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From *in illo tempore* to 1984 and beyond. Insights from the Oral Presentation Round Table #1 chair

LIVRATLÉGIC
HYPOTHESIS
HISTORIA
PERIODICAL

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Abstract. This text tried to reflect upon the three presentations of Round Table #1 at the ‘What If’22 International Conference of ‘What If?...’ The theme was “World History”. The presentations range from the ethnography and mythology of the Nagas, around Buddhism and Brahmanism, to the book *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1948), by George Orwell. It also discussed Brazilian artists who opposed the Military Dictatorship (1964-1985). Bound by the premise of counterfactuality, i.e., the “what if”, the presentations gave rise to a long debate about current times and how art and literature continue to be decisive. In a word, to what extent do art and literature give us warnings or even predict the future? Or, on the other hand, how they influence events, and feed our imagination.

Keywords: Buddhism and Brahmanism; Brazilian Contemporary Art; Dystopia; Counterfactual

1. Introduction

The programme of the ‘What If’22 International Conference of ‘What If?...’ World History, which was held from 23-25 November 2022, was attended by a number of researchers working on the issue of the counterfactual from a variety of perspectives. In this sense, it was a transdisciplinary event, which crossed history, mythology, art, science, and literature, among other fields of knowledge. In other words, the aim was to generate an international debate, bearing in mind that the subject is still emerging in Portugal. In any case, only in 2011 the historian Niall Ferguson wrote a seminal text, in which he dissected the “uses and abuses” of counterfactuality, but, above all, how it should be approached by historians [1].

The Oral Presentation Round Table #1 from the conference, which took place online, was a fine example of dialogue between transdisciplinarity and the “what if”. Likewise, it was also an example of bringing together different latitudes and historical times, especially since mythology and religion refer to ancestral times, while dystopia points to the future, whereas art has greater freedom in its relationship with time. Thus, the presentations were as follows:

- “Naga in Ancient Indian History: Buddhism and Brahmanism”, by Daipayana Paul;
- “To be or not to be: identity, history and alternative social outcomes in Brazilian Contemporary Art”, by Pedro Pousada and Vera Araújo;
- “What if we were living in the dystopic world of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four?*”, by Iren Boyarkina.

The presentations were vivid and engaged in a lively debate, which ended up, given the timeliness of Orwell’s text, discussing above all the thematic richness of some of the most important dystopias of the 20th century. In this sense, past, present, and future came closer together, especially since Orwell would have made use of his memoirs of the

early days of the Spanish Civil War – see *Homage to Catalonia* [2] – and the Trials of Moscow. At the same time, according to some authors, he converted the “present” of 1948, when he was writing his book, into 1984.

On the other hand, the references to the history of the Nagas and the approach to contemporary Brazilian art allowed the expansion of geography and temporality, crossing religion and art. As we shall see, these seemingly irreconcilable topics found common ground in the counterfactual argument.

2. The three presentations

2.1. Fusing Buddhism and Brahmanism

The presentation by Daipayana Paul focused on the cultural history of India. Having completed a Master’s degree in the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture at the University of Calcutta, Paul is currently working on the dormant culture of Nagas, a native people of northeastern India and northeastern Myanmar. According to the author, references to these people can be found in classical Sanskrit literature, such as the *Rig Veda*, the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (commentaries on the *Vedas*), and the *Puranas*, as well as in the *Mahāvamsa* (Sri Lanka), among others [3]. He also states that although the Nagas are not described negatively in these texts, no positive elements emerge either. Either way, they are a voiceless and “foreign” people throughout history, despite some relations that could be established between these people and the mythology of the Nagas, the (semi) divine race of half-human, half-serpents of the underworld, from the Hindu and the Buddhist religions [4].

Paul goes even further, describing the complex process of amalgamation between Buddhism and Brahmanism, highlighting a rich syncretic path followed in those past years. In this way, being a voiceless people, one without the power of written

history, Paul questioned what if the Naga culture could have written their own past along history. How things could be different? Could these virtual historical sources shed light on the aforementioned syncretism? Could a new historiographical pattern emerge? And what about the traditions thus recorded for future generations and preserved for the future? Certainly, one must not forget the importance, in our times of globalization, of the myriad of cultures that tend to be swallowed up by the dominant paradigms.

2.2. Art and Dictatorship

The second presentation, by Pedro Pousada and Vera Araújo from the University of Coimbra, brought us from the Indian subcontinent to another larger country, that is Brazil. According to the authors, the “what if” methodology was employed in order to question the work of three Brazilian artists who emerged in the late sixties and the early seventies: Cildo Meireles (b. 1948), Anna Maiolino (b. 1942), and Artur Barrio (b. 1945). It is worth mentioning that the latter was born in Porto and lived briefly in Angola before moving to Brazil. In the end, all of them followed different paths. However, the question remains: how do they approach the complex subject of art production in times of dictatorship?

First of all, it must be stated that Pousada & Araújo did not refer to the dictatorship of the *Estado Novo* [New State] that prevailed in Brazil between 1937 and 1946, a regime that kept strong ties with the also authoritarian Portuguese *Estado Novo* [5]. Instead, they dealt with the Brazilian Military Dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 to 1985, partly coinciding with the last years of the Portuguese *Estado Novo*. It should be added that the Brazilian dictatorship was based on conservative values, therefore the main victims were trade unionists, activists, and members of organisations of the political left. Violence was also inflicted on indigenous

people, and torture was a common recourse for the authorities. It is estimated that more than 450 people have lost their lives, with the number of victims of all kinds of violence being much higher. Similarly, literature and the arts were subject to censorship, which did not prevent artists from expressing their vision of some particularly traumatic events, which the dictatorship sought to hide [6].

Thus, the “what if” methodology employed by both authors sought to question, rather than answer, the following issues: what if these art forms had not been developed in Brazil during the dictatorship? What if there had been no dictatorship in Brazil? In fact, the regime cast a long shadow over the country that still prevails today, especially regarding the high degree of violence. Cildo Meireles, author of *Quem matou Herzog?* [Who killed Herzog], a 1976 work that denounced the death of the journalist of the same name, recreated the work in 2021 in order to highlight the political circumstances of the murder of councillor Marielle Franco in 2018. It would be something like “Who killed Marielle”?

The same can be stated about the other artists. For instance, Anna Maiolino created the work *The Hero*, a wooden skull with a helmet, studded with medals, illustrating the character of the dictatorship in a way not very different from the poem *Receita para fazer um Herói* [Recipe for making a hero], by Reinaldo Ferreira, since ultimately the “hero” is served dead. Nevertheless, as Pousada & Araújo stated, without Maiolino’s work it would certainly not exist the *Illustration* (2018), by Alex Nabaum. This illustration depicts Jair Bolsonaro dressed in Brazilian flag colours with soulless eyes.

Ultimately, the major “what if”, somewhat implicit in the presentation, relates to the long colonial process that was at the genesis of contemporary Brazil. Certainly, the well-known and simplistic argument around the hypothesis “What if the Dutch had won the war in the 17th century against the Portuguese, establishing a Dutch Brazil”, does

not solve the issue [7]. One way or another, we remain in the field of colonialism, slavery, racism, and structural violence. Are there better colonialisms? It would be to use counterfactuality in order to rescue the determinism of an imagined society conceived according to the stereotypes of Northern Europe. In a word, a contradiction in itself.

2.3. World in a Wire

In 1973, Rainer Werner Fassbinder directed the film *Welt am Draht* [World on a Wire]. The work inspired several filmmakers, including the Wachowskis when directing *The Matrix* (1999) and the subsequent franchise of three films produced in the following years (2003, 2021). The premise is based on the possibility that our life and our world are nothing but an illusion. Despite the futuristic undertones, the truth is that the subject has been of paramount importance to several religions and philosophies. It is no accident that some scholars have found Hindu, Buddhist and Christian elements in the Wachowskis' films. Take the case of the "Veil of Maya", a Hindu and Buddhist belief about the elusive nature of the world. And although books, such as Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922), have promoted this perception as Oriental, the fact remains that already since Plato Western philosophy (and Christianity) have seen the physical world as a pale reflection of the true world of forms. Just two examples which, in fact, are only one: Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* [The City of God] and the medieval belief in the Heavenly Jerusalem [8].

Likewise, the literary genre of utopia has some elements rooted in religion. The idea of a "Golden Age" is one such element. The 20th century, especially after the First World War and its aftermath, inspired the literary flourishing of the dystopian sub-genre. *My [We]* (1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) by George Orwell, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury, and *A Clockwork Orange*

(1962) by Anthony Burgess are probably the best-known dystopias and undoubtedly belong to the literary canon of the last century. Particularly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is too often quoted and, from time to time, discussed regarding almost every subject: fake news, surveillance, language, historical revisionism, science fiction, *realpolitik*, China, Putin, Trump, you name it. The book is so far-reaching that encapsulates all this debate. In fact, that's the main reason why Iren Boyarkina, from the University of Rome La Sapienza and the University of Viterbo, set the hypothesis of we are (already) living in the dystopic world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Working extensively on science fiction literature, Boyarkina recently edited the book *Passages through Enclosures and the Space-Time Continuum in English and American Science Fiction* [9]. Assembling several authors and theories regarding alternate realities and universes, the author states that one fundamental difference between the time when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written and nowadays lies in the fact that USSR, Orwell's main influence, does not exist anymore, but capitalism does. The proliferation of surveillance cameras, the tracking of credit card movements, and cryptocurrency have made national states (and some corporations) extremely powerful through the knowledge and control they have over entire populations. Boyarkina also points to the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as one of the elements that bring our world closer to the world conceived by Orwell. In this particular, there has been a considerable amount of debate in recent times, with some leaders from different areas warning about the dangers that AI could bring to humanity in the coming years [10]. In any case, it's not by comparing the latest technology with Skynet's "will to power" or the apparent apathy of humans induced by technology, as Frank Herbert suggested in *Dune* (1965), that we can get easy answers. In the end, it's all about the long-standing question: does the

utopian genre (and science fiction) anticipate or shape the future?

According to Boyarkina, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is also notable for its vision of “ongoing war”. This war is not only fought against external enemies but against society itself. This is the logic of totalitarianism: creating apparent internal enemies, which are never completely destroyed, which allows terror, repression, and fear to be perpetuated under the banner of the party and Big Brother. On the other hand, continued conflict would drain much of the resources, implying no social mobility in an impoverished society. As Brian explains to Winston during the questioning, fake news and, above all, the famous principles of “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength” and “who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” would allow the consolidation of most enduring despotism ever created [11].

A child of his time, Orwell was well aware of Clausewitz’s principles of “total war” that the First World War, as well as the totalitarianism of the 1930s and 1940s brought to societies. And so, returning to the question of anticipating/shaping the future, it is important to ask whether Orwell announced that totalitarianism is inescapable or whether we have prepared for it by accepting the death of privacy under the cloak of apparently harmless technology and the promise of long-lasting safety.

3. Engaging the discussion

3.1. The Fourth Industrial Revolution

The debate that followed was particularly thought-provoking and highlighted most of these themes. More than ever, Antonio Gramsci’s famous sentence seemed to be implicit: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters”, all the more so since the Fourth Industrial Revolution has been referred to as “the last stage of capitalism”, with the merge

of corporations. In any case, this “last stage” or “end of History” – see Francis Fukuyama for the over-optimistic view of the triumph of American democracy in 1991 [12] – it’s not a fully convincing argument. The much-heralded “end of history” is a characteristic of the philosophies of History and encapsulates modernity since the times of the Enlightenment [13]. Hence each generation can claim to be on the verge of decisive change, walking through the gates of the “final frontier”.

However, there is no doubt that the phenomenon of acceleration of History bolsters the belief that we are facing a decisive moment, particularly because of the overwhelming development of AI. One of the questions made during the discussion was precisely: “What’s the way out”? Are we willing to surrender our lifestyle built upon an over-simplified way of dealing with reality? As one author remarked, people deeply cherish the fruits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, even if their taste is not always the best. Certainly, the speed of information has been raising a multitude of questions and we know how populist discourse uses these tools to influence.

Another subject discussed, still around the “what if” we are living in the world of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, was the issue of language. The teachers who participated in the debate stressed how young people are usually the prime objective of political extremism. After all, “new” is a common word in the vocabulary of fascism. It was stated that younger people are more susceptible to fashions, and do not yet have analytical tools of critical thinking to resist certain temptations, such as social media – but the same can be stated of adults. In any case, his growing inability to fully understand long texts was underlined. And, of course, one was reminded of how Orwell had envisioned simplifying and reducing the number of words in order to limit thought. In this particular, it is also important to know his text *Politics and the English Language* in

its approach to a certain “decadence” of what we say and write. Its adaptation of “a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort”, that is, “a well-known verse from *Ecclesiastes*”, became a sort of classic [14].

3.2. The Exercise of *What If*

Against this backdrop, it was suggested that the “what if” premise is a strong deterrent and also a valuable exercise to counter conformism. As stated, the “what if” challenges deterministic approaches and dominant narratives. Moreover, see how counterfactual literature deconstructs itself, at the same time deconstructing determinism. Philip Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) is a good example. Imagining the United States divided between Japan and Germany after the end of an alternative Second World War, he suggests through one of his characters that the factual victory of the Allies will be after all the *truth*.

Another “what if” that has been revisited over and over in the last years is Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935), about a demagogue who comes to power in the United States in the 1930s. While some have looked for common features with the Trump administration, others have asked the question that has been running through this text: does literature warn us or give us (bad) ideas? Or both? In this regard, classic examples would undoubtedly be Gustave le Bon’s *Psychologie des Foules* [Psychology of Crowds] (1895) and Georges Sorel’s *Réflexions sur la Violence* [Reflections on Violence] (1908). As several authors stated, it is difficult to conclude how much they will have described the *zeitgeist* of the time, anticipating some elements of fascism, while inspiring their leaders and the characteristics of these movements in the years to come [15].

In the same vein, the discussion revolved around the power of art and culture: how the Nagas found their way, how Brazilian artists resisted the

dictatorship, and how Orwell is still an important reference. Furthermore, the speakers mentioned the dualism of violence/bureaucracy as essential tools of the State, and it was difficult not to think also of literature. In this particular case, Franz Kafka or even Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu’s novel *Ora 25* [The Twenty-Fifth Hour] (1949). Set in the Second World War, this last book discusses the dehumanization of society, both through the “Aryan myth” and through people turned into numbers, according to a mathematical logic that foreshadows the negative view of AI. Nevertheless, considering all these “prophecies” or “warnings”, it is possible to conclude that Orwell will have made the most accurate guesses, so to speak. Although he did not foresee the Internet, he fully understood the power of the language and mass media. His name has indeed become an adjective.

4. Conclusion

Just a few words to conclude. Departing from themes apparently difficult to relate, but unified by the premise of “what if”, the presentations of Round Table #1 were a challenge for the speakers, the audience, and last, but not least, the moderator. Hence the title of this text, with apparent futuristic undertones, stresses the importance of religion, art, and literature. Knowing that cosmogonies begin with the victory of order over chaos, it is worth rethinking the importance of old and new myths throughout the ages. At the same time, utopia, dystopia, and counterfactuality are key elements to question determinism and conformism. Even if many alternative universes feature citizens vanquished by omnipotent and Machiavellian states.

The fact that Orwell’s book was the most discussed topic should come as no surprise. It is one of the best-known, quoted, and studied dystopias. To live in the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is to live in “a prison without bars”, also a very often quoted phrase regarding today’s world. However,

unlike the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we can still freely read Emmanuel Goldstein's words, as well as the principles of "Newspeak". That is a right Winston never had.

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