Literature, Text and Context: Insights regarding Alternative History, Humour, Zen and more

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Abstract. Storytelling has accompanied humanity since the dawn of consciousness, and the reader is the ultimate recipient of these stories. However, the parameters shaping the nature of the reader's enjoyment and understanding of the stories are still a matter of discussion. Starting from the contents of a f2f Invited Lecturers session on Alternative History and Fanzines, this paper develops the idea that a shift in the point of view of the observer/reader is important in many aspects of art and life. Using an experiential perspective and autoethnography as methodology, both as a reader and a writer of speculative fiction, it is argued that such shift provides a richer experience on reading an Alternative History, Fantastic or Steampunk novel, and it may ease some problems in the appreciation of a translated story or novel. Finally, this mind shift is an essential part of the structure of humour, and it is present in the stories which are part of Zen teaching techniques. This reflection proposes that these are some essential parameters to the reading experience and sustains them through literary examples from genre literature.

1. Introduction

A work of art is not life and should not be confused with it. The question of the difference between art and reality has emerged remarkably in the figurative arts, for example when the surrealist Magritte, in a painting entitled "La trahison des images"[1], places the phrase 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', *i.e.,* 'This is not a pipe', underneath the image of a pipe [1]. And he repeated the act in 1964, with another oil on canvas representing an apple, and above it the sentence 'Ceci n'est pas une pomme', which translates to 'This is not an apple' [2]. And of course he was right. The first image is not a pipe because you cannot fill it with tobacco and smoke it, and one cannot also eat the painting of an apple. The representation of a thing is not the real thing.

Transitioning from Art to Literature, a similar title — 'Ceci n'est pas un conte', *i.e.,* 'This is not a story' — was given by the French author Denis Diderot to a story written in 1772, which is available in French through Project Gutenberg [3]. It so happens, in literature, that sometimes, when recommending a book of speculative fiction to a friend, you are likely to hear a negative followed by: *I don't like that, it's not real stuff.* Empirically, one could hypothesized that the main reason for these attitudes of rejection is that in the case of mainstream literature the context is easily grasped by the readers, due to its similarity to their everyday life. Diversely, if one intends to enjoy science fiction or fantasy, one must be familiar with the tropes of those genres. Furthermore, and this is a personal observation, the taste for this type of genre literature is generally acquired as a teenager, perhaps in a similar way to what happens with the taste for jazz music.

However, in an objective perspective, no mainstream novel, being fiction, is the real stuff either.

In fact, even in mainstream fiction, also problems of context can arise. Some time ago I read a short story by a U.S. writer whose plot I found difficult to follow, since I was confronted with a large number of metaphors related to baseball, being myself profoundly ignorant of the rules of that game. This experience led me to think how incomprehensible it would be for the average American reader if, in a short story by a Portuguese author, the characters were around the table, tasting various regional dishes and discussing their respective merits. The comparison could be taken further with the addition of wine context, with the characters arguing enthusiastically about the primacy of the wines from Alentejo over those from Dão, discussing aromas and flavours, and grape varieties and terroir. Or even, if the American reader was faced with a story involving a doctor and his patient, in the context of the Serviço Nacional de Saúde (Portuguese National Health Service), an experience totally different from the one in a private health system. The 'reality' of 'real stuff' mainstream literature can be as far from the reality of a reader as an extragalactic culture, or a dragon populated realm, in genre stories, depending on the culture of the reader and the writer.

Therefore, when approaching the study of literature, enjoyment or understanding by the general reader cannot be a minor issue. The main objective of this work, of essayistic nature, will be to probe the hypothesis that the enjoyment or understanding of reading is enhanced by a change in the point of view, *i.e.,* a mind shift that allows a wider perspective of the situation. In order to achieve that goal, I shall resource to several case studies, interconnected through various aspects. It will be argued that the pleasure involved in reading has much to do with the reader's mind shift between text and context, or between the 'reality' that is perceived by the reader's experience and the reality presented/suggested by the story.

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1   The treason of the Images, Magritte, oil in canvas , 1929

This paper is organized in the following sections: *Introduction*, where the nature of enjoyment and understanding of literature and its likely dependence on cultural context is presented, as well as the main goal of the work; *Background*, where the differences and similarities between mainstream fiction and genre fiction are briefly introduced, while also addressing specific genres within speculative fiction: the Fantastic, Alternative History — the genre that overlooks the whole paper —, and Steampunk; *Methodology and Materials*, which presents a justification for the experiential perspective which has been adopted in the paper, related to the autoethnography approach, and essentially drawing information from the (long) history of the author as both reader and writer of speculative fiction (additionally, *Materials* subsection will show how some of the matter to be discussed was chosen by the author — or 'came' to meet him); *Reader's Work*, where the main discussion and essayistic results regarding the 'work' of the reader are presented, namely considering issues related to Translation, Humour, Zen tradition, and Alternative History, the point of departure of this writing; *Conclusions*, which summarizes the main points of the work; and *Invited Lecture f2f Session Insight*, with an added reflection from the importance of peers interaction for the development of the present work.

2. Background: The making of a particular reader

The dialogue between context and text that a reader has when presented with genre literature, namely of science fiction and fantasy, *versus* mainstream works cannot be explored without defining some aspects of these two types of narratives. In particular, when the methodological approach is of autoethnography, as it is the case, there needs to be a tolerance to the width of the background section. Additionally, some definitions, regarding the Fantastic and Alternative History are also

needed to support this discussion.

2.1. Mainstream fiction and genre fiction

Any reading, in a broad sense, always involves a coming and going between the text we read, and the context in which the action takes place. The closer the context is to our everyday life, the easier will be to follow the plot development. Though in mainstream fiction, scenarios and background are usually as expected, one can argue the same happens in some classes of genre fiction. Consider, as an example, these specific types of genres, the western, the detective narrative, and science fiction. When a western author speaks of Dodge City, the readers will immediately imagine a dirt street flanked by wooden houses, a one-room primary school, the jail and sheriff's office, a few stables, the undertaker, and a saloon or two [4]. In a detective story, it will not be unexpected to find the detective, who smokes cigarette after cigarette and drinks cheap whisky, in a dusty office, conjecturing how the corpse of the young man of good families appeared in the dimly lit alley.

Notwithstanding, in science fiction we will need to exercise much further and often the 'suspension of disbelief'. However, provided the story is plausible — which includes auto consistency — the reader goes along with the writer, trusting the author that in the end the enjoyment of a good story will be the dominant feeling. If the reader is familiar with what has been published in the genre, easy acceptance of the tropes and devices introduced by the author ensues. As an example, Ursula K. Le Guin, in her 1966 novel 'Rocannon's World', coined the word *ansible* [5]. As the device would allow its users to receive answers to their messages in a reasonable amount of time, even over interstellar distances, its designation was a contraction of 'answerable'. The term has since been widely used in science fiction [6], so that it has become a common 'device' in this genre.

In Alternative History (AH), a subgenre of science fiction where you propose a different past, which leads to a different present, after altering a specific historical outcome (also known as the Divergent Point (DP)), the reader has no idea about the scenario where immersion is going to take place. Therefore, the author has to provide a detailed historical background in order that the reader will become familiar with the setting. The further the distance between the DP and the time the narration flows, the wider will be the difference between the reader's historical line and the story timeline, and greater care will be required from the author when drawing the details.

In mainstream literature, the use of metaphors is common. A metaphor can be defined, and I quote, as *an interactive process based on a mapping process between target and source* [7]. Lakoff and Johnson [8] argue that the whole everyday language is grounded in metaphors, that is, everyday language is metaphorical, but this situation is so internalized that we do not realize it. But in less usual metaphors, their function as figures of speech implies a sudden alternation between objects in the Source and Target fields, following the mapping process that relates them. Thus, the reaction the mainstream reader might have when faced with a science fiction or a AH story, stating that it is not 'reality', as the specific metaphors are not internalized.

2.2. The Fantastic

Julio Cortázar, my first contact with what I later came to know as 'magic realism', said at a conference at the Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas, entitled 'El sentimiento de lo Fantástico', *i.e.*, 'The feeling of the Fantastic' [9]:

> *This feeling of the fantastic, (...) could be called estrangement; at any moment (...) that we could call prosaic, in bed, in the bus, in the shower, talking, walking or reading, there are small paren-*

theses in that reality, and it is there, where a sensitivity prepared for that kind of experience feels the presence of something different, feels, in other words, what we could call the fantastic. This (...) consists above all in the fact that the guidelines of logic, of the causality of time, of space, everything that our intelligence has accepted since Aristotle as immovable, secure and reassured is suddenly shaken, as if moved, by a kind of, an inner wind, which displaces them and makes them change. [2]

In some well-crafted stories, Cortázar starts with something which is familiar to the reader and very slowly introduces that 'estrangement' he refers, and suddenly the reader feels that the universe he is reading about is no longer the same as the universe where he lives. Two examples of this are the stories 'Casa Tomada'[3] [10], from 1946, where a brother and sister living in their family home, watch (feel) the house being taken over by mysterious occupants, and 'La autopista del sur[4] in 'Todos los fuegos el fuego[5], [11], where a usual motorway traffic jam slowly changes into a nightmarish situation.

Alongside with Cortazar, two other authors deserve mentioning in this subsection: Jorge Luis Borges and Ítalo Calvino. I often refer to them as the 'Fantastic Trinity'.

Interestingly, Borges never wrote a novel. In the prologue to 'Ficciones', he stated that it was a impoverishing to expose in several hundred pages books an idea one could orally swiftly explain in a few minutes [12]. In fact, he has several themes that are dear to him, and to which he returns time and again. The concept of infinite sequence, as for example, in the case of someone dreaming someone, who is dreaming someone,

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2   Translation by the author of this paper
3   English translation: *House Taken Over*
4   English translation: *South Highway*
5   English translation: *All Fires The Fire*

i.e., that our 'reality' is a dream within a dream, is one of those recurring themes. Such is the case of 'Las ruinas circulares'⁶, included in the book 'Ficciones' [12], which ends like this:

> (...) *He walked into the leaping pennants of flame. They did not bite into his flesh, but caressed him and flooded him without heat or burning. In relief, in humiliation, in terror, he understood that he, too, was an appearance, that someone was dreaming him.*
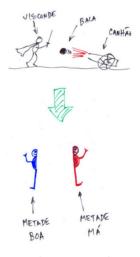
Other interesting recurrent aspects of the narratives of Borges include frequent use of invented quotes, as in the vignette 'Del Rigor en la Ciencia'⁷ [12], the feeling that, in the universe, everything is connected to everything else, although sometimes we don't realise how, and especially, a fine irony about himself, well patent in the short story 'Borges and Myself' [12].

I found Ítalo Calvino in my youth, in "The Path to the Spiders' Nests". I was fascinated by this account of an Italy at war watched by the eyes of a child, which is a beautiful coming-of-age story [13]. The quality of Calvino's writing and its effects on me were clear in a talk about him and his work, which I presented at the 1ˢᵗ Literary Conference on Fantasy and Science Fiction that took place at the University of Lisbon, in May 2004 [14]. We were still in the age of overhead projectors, so I prepared a few transparencies with rough sketches to illustrate the talk, some of which you can see in Figure 1. The top drawing was to illustrate 'If on a winter's night a traveller', a novel which is in fact a collection of ten novels, all incomplete, all left on a cliff-hanger, with reading codes that necessarily vary, in a permanent challenge between author and reader, as in a game of cat and mouse [15], which even gained an orchestral album

as soundtrack [16]. The bottom sketch is an invocation of 'The Cloven Viscount', a parable about good and evil, a kind of Dr Jekill & Mr Hyde originated by a cannon shot in the war between Austria and Turkey in 1716. This book is like a Calvino's wink at the manichean basis of our thinking: the actions of the "good half viscount" sometimes manage to have worse consequences than those of the other half.

Viajante — Traveller / Lua — Moon / Chuva — Rain

Visconde — Viscount / Bala — Ball / Canhão — Cannon
Metade Boa — Good Half / Metade Má — Bad Half

Figure 1. Illustrations presented at a Literary Conference on Fantasy and Science Fiction during a talk regarding the work of Italo Calvino [14]. On the top, the connexions between the Traveller, the Moon and the Rain, from the novel "If on a winter's night a traveller" and at the bottom, the

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6   English translation: *The Circular Ruins*
7   English translation: *On Exactitude in Science*

connexions between the Viscount, the Ball, the Canon, the Good half , and the Bad Half, from "The Cloven Viscount".

In particular, the title of that talk 'Italo Calvino: Fantasia, ficção especulativa, slipstream... ou simplesmente literatura?', *i.e.*, 'Italo Calvino: Fantasy, speculative fiction, slipstream... or simply literature?', alludes to a recurrent issue in the wider field of fantastic literature, which is the concern, in my view exaggerated, with labelling. Every now and then someone decides to invent yet another label (slip fiction, weird fiction,…), into which they try to fit authors, and the discussions about whether certain works are fantasy or science fiction would fill volumes. So, I started my talk with the following warning [14]:

The cartographer who draws maps of the real world uses a fine point pen as a main tool, because the borders between countries, widely accepted or not, are lines, which establish a territorial cut, an administrative, political, sometimes cultural, but (almost) always authoritarian discontinuity.

Anyone wishing to map the literary territory would have to use his brush and work on porous paper, more a watercolour than a pen drawing, because the borders between genres are often ill-defined, diffuse, sometimes claimed by supporters of the two (or more) bordering genres, but wide enough for some authors to manage to live within them.

With this idea of cartography in mind, 'The Invisible Cities' is, in my opinion, the best of Calvino's books [17]. In it, Marco Polo, in the service of Kublai Khan, is sent by the latter on several missions throughout the vast empire and describes to him on his return the cities he visited on those trips. The conversations between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan raise questions, make some foundations of our mental structures vibrate, remind us that

the reality we see is often a scenario and that when that scenario is torn apart, what appears behind it may be another scenario. Some of the classes that Calvino uses to catalogue the cities described by Marco Polo are 'Subtle cities' or 'Continuous cities'. Do we put ourselves in the position of Kublai Kan or that of Marco Polo? Does the former try to see what the other observed and described, or is it the latter who seeks and ends up finding what is born in the imagination of the former?

From the examples of the works by Cortazar, Borges, and Calvino, it is evident that the mind of the reader of fantastic literature, is forced to alternate all the time between the unfamiliar events he reads on the text and the familiar ones from his everyday life. And I think that the pleasure of reading good fantastic literature is connected to that shift of mind. This hypothesis is one developed further in the main discussion of this paper.

2.3. Alternative History

As previously stated, a work of AH takes a given historical event, called the DP, and alters its outcome, giving rise to a timeline divergent from that which happened in real history. A detailed exposition of AH can be found in the book by Lodi-Ribeiro [4], where he proposes a taxonomy of Alternative Histories. He classifies AH scenarios into three distinct categories, according to the distance between the point of divergence and the time in which the narrative takes place: a) alternative present plots, where he gives as examples 'The Man in the High Castle', by Philip K. Dick [18], or 'Pavane', by Keith Roberts [19]; b) alternative past plots, such as Harry Turtledove's fix-up 'Agent of Byzantium' [20]; and c) alternative event plots, such as 'The Guns of the South', also by Turtledove [21].

Lodi-Ribeiro also discusses plausibility and self-consistency in AH accounts, AH narratives closer to Fantasy than to the Science Fiction genre,

and even includes a chapter on Alternative Natural Histories, which are AH stories where the DP is not a change in human history, but in natural history [4]. Some excerpts from Lodi-Ribeiro book[8] can be read in his blog [22].

Within this taxonomy, it seems that there are national preferences regarding specific DP, such as Alternative Wars of Secession, by American writers, or Catholic England, by British writers, given the amount of works that explore the Secession War or what would have happened if the Protestant Reformation had not taken hold in England. But not only is AH filled with alternative realities for past conflicts, but also with many alternative historical scenarios that include imaginary conflicts - that is, conflicts which did not happen in our timeline - and scenarios resulting from the non-existence of wars that actually occurred in our historical line. War and wars are a very recurrent theme in AH, either when they took place or otherwise.

To conclude this subsection, it must be mentioned that a trove of information about AH is 'Uchronia: The Alternate History List', a bibliography of more than 3400 novels, stories, essays, collections, and other printed material involving the many 'what if' of history, curated by Robert B. Schmunk [23].

2.4. Steampunk

The term steampunk originated in the late 1980s as a tongue-in-cheek variant of cyberpunk, which is *a subgenre of science fiction in a dystopian futuristic setting that tends to focus on a 'combination of lowlife and high tech', featuring advanced technological and scientific achievements, such as artificial intelligence and cybernetics, juxtaposed with a degree of breakdown or radical change in the social order* [24]. The most famous work in this genre is probably William Gibson's 'Neuromancer' [25].

The designation 'steampunk' was coined by science fiction author K. W. Jeter , who was trying to find a general term for a group of narratives ('The Anubis Gates', by Tim Powers; 'Homunculus', by James Blaylock; 'Morlock Night', by K. W. Jeter; and 'Infernal Devices', also by K.W. Jeter), all of which took place in a 19th-century, usually with Victorian background, in order to distinguish them from future-loving *cyberpunks* [26, 27].

Being a subgenre of science fiction [28], located in the Victorian epoch, some authors consider steampunk narratives within AH, while others say that only the stories that show a discernible DP should be considered as such [4]. As a movement, steampunk goes past literature, giving origin in several countries to steampunk 'leagues' or 'societies'. Portuguese examples of these are the *Liga Steampunk de Lisboa*[9], based in Lisbon, and *Corte do Norte*[10] and *Clockwork Portugal*[11], located in Porto, both Portuguese cities. Multiple aspects of steampunk culture, such as literature, fashion, or music, can be easily found in the internet [29]. In fact, this mixture of Victorian scenarios with upgraded steam technology is such a powerful evocation that even led to the appearance of the brand 'steampunk' in the name of a PhD thesis in Physics [30], as explained by the author:

Combining quantum information theory

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8   Lodi-Ribeiro not only closes the book with a chapter discussing Lusophone AH Scenarios, whose action takes place in scenarios derived from the history of Portugal and/or Brazil, but also presents two Appendixes, one with a list of Alternative Histories in Portuguese, and the other with a listing of professionally published alternative history works by lusophone authors, originally in Portuguese.

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9   https://ligasteampunk.pt/
10   https://www.facebook.com/cortedonorte
11   http://www.clockworkportugal.
      com/2012_05_01_archive.html

with thermodynamics unites 21st-century technology with 19th-century principles.(...) I propose the name quantum steampunk for this program. The term derives from the steampunk genre of literature, art, and cinema that juxtaposes futuristic technologies with 19th-century settings.

Several other derivative 'punk' subgenres, such as solarpunk or dieselpunk, have appeared since then in such an amount that it provided material for a humorous flash fiction located in a steampunk convention and published a few years ago [31]. The original text and an English translation are accessible in this paper's *Supplementary Material.*

3. Methodology and Materials
3.1 Methodology

The present paper is written from an experiential perspective. My personal evolution as both a reader and a writer of speculative fiction permeates the flow of the discussion. This follows the approach known as Autoethnography, under the larger area of Qualitative Social Research. According to Ellis *et al* [32], not only autoethnography imbodies simultaneously process and product, but it approaches research through 'epiphanies', as many autobiographers consider it:

Autoethnographers (...) must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. To accomplish this might require (...) examining relevant cultural artifacts.

In fact, these authors also consider that:

Autoethnography, as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art.

This *binary* is something that I have been aware since my youth. Though more recently, Walter E. Massey [33] provides an up-to-date appraisal of this particular aspect, a book that contributed to my awareness of the problem was C. P. Snow's 'The two cultures' [34], which puts this binary with a simple comparison:

(...) Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company [highly educated, by the standards of the traditional culture] how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is about the scientific equivalent of 'Have you read a work of Shakespeare's?'

Interestingly, this is a binary I experience as a writer and a reader.

My personal history as a writer was obviously shaped by my training as a mechanical engineer and my life experience of teaching and research in the physical sciences. My first published story had the title 'A Cinza do Tempo'[12] and owes its form to the influence of Cortázar and its content to my learning of thermodynamics — entropy growth is the leitmotiv [35]. Moreover, without my research on combustion, I could not have written 'Fogo!'[13], a science fiction account where intelligent fire is the main character [36]. And it was my interest in solar energy that led me to research the life of Padre Himalaya (1868-1933), who was a Portuguese Catholic priest, scientist and inventor — his solar furnace won in 1904 the Grand Prize of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, in St. Louis. That research gave origin to the AH story 'O

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12   English Title translation: The Ashes of Time
13   English Title translation: Fire!

Sol é que alegra o dia'[14] [37]. Figure 2 displays a sample of anthologies where the abovementioned stories, as well as others I wrote, have this binary at its core.

Figure 2. Covers of the anthologies Contos Fantásticos, Antologia de Ficção Cientifica do Fantasporto, Vaporpunk, and Winepunk Ano Um – A Guerra das Pipas, which include some of the short stories where my professional experience and storytelling hybridize.

3.2 Materials

As a reader and a writer of speculative fiction, and within the context of autoethnography, I am not sure if I chose the materials I selected to talk about in this paper or if those materials find me.

I found authors of fantastic literature sometimes by chance, other times following recommendations from friends who were more knowledgeable than me in that area. I follow Steampunk conventions in Portugal and I am a regular contributor to 'Almanaque Steampunk'[15], I read Alternative History books because I am interested in the *What If...* developments.

In 1974, Robert M. Pirsig published 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance', the account of a motorbike journey through the North American countryside by a father and son, which works as a kind of inner pilgrimage to the father [38]. This led me to find more information about Zen.

Slowly, I realized that the mind shift I had identified as useful — or sometimes necessary — for the enjoyment of those stories was also present in other areas, like translation and humour. When you start pulling on a tangled thread, you never know what's going to come to you. From those different areas (humour, zen, AH, steampunk, fantastic) I selected the materials that sustain the discussion of this paper.

4. Reader's Work

As I said, this paper intends to explore the nature, or degree of enjoyment, of the reader through some autoethnographic epiphanies that I as a writer and reader of genre literature had throughout my life.

Though formally those moments are especially presented here, the background section, as I explored not only the necessary introduction to definitions and aspects of the theme but also my reading interests and the binary between the scientific and literary areas of my path, can be also seen as prequel section of epiphanies.

Therefore, many of the following subsections will mention and relate with those details presented in the Background section.

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14   English Title translation: It's the Sun that brightens the day

15   A Steampunk Almanach, first published by *Clockwork Portugal* in the years 2012 and 2013, then picked up by the *Corte do Norte*, and at present published by Editorial Divergência.

4.1 Reader's work: enjoying AH

I already mentioned Robert B. Schmunk's work 'Uchronia: The Alternate History List' [23]. This long and interesting list of 'what if' and what they bring to the literary universe enhances some aspects of AH and how it can affect the reader:

> *How much attention is given to the what-if and how much to the ensuing consequences varies greatly. Some authors may describe the what-if in detail and provide little follow-up and other authors may present a scenario set some years after the what-if and leave it to the reader to guess what happened. Many opt for an in-between option, providing an introduction that describes of the divergence but in which the bulk of the story is set some years later.*

What I argue is that the pleasure of reading an AH novel largely results from this alternation that we make almost unconsciously between the text and the context. However, for this alternation effectively occur with enjoyment it is necessary to have some knowledge of the historical fabric 'that was' in order to compare it with that which "might have been".

As an example, Turtledove's novel 'Ruled Britannia' [39] is located in an Alternative England that was defeated by the Spanish Armada in 1588 and is therefore under Spanish rule. Queen Elisabeth was locked by the conquerors in the Tower of London. William Shakespeare, a popular playwriter, was approached by the Spanish occupants to write a play praising the virtues of the Spanish monarch. But, at the same time, the leaders of a conspiracy aiming to expel the foreign invaders and reinstate Queen Elisabeth also want him to write a patriotic play, intended to raise the spirits of a popular upheaval they are trying to promote. Lope de Vega is with the occupant army and he tries to befriend Shakespeare, who is aware that any mistake on his part can denounce the plot in preparation.

If the reader has some knowledge about Elizabethan History, the work of Shakespeare and the importance of Lope de Vega in the Spanish Siglo de Oro, his reading of the novel will be an enriched experience.

4.2 Reader's work: the role of translation

The transcription of a literary work from one language to another presents some similarities to what I have been talking about. To continue, I would like to present two quotes.

The first one is 'traduttore, traditore', *i.e.*, 'translator, traitor', an Italian aphorism according to which almost all translations are unfaithful, and consequently betray the thought of the author of the original. And yet, Italo Calvino once said:

> *Without translation, I would be limited to the borders of my own country. The translator is my most important ally. He introduces me to the world. [40]*

This is a dilemma we have to live with. On one side, the knowledge that a translation cannot transcribe accurately the manners, mores and ideas of the society where the narrative takes place. But at the same time, the acceptance of the fact that, without translation, writing in languages spoken by few people could never aspire to wider recognition.

But what is translation? Using a definition, it is an interface of meaning between a source-language text and an equivalent target-language text [41].

The ancient Greeks distinguished between metaphrase (literal, or 'word by word' translation) and paraphrase. In fact, *this distinction was adopted by [English poet and translator] John Dryden (1631–1700), who represented translation as the judicious blending of these two modes of phrasing when selecting,*

in the target language, "counterparts," or equivalents, for the expressions used in the source language [42].

Furthermore, *this general formulation of the central concept of translation—equivalence—is probably as adequate as any that has been proposed ever since Cicero and Horace, in the first century B.C., cautioned against translating "word for word" (verbum pro verbo)* [42].

Notwithstanding, *where the target language has lacked terms that are found in the source language, translators have borrowed them, thereby enriching the target language. Thanks in great measure to the exchange of calques (French for "carbon copies") between languages, and to their importation from Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic and other languages, there are few concepts that are "untranslatable" among the modern European languages* [42]. A greater problem, however, is translating terms relating to cultural concepts that have no equivalent in the target language. The article 'Translating the 17th of May into English and other horror stories' [43] addresses this problem. For full comprehension, such situations require the provision of a gloss[16].

Fidelity and *transparency* work sometimes against each other. Fidelity *is the extent to which a translation accurately renders the meaning of the source text, without distortion*, while transparency *is the extent to which a translation appears to a native speaker of the target language to have originally been written in that language, and conforms to its grammar, syntax and idiom* [44]. A translation that meets the criterion of fidelity, or faithfulness, is said to be *faithful;* a translation that meets the criterion of transparency, *idiomatic.*

Difficulties in translating can arise from lexical and syntactical differences between the two languages, and those differences will be greater if the two languages belong to different families [45]. Also, the further away the fictional context is from the reader's 'here and now', the more difficult it will be for the translator to recreate the atmosphere of the narrative.

Even in our own language, the experience of reading an author who wrote one or two centuries far from us is akin to the problem of translation mentioned above: social mores, costume fashion, ways of communication between characters, they are so different from our everyday life that it may be difficult sometimes to enjoy the story, due to the lack of information about the context. A very simple example will show this difficulty.

Cesário Verde (1855-1886) was a Portuguese poet who lived in Lisbon. He wrote a long poem called 'O sentimento de um ocidental'[17]. The first part of the poem has the title 'Avé Marias' — which means *Angelus* — and he describes, in a very imagetic way, nightfall in the town [46]. There is one verse I would like to comment about:

Às portas, em cabelo, enfadam-se os lojistas!

A rough translation will give: 'At the doors, bareheaded, the shopkeepers get bored!'

I like this verse because I can visualize the scene. About a hundred years after the poem was written, in the fifties, Portuguese society was still very static. I remember from my boyhood, when a shop had no customers, the shopkeeper would come to the door, watching the people who walked the street. And one easily gets bored when there is nothing to do. And the mention 'bareheaded' was due to the

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16　　A gloss is a brief notation, especially a marginal one or an interlinear one, of the meaning of a word or wording in a text. It may be in the language of the text or in the reader's language if that is different.

17　　The whole poem, whose title can be roughly translated as 'The feelings of a westerner', can be found here: http://users.isr.ist.utl. pt/~cfb/VdS/v039.txt

fact that no man would go out without a hat.

The question is, does this verse mean anything to anyone today? Can it evoke in the mind of any reader half my age the images that pop into my head? How could one *translate* this verse to a 21st century reader?

4.3 Reader's work: Humour

Various theories of humour and laughter can be found in the literature, but three of them appear repeatedly: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory [47].

Relief theory maintains that laughter is a homeostatic mechanism by which psychological tension is reduced. Humour may thus function to facilitate relief of the tension caused by one's fears [48]. Superiority theory, as defended by Aristotle, considers we laugh at inferior or ugly individuals, because we feel a joy at feeling superior to them [49]. Finally, to explain the Incongruity theory, I would like to go back to the Magritte painting referred in the Introduction, the simultaneous view of a pipe and the sentence 'This is not a pipe' sets a collision between two frames of reference. This incongruity results in a humorous effect at the moment of its realization.

Humour frequently contains an unexpected, often sudden, shift in perspective, which is explained by the Incongruity Theory. Boyd [50] views the shift as from seriousness to play. Arthur Koestler argues that humour results when two different frames of reference are set up and a collision is engineered between them [51]. Additionally, Bergson attempted to reduce incongruity to the contrast between the "living" (flexibility) and "mechanical" (rigidity). [52]

Ron Atkin, mathematician, in his book 'Multidimensional Man' introduces the notion of a hierarchy of concepts, with the ones at each level working as cover-sets for the concepts at the level immediately below [53]. And he states:

(...) moving up the hierarchy through a series of cover-sets automatically brings things together by making them less detailed, whilst moving down the hierarchy emphasizes not only the things they share but also any differences they might possess.

He argues that humour, the idea of something being amusing, the fact that it generates laughter, is closely tied up with the idea of hierarchical levels of consciousness. He not only claims that it is the sudden elevation to a higher hierarchical level that produces humour, but illustrates his approach with examples from the literature, namely using extracts from well-known works like Joseph Heller's Catch 22, and Jaroslav Hasek's The Good Soldier Schweik.

Quoting Mark Twain (*there is no humour in heaven*), Atkin says:

If to be in heaven is to know the ultimate state of awareness, almost the infinite hierarchical level, then there can presumably be no more levels to reach? It would be sad but true that there could then be no humour.

We can see that most theories of humour rely on the existence of different perspectives about a situation and on the mind shift that allows us to alternate between those different points of view.

4.4. Reader's work: Zen tradition

Zen aims at the perfection of personhood. In pursuit of that objective, it tries to overcome our dualistic paradigm of thinking in practice by achieving a holistic and nondualistic perspective in cognition.

The *kōan* method is devised to assist the practitioner to become a "Zen person". A *kōan* is formulated like a riddle or puzzle and is designed in

such a way that intellectual reasoning alone cannot solve it without breaking through the barrier of ego-consciousness by driving it to its limit. It involves paradoxes, contradictions, sometimes nonsense. These problems that the Zen master proposes to the disciple can only be solved when the disciple reaches enlightenment. In this process of discovery, he moves from an ordinary standpoint to an extraordinary standpoint, and with this transformation returns to the everyday life world, wherein no common logic is accepted as a way to know and understand reality [54]. This enlightenment is generally related to transcending the situation experienced, passing above it, seeing it from a higher plane or dimension where the problem, conflict or dilemma ceases to make sense, or becomes trivial.

There are some "subterranean" links between Zen Buddhism, on one side, and Fantastic Literature, on the other side. Those subterranean links are born from a certain "strangeness" which comes to surface after one reads a Zen story (*kōan*) or a good fantastic story. In both cases we are forced to a similar shift in perspective. It looks like that both the wisdom of the old Zen master and the skills behind the writing of fantastic literature come from the same everlasting pool of knowledge. Ray Bradbury, well known science fiction and fantasy author, published in 1990 a collection of essays entitled 'Zen in the Art of Writing' [55]. In the essay which gives the title to the book, Bradbury compares the craft of the writer to the Zen mastery of the art of archery.

There is also some connection between Zen and humour, as it becomes evident in stories such as 'The Stone Mind' [56]. The punchline, that contrasts the philosophical perspective versus the real-life implications of it, if taken to the letter, is unequivocally filled with irony and wisdom in equal parts.

4.5 Reader's work: intersecting the epiphanies

The reader of an AH account must "believe" in the world that the author has created. This one should have done a competent 'world building', because the reader has no points of reference to stick with, except the true historic line. So, it is like a translation that the author must carry out, to link what he is narrating to the actual reader's experience. And the reader is always comparing — sometimes subconsciously — what he is being told to what he knows actually happened. This type of shift can be observed through the reader's enjoyment in Humour or Zen narratives.

Humour is, in my perception, a useful ingredient in many stories. Even in more dramatic plots, the author finds sometimes the need to introduce what is known as a 'comic relief', a humorous episode to release the tension. And even common events may be comic when observed from a different level. Concerning Zen, the techniques learned in this oriental tradition of transcending a problem looking at it from a higher level can be useful for the reader of Alternative History: the flow of history becomes clearer when viewed from an above level. The leap between two planes of observation of reality constitutes, through the practice of meditating over stories proposed to the disciple by the Zen master, an essential part of the teaching of Zen Buddhism, being consolidated in the multi-millenary tradition of this philosophical-religious path.

And allow me to terminate this account with the translation of a vignette that is the last text in 'Tudo Isto Existe'[18] , a collection of short stories, whose book cover is displayed in Figure 3 [57]:

THE END
The first one, who was a pessimist, said:
This is the beginning of the end!

18   English Title translation: All This Exists

The second one, who was an optimist, replied: No, it's just the end of the beginning.

The third one, who had been reading a book of Zen stories, concluded: Whatever it is, let's have dinner!

5. Conclusion

Starting from Alternative History – theme of the *2nd International Meeting of 'What If?...' World History* – it is argued that the enjoyment of a narrative in that genre has to do with the ability of the reader's mind to play with the comparison between the text the reader is reading and the corresponding evolution in the reader's historical line. This need for changing points of view occurs not only in some areas adjacent to Alternative History, such as Fantastic or Steampunk, but also in more distant areas, such as Translation or Humour.

Through an autoethnographic approach, some personal epiphanies regarding these aspects sustain the discussion regarding how the alternation between Text and Context is necessary for the narratives which are being produced to function in the intended way.

Figure 3: Book cover of 'Tudo Isto Existe', a selection of my short stories [57]

6. Invited Lecture f2f Session Insight

The f2f Invited Lecture Session in which I participated started from different perspectives. On one hand, the punk movement and the fanzines that were its main media support. On the other hand, the punk word appearing in 'steampunk' and the fanzines as a media alternative to the classical publishing way. However, some similarities emerged during the f2f Meeting itself and particularly in the reflection after the Session.

The reason for the word 'steampunk', as it was explained, carries some sort of a devious 'rebel' motivation. The role that "strange" costumes play in both movements, creating a fashion trend. Even the fanzines, although not so radical in science fiction as in the punk community, were nevertheless a way that the fandom used to publish material that the mainstream publishing channels were not interested in. The sentence *Contos não vendem*, *i.e.*, short stories don't sell, which is some kind of *motto* in the Portuguese publishing industry, is still more assertive when it is applied to the genre literature. Short stories and flash fiction were the main contents of science fiction fanzines. The fact that fanzine publication has strongly declined deserves some further investigation.

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