural hybridization as a nationalistic element, those in the northeast sought to empower their region's culture in reaction to foreign influence and birthed a literary movement known as Regionalism. Although it led to a politicized cry against social injustice and environmental problems, it also reinforced the vision of the northeast as a backward semi-arid region by depicting its numerous social problems and forced migrations due to droughts (ALBUQUERQUE JR., 2014, p. 138). In addition, roving gangs of bandits in the early 20th century also contributed to a conception of the region as lawless. Gang leaders like Lampião and his *cangaceiros* captured the national interest when the media sensationalized their actions. *Cangaço*, as the movement of roving gangs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century became known, consolidated itself in the cultural imagination as a form of resistance against social injustice, since the gangs were remembered as acting kindly toward the poor. Nevertheless, they often committed violent crimes and clashed with other armed men employed by wealthy landowners. Virgulino Ferreira da Silva (1897-1938), known as Lampião, was the best-known example: he could fire a lever-action rifle so fast it resembled a lamp, hence his nickname. According to his legend, the once prosperous cattle rancher became a bandit after a land conflict that expelled his family from their farm. Historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote about him in the book *Bandits* (1969) while arguing his theory of social banditry. He noted the underlying ambiguity of the gangs, seeing them less as social warriors and more as avengers who earned respect from showing that the poor could also exert power through violence. More detailed assessments of the historical record shows that *cangaceiros* were less socially conscious than thought and might even have presented hurdles to the formation of a revolutionary class<sup>4</sup>.

Élise Grunspan-Jasmin (2006) argues that Lampião was the first *cangaceiro* to cultivate his image both through fashion and modern technologies like the press and photography. Furthermore, his legend and creative way of dressing up, itself an aesthetic proposition (ALENCASTRE, 2010), later became material for an essential film in the Brazilian cinematic movement known as Cinema

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the discussion, see Linda Lewin's *The Oligarchical Limitations of Social Banditry in Brazil* (1979).

Novo in the 1960s, Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, 1964). Together with the region's spiritual tradition of Christian pilgrimage and its social injustices, the film further cemented some northeast's tropes in the country's cultural imagination, particularly in its amalgamation of Eisensteinian montage and Cordel Literature<sup>5</sup> ("Literatura de Cordel"), not to mention local archetypes incarnating political discourses, such as the *cangaceiro*, the professional killer, the prophet, the priest, and the *retirantes*, as economic migrants affected by the region's cyclical droughts are known. Like Italy in the early twentieth century, these migrants provided an unskilled labor force for the rapidly developing southeast region in the same period, which consolidated their subaltern position in the national imaginary.

### Politicized SF and technology

While *sertão* is an evocative concept connected to both a biome of Brazil's Northeast (which in fact contains more biomes including savannah and Atlantic forest) and a space in the Brazilian cultural imagination, the SF subgenre suffix comes from cyberpunk, another science fictional current with an older history dating back to the 1980s. It represented a major renewal moment for Anglophone SF by blending counterculture with dystopia, emerging data technologies of the time, man-machine interactions, and a transgressive political impulse<sup>6</sup>. It often depicts the combination of high technology and breakdown in the social order with noir and crime fiction elements.

Brazilian SF already has a tradition of creativity in subgenres (SILVA, 2021) ranging from "tupinipunk" in the 1990s<sup>7</sup> to macumbapunk and cyberfunk<sup>8</sup>, which appeared more recently among

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<sup>5</sup> Cordel literature, whose name comes from the strings in which the chapbooks would be displayed for sale, is an example of folk culture expressed through narrative poems and derived from the Portuguese colonial tradition. The language often is vernacular while topics are diverse, ranging from social or political commentary to even hybrids of SF and local culture, as in the cordel "Alien and Predator against Lampião," in which the franchised monsters of Hollywood are pitted against the legendary northeast bandit. The booklet is available on amazon.com.br. See: <https://www.planocritico.com/critica-alien-e-predador-vs-lampiao-a-batalha-mais-horripilante-do-universo/>. Accessed on 01/08/2022.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/cyberpunk>. Accessed on 01/08/2022.

<sup>7</sup> SF writer and scholar Roberto de Sousa Causo discussed the term in 1996 in his fanzine *Papêra Uirandê Especial* and has sought to develop it since then. Silva (2021) establishes Causo's creation of the subgenre in 1989 and draws a parallel with the Anthropofagic Manifesto of Brazilian Science Fiction, by Ivan Carlos Regina, from 1988, which raised the political tone of the discussion around the Brazilian genre. As part of this broader debate about the national character of Brazilian SF, tupinipunk takes the task of blending elements of the local culture with cyberpunk aesthetic and tropes but without artificiality. In essence, like other efforts and discussions in Brazil at the time and in the early 2000s, it sought to counter cultural hegemony with creative freedom.

<sup>8</sup> Fábio Kabral created macumbapunk, while Lu Ain-Zaila coined cyberfunk.

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Afrofuturist writers. Another recent example of Brazilian genre creativity is Amazofuturism (GAMA; GARCIA, 2020), although it also suffers from its share of essentialization and cultural appropriation. Brazilian SF also has grown more diverse and politically engaged in the last few years. Through recent manifestos that also demarcate territory within the genre, authors called attention to the need to be more inclusive, configuring another “wave” as the evolution of Brazilian SF has been traditionally demarcated (SILVA, 2021) – the first wave encompassing the beginnings of SF in the country in the nineteenth century and ending in the 1970s, as established by Causo (2003, pp. 297-298) followed by a second wave from the 1980s and the third wave in the late 1990s to early 2000s. While the second wave had a strong influence from the golden age of cyberpunk in Anglo-American fiction, the third wave became more political and started questioning the very “Brazilianess” of the country’s SF, as well as issues of identity and representation.

The manifestoes of the third wave problematized SF’s relationship with foreign influences and why Brazilian readers and writers of the genre did not give their characters Brazilian names, for instance. Manifesto AntiBrasilite, written by Osiris Reis and others, exemplifies the trend. Showing a sophisticated awareness of the cultural imperialism of SF, it calls for creative freedom for Brazilian writers without imposing nationalistic limits. The manifesto<sup>9</sup> equates “brasilite” with a cultural illness imposing standards and limitations on Brazilian creators while reinforcing the supremacy of SF and fantasy from Anglo-American authors; it then calls on the local community of SF writers and readers to treat their production seriously. Silva (2021) argues that the fourth wave seems to have overcome this identity crisis and feels at home celebrating what makes Brazilian genre literature unique.

Another development driving the trend in Brazil and other Global South countries is the drop in the marginal cost of telecommunication and computing, which facilitated dissemination for SF communities and social activists alike. Online magazines, e-books, and social media are becoming spaces of publication and debate without the traditional editorial gatekeepers. I contend that the ease of publication is accelerating the genre’s evolution, as shown by the smaller distance between the third and the fourth wave of Brazilian SF (less than a decade, according to Silva) and experiments like sertãopunk<sup>10</sup>. The internet has been playing a growing role in Brazilian SF since

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<sup>9</sup> See: <https://mapc.medium.com/manifesto-antibrasilitite-f7ff0aa9d14d>. Accessed on 01/08/2022.

<sup>10</sup> Silva (2021) thus delineates the shape of this fourth wave: “Among other points, this Fourth Wave may be understood by the affirmation and celebration of Brazilian sociocultural and regional diversities, formalized both by a deeper

the early 2010s (RÜSCHE and FURLANETTO, 2018). Its importance became evident when sertãopunk proponents fought back against what they considered to be stereotyped characterizations and cultural appropriation attempts using the imagined northeast as inspiration but dressing it with a techno-aesthetic, including by taking the social banditry trope of *cangaceiros* and giving it a cybernetic work-over<sup>11</sup> or using the northeast as an exoticized scenario for SF by authors from other regions of Brazil.

Technology is a critical element for the process described here, both philosophically and practically. Science fiction operates with science and technology, and the latter can be theorized as both poison and cure, as French philosopher Bernard Stiegler argued based on the earlier recovery of the term *pharmakon* by Jacques Derrida (CROGAN, 2010). According to Stiegler's proposition, culture and art could be the catalyst to help us break away from the domination of the digital by cognitive capitalism and its "symbolic misery" programming individuals to become consumers. Technology can help synchronize individuals with the collective for positive change, but in accordance with the idea of cure and poison, this process of independent publishing happens with the tools of capitalism – monopolistic platforms like Amazon.com and US-owned social media sites. Nevertheless, the process still makes the community of readers and writers the gatekeepers of the genre, transforming form and content.

One aspect that exemplifies the cultural struggle taking place online is that while G.G. Diniz, Alan de Sá and Alec Silva were conceiving and disseminating the term sertãopunk, others tried to name the emerging aesthetic as cyberagreste (ARAÚJO, 2020). Diniz raised issue with the perceived erasure of her authorship by the "cyberagreste" essay about the emerging subgenre published by *Fantástica 451*, an independent online magazine focused on SF essays and reviews. The magazine issued a correction after sertãopunk's proponents mobilized the SF community using social media<sup>12</sup>. Another independent SF publication, *Eita!*, focused on Brazilian SF in translation, also was criticized for a cover perceived as fetishizing a *cangaceiro* stepping out of a portal alongside a jaguar and into an Orientalized neighborhood<sup>13</sup>. The cover was later changed<sup>14</sup>.

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presence in literary scene of black writers linked to Afrofuturism and by the rise of movements such as Amazofuturism and Sertãopunk."

<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.2057180467744624&type=3>. Accessed on 01/08/2022.

<sup>12</sup> The thread <https://twitter.com/fantastika451/status/1344732674250993667> helps understand the controversy (in Portuguese). Accessed on 01/08/2022.

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.eitamagazine.com/issue/2020/12/23/issue-0-released.html>. Accessed on 01/08/2022.

<sup>14</sup> See: <https://www.eitamagazine.com/issues/zero/>. Accessed on 01/08/2022.

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Abigail De Kosnik (2016) studied online communities of fans to understand how their archival work helped preserve elements within digital culture's high instability and found it constituted a form of collective effort whose longevity surpassed the uncertain lifespan of the media. By gathering to discuss how to build archives and encouraging the community to compile works that went against heteronormative and white cultural hegemony, fandom shaped its own cultural environment. Therefore, the activism of sertãopunk can be considered an example of this process. Although its proponents were criticized as being overtly political or politically correct when complaining about essentialization in the SF community<sup>15</sup>, they were able to generate enough debate about what constitutes SF from northeast Brazil.

Contemporary SF from the Global South has been showing a tendency to play with tropes and forms of the genre in ways that set up spaces for imagining different futures, in a dual decentering of form and content that seeks the new while commenting on the aspects of SF that stop that transformation (O'CONNELL, 2019, p. 695). In addition to asserting control over representation in a spatially constructed identity, sertãopunk's confluence of self-publishing, political intent, and genre intervention results in a fluidity of narrative genres that denotes the lack of commercially minded editorial gatekeeping. Diniz's short story *Os olhos dos cajueiros* (Diniz et al, 2020) blends sexuality, police procedural, ecology, SF tropes and post-apocalyptic reconstruction to narrate a murder investigation at a university in Fortaleza (capital of Ceará) in the future where the city "fluctuates" after a non-specified deluge. The murder takes place inside a laboratory where scientists try to communicate with cashew trees and is probed by a lesbian prosecutor who feels free to express her sexuality and at ease to subvert political cronyism, which sertãopunk's creators consider one of the top challenges of the region (Diniz et al, 2020). Another story by Sá, *Schizophrenia*, narrates an underground laboratory where Western science conducts unethical experiments with an advertising worker. The psychedelic drugs become a catalyst for an eruption of repressed sexuality where the subject learns to co-exist with his hallucinating reality.

Within this process of digital publication described above, which in the case of sertãopunk involves both politically oriented artistic production and genre transformation, understanding boundary objects as tools for the community of readers and writers of SF becomes vital (RIEDER,

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<sup>15</sup> See: <https://amaranganha.wordpress.com/2019/09/15/cyberagreste-quando-a-problematizacao-prejudica-a-literatura/> and <https://anchor.fm/tavernadolugarnenhum/episodes/Miscelnea---Sertopunk--Cyberagreste--Literatura-de-Gnero-Nacional--Politicamente-Correto--Lugar-de-Fala-e-Movimento-Armorial-ehcchb>. Accessed on 01/08/2022.

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2017, p. 29). The term itself comes from science and technology studies, as researchers sought to understand how knowledge was assimilated and negotiated collectively by communities of practice. In this sense, boundary objects are ways in which communities negotiate meaning and solve problems together, making them powerful tools for social activism and assemblages (creation of new objects or concepts from unrelated and related ones, with great fluidity, exchangeability, and multiple uses). Therefore, their literary works, images, and manifestos become boundary objects themselves when used by different communities for collaborative work. Like their scientific counterparts, they are plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites (STAR; GRIESEMER, 1989). Therefore, the boundary-setting work of those trying to establish new genres is both part of the process of SF and proof of its malleability within a mutually recognized core.

## Conclusion

Recent research on futurism argues that such movements are the “change that generates change” (CHATTOPADHYAY, 2021). Futurisms may borrow from SF or be more intimately connected with it or not, because “they are not fiction and do not seek cognitive estrangement: they seek cognitive reconstruction” (CHATTOPADHYAY, 2021). Still, all of them seek to take agency over the imagination of the future and their representation – sertãopunk, for instance, aims to break through with the hegemonic thinking that essentializes the region. Its proponents don’t precisely position themselves as transformative agents for all of Brazil’s society, nor its capitalist system. Their work is more subtle and operates in the cultural realm, being inspired by the physical and human geography of the Northeast as a region that produces culture as well as innovation, development, ideas, and technology amid a varied ecosystem, fighting the assumption that it is a chronically underdeveloped ecological and intellectual desert.

Because of the merger of political context and genre intervention, I contend that sertãopunk is a politically oriented artistic movement: a futurism. The confluence of artistic creation and political activism enacts utopia in the present by taking charge of the imagination of the future within an aesthetic framework that generates affect – the techno-sublime described by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (2008)<sup>16</sup> – and political proposition. Not only this accelerates genre

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<sup>16</sup> “In a sense, the sf sublime has become a ‘realistic’ discourse. It reflects a social world that has been saturated with



developments but makes the whole community of readers and writers a more diverse and inclusive space operating autonomously. As Gramsci dreamed, it is a genuinely organic intellectuality, but what will determine its survival, setting it apart from other foundational claims by aesthetic movements that descended into obscurity, is the degree of acceptance and transformation of dominant culture it achieves. Blending the work of SF with that of social transformation is an attractive proposition because of the notoriety it can deliver to its proponents, but the autonomic character cuts both ways. Collectivity is at the genesis and could well be the grave of sertãopunk, and only the temporal/acceptance axis will tell. But the genre genesis process remains.

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technosublime narrative/image systems that adopt the language sf itself has cultivated. Advertising and media, political propaganda, and the justifications of grand public works and experiments use the emotional charge of awe and reconsolidation in technoscience to create assent and to prevent dissent, reveling in the ecstasy of control, applying the poetics of fiction to the construction of society. SF has, more than any other contemporary discourse, cultivated the motivating concepts of the global transformation of natural existence into a system of interlocking technical systems, the empire of technoscience. The sf sublime emphasizes the dramatic arc of the technosublime: recoil at the unutterable power and extension of technology, and recuperation through ethical judgments about its effects in the future.” (CSICSERY-RONAY, 2008, p. 161).

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