

Daring Alternatives for Portuguese History

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Abstract. Alternative History, as a subgenre of speculative fiction, offers a distinctive lens to interrogate historical causality. Drawing on a non-exhaustive survey of Portuguese works published primarily in the twenty-first century; thematic focus and narrative outcomes are discussed. Portuguese Alternative History tends to privilege divergences located close to the authors' present and to foreground limited regime change scenarios, often less liberal or more conservative social orders. While such narratives sometimes function as cautionary tales or expressions of historical nostalgia, their proximity to the writer/reader's timeline appears to limit more radical speculation about alternative forms of governance and social organization, constraining the genre's emancipatory potential to challenge entrenched assumptions about historical inevitability.

Keywords: Alternative History; Portuguese Speculative Fiction; Regime transitions; Portuguese Alternative History.

1. Escapism, Meaning and Subgenres

Alternative History is a subgenre of the so-called Speculative Fiction, which includes genres such as science fiction, fantasy, supernatural horror, weird fiction, with the common denominator of the "What if...?" motif. If a taxonomy exercise could be attempted to classify this family of literary forms, it would be easy to defend that Alternative History is closely related with Science Fiction. While Science Fiction usually focus on imagining futures stemming from by a certain technology or sociologic development, departing from or accentuating the reality shared by the writer and the reader, Alternative History dwells on stories in which an historical past event has a different outcome (Point of Divergence), with rippling consequences throughout History, creating a different timeline known by the writer and the reader. To highlight on how this draft of taxonomy is not perfect, it is noteworthy to mention Retrofuturism, such as Steampunk, as an instance in which Science Fiction and Alternative History limits are blurred, since this genre tries to imagine a future using the Past (in relation to the time of writing) as point-of-view for the new timeline in which the story occurs.

Many times, Speculative Fiction is accused of being purely escapism and entertainment (a criticism which by itself would be worthy of reflection, since it points to a false hierarchy of "usefulness" in literature and, moreover, a disdain for "leisure"), however, while these stories are not factual, they are not short in Truth. As Chesterton [1] writes:

(...) fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already. Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey.

The parallel can be established with Speculative Fiction stories in general, and Alternative History in particular.

2. The Usefulness of an Imaginary History

By imagining how History could have been, one can ponder on the forces, motivations, choices and consequences behind the Humanity path; by analyzing what other timelines could be possible, one understands better what brought us to the present and, maybe as important, which other futures we can have ahead. This exercise is not trivial, authors are children of their time, molded by the current zeitgeist, which by its turn molds a certain most accepted interpretation of History. Alternative History offers the reader the possibility to escape its own limits and bias and reveal the infinite hypothesis the day of tomorrow can bring. As stated by Ursula Le Guin [2]:

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.

Another potential "usefulness" of Alternative History resides in the fictional game itself: facts are intertwined with fictional occurrences, most of the time without a clear indication of what is from the history books and what is from the author mind, prompting many readers to get interested in and research the real-world timeline, developing their critical thinking and information retrieval skills. Abilities we can argue will become more and more vital in a world filled with deep-fakes, which also originate from real-world/factual data to generate alternative events [3].

3. Portuguese Literature and Alternative History: a few notes

In Portugal, Alternative History, as many other genres within Speculative Fiction, with the exception of folktales, do not have a strong literary tradition [4]. However, several examples can be found, written mostly in the 21st century, focusing on Points of Divergence mainly located within the Contemporary (or even "recent") History. Some examples [5 - 17] include:

Table 1 - Selection of Alternative History publications written mainly by Portuguese authors and published in the Portuguese market.

Title	Publishing Date	Ref.
A República nunca existiu: antologia de contos sobre um Portugal onde o regicídio de 1908 falhou.	2008	[5]
Alfa 33 e o Furúnculo de Salazar	2012	[6]
Lisboa no Ano 2000 - Uma antologia assombrosa sobre uma cidade que nunca existiu	2013	[7]

Alfa 33 e o Enigma das Caldas	2013	[8]
Nome de Código Portograal	2013	[9]
Steampunk Internacional	2018	[10]
Winepunk: ano um, a guerra das pipas	2019	[11]
Lisboa Noir - O Ano Louco de 1930	2023	[12]
Winepunk: ano 2, a República contra-ataca	2024	[13]
Alvorada Desfeita - E se o 25 de Abril Tivesse Falhado?	2024	[14]
Lisboa Noir: O Ano Negro de 1929	2024	[15]
Quando o Vaticano Caiu	2024	[16]
Portugal Vermelho	2025	[17]

Briefly synopses of some¹ of these works are as follows:

“A República nunca existiu!”, an anthology in which the Portuguese 1908 regicide fails and the country never becomes a republic [5];

"Alfa 33 e o Furúnculo de Salazar" [6] e “Alfa 33 e o Enigma das Caldas" [8] is a spy-thriller parody set in Portugal in which the 1975 Carnation Revolution that in our timeline deposed the fascist regime was unsuccessful;

“Lisboa no Ano 2000 - Uma antologia assombrosa sobre uma cidade que nunca existiu” [7], an anthology, in which an electropunk retrofuturistic Lisbon is imagined, a direct reference to the 1906 classic science fiction book “Lisboa no ano 2000” [18];

“Nome de Código Portograal” [9], that tells the story of the invasion of Portugal during World War II, which never occurred in our timeline;

Winepunk anthologies [11, 13], organized by the Invicta Imaginaria group, in which a wine-powered revolution extends the real-world Monarchic 1919 counter-revolution is extended from the historical 3 weeks to 3 years;

¹ The anthology “Steampunk Internacional” only has three short stories by Portuguese Writers, being an outlier in this corpus of examples.

“Lisboa Noir - O Ano Louco de 1930” [12] and “Lisboa Noir: O Ano Negro de 1929” [15], in which the 1834 Portuguese Civil War is won by Miguel I King, the conservative faction, instead the Liberal one;

“Alvorada Desfeita - E se o 25 de Abril Tivesse Falhado?”[14], in which the Carnation Revolution fails;

“Quando o Vaticano Caiu”[16], which describes the invasion of Vatican City by the Nazi forces and the settlement of the Pope and Roman Curia in Fátima, Portugal;

“Portugal Vermelho”[17], imagines Portugal in which a communist revolution follows the Carnation Revolution.

It is also worth mentioning, alongside the examples displayed on table 1, “Almanaque Steampunk”, a steampunk almanac, published in 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2022 [19 - 24], which the first four editions were published in tandem with the Portuguese edition of the EuroSteamCon event, while the later were in tandem with Festival Vapor in Entroncamento.

Not asserting any kind of judgement on the literary quality of these stories, or relevance of their tropes and chosen Points of Divergence, one can try to find a pattern.

It is noticeable that in most of the stories listed above the Point of Divergence is close to the time in which the narrative takes place and frequently are not anchored in technological advancements, somehow limiting the ripple effect of consequences throughout the timeline, resulting in imagined futures which resemble more closely the writer-reader timeline. Another important factor to mention is that many of the Alternative History scenarios mentioned above are related with changes in regime, many times towards a less liberal/democratic society, contrary to the overall progression of Portuguese History. If, in some cases, this could be related to a certain cautionary tale nature of the narratives, others may represent a sense of nostalgia for the never fulfilled potential glory promised by the past.

These characteristics position the Portuguese Alternate History stories timelines closer to the writer-reader timeline, which may stand as evidence of an unrealized full potential future ideation. On the other hand, how distant an Alternative History timeline can stray from the writer-reader timeline before becoming unrecognizable and/or lost in reference to the History it comments on? If too close to the reality, it does not challenge the beliefs and bias and the genre fails to deliver its emancipatory power, if too speculative, it loses its connection to History, the base of the genre.

4. Conclusion and Final Remarks

It is still premature to draw conclusive findings, especially dealing with such a small list of literary works. However, these kinds of considerations are important for critics when reviewing speculative fiction, taking in consideration its specificities and unique approaches to fiction and storytelling.

The apparent trend in Portuguese Alternative History is an avoidance of daring speculation, not far from the Point of Divergence, and away from liberal/progressive futures. Although regime changes is a recurrent motive explored, there are practically no examples of radically different forms of governance/society structure conceptualized. Factual reality is, still, for Portuguese literature, a power that seems difficult to escape.

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