

AESTHETIC HYBRIDITY: COMBINATION OF TEXT AND IMAGE IN *O MEZ DA GRIPPE*, BY VALÊNCIO XAVIER

Estética híbrida: combinação de texto e imagem em *O Mez da Grippe*, de Valêncio Xavier

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Abstract

This article discusses two aspects of *O Mez da Grippe*, by the Brazilian writer Valêncio Xavier: the graphic composition and the generation of meanings through historical references in the work. In the first part, using Gérard Genette's concept of paratextuality, we analyze some graphic characteristics of the text that enclose Dona Lúcia's narrative, a (fictional?) survivor of the Spanish flu. In the second, we seek to demonstrate, in the light of Wolfgang Iser's concepts of empty spaces or points of indeterminacy, implicit reader, and asymmetry between text and reader, how historical references can contribute to the reader's response.

Keywords: Spanish influenza. Graphic novel. *O Mez da Grippe*, Valêncio Xavier.

Resumo

Este artigo discute dois aspectos de *O Mez da Grippe*, do escritor brasileiro Valêncio Xavier: a composição gráfica e a geração de sentido por meio das referências históricas na obra. Na primeira parte, utilizando o conceito de paratextualidade de Gérard Genette, analisaremos algumas características gráficas do texto que circundam a narrativa de Dona Lúcia, uma sobrevivente (ficcional?) da gripe espanhola. Na segunda, procuraremos demonstrar, à luz de Wolfgang Iser e seus conceitos de espaços vazios ou pontos de indeterminação, leitor implícito e assimetria entre texto e leitor, como as referências históricas podem contribuir para a resposta do leitor.

Palavras-chave: Gripe espanhola. *Graphic novel*. *O Mez da Grippe*, Valêncio Xavier.

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Introduction

O Mez da Grippe (1981), a fictional text by the Brazilian writer Valêncio Xavier, deals with a pandemic – the outbreak of the Spanish flu in Curitiba, capital of Paraná, in 1918, and the news about World War I (1914-1918) in the city. He creates a fictional work in which he combines words and images, characteristic elements of graphic novels, an unusual format in Brazilian literary history.

According to Christopher Murray, “Graphic novel, in American and British usage, [is] a type of text combining words and images – [...] the term most commonly refers to a complete story presented as a book rather than a periodical”.³ One of the first of its kind in Brazil, *O Mez da Grippe* is a serious, hybrid work about the 1918 Spanish influenza and WWI, which suggests a continuous dialogue between words (micronarratives, fragmented verses of an erotic poem, newspaper clips with news about the flu and the war, etc.) and images (old photos, postcards, newspaper clips with images and advertisements, etc.), all paratextual elements included in the book.

Schnaiderman (1993, p. 103), in an essay published in *Revista USP – O Mez da Grippe – a chorus of many voices*,⁴ writes: “Valêncio Xavier is one of those artists who manages to bring the experience acquired in other media to the written text”.⁵ He adds that the path of the author “is marked by a combination between word and image, image and movement, black and white, prose and verse, journalism and fiction” (SCHNAIDERMAN, 1993, p. 103).⁶ We further add, between the micro (the Spanish influenza in Curitiba) and the macronarrative (the Spanish influenza and World War I). Décio Pignatari, a writer and professor in Curitiba, was enthusiastic about finding a “true Brazilian graphic novel”, whose “formula” inspired his 1992 novel *Panteras*,

³ Available in: <<https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel/>>.

⁴ All the Portuguese citations are translated by the authors of this paper, with the exception of the one by Gérard Genette. The Portuguese versions will be included within quotation marks in footnotes. “*O Mez da Grippe – um coro a muitas vozes*”.

⁵ Original text: “Valêncio Xavier é um destes artistas que conseguiu trazer para o texto escrito a experiência adquirida em outros meios de expressão”.

⁶ Original text: “[...] está marcado por uma relação entre palavra e imagem, imagem e movimento, o preto e branco da página, prosa e verso, jornalismo e ficção”.

according to his students.⁷

The objective of this paper is, therefore, to discuss the graphic composition of the work and the generation of meanings, through historical references, in *O Mez da Grippe*. In the first part, using Gérard Genette's concept of paratextuality, we turn our attention to some graphic characteristics of the work. In the second, we seek to demonstrate, in light of Wolfgang Iser's concepts of empty spaces or points of indeterminacy, implicit reader, and asymmetry between text and reader, how historical references can increase the reader's understanding of the work.

O Mez da Grippe, first printed by Fundação Cultural de Curitiba in 1981, was published together with other works by Xavier, in 1998, with the title *O Mez da Grippe and other books*, by Companhia das Letras, preserving the layout of the first edition. This kind of novel-montage is inspired by graphic novels and by Sergei Eisenstein's assembly theory and cubist collages, in which meaning is created by the reader or spectator. It is worth remembering that Xavier left important contributions not only to literature, but also to journalism, television, cinema (he was the founder of Cinemateca de Curitiba, in 1975) and plastic arts. He was friends with Hans Arp, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Marcel Duchamp, among other important names of the Dadaist and Surrealist artists. Therefore, it is apt to consider *O Mez da Grippe* as a successful accomplishment in the sense of breaking the limits of literary discourse centered only on the verbal (written) code, challenging the reader to apprehend the meaning of the work through the combination of text and graphic, visual codes.

In this way, *O Mez da Grippe*, a hybrid (verbal/visual) work, with its empty spaces or points of indeterminacy, invites the reader to assume an active part in the generation of meaning. The work that requires a certain type of reader, one who aspires to participate in the game created by the author, a game of asymmetry between text and reader that must be overcome by the latter during the process of reception. If every literary work grants the reader an important role, in the work of Xavier, this proposition is much more demanding. The reader becomes a (re)creator of the work.

⁷ *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, by humorist Rodolphe Toffler, published in 1842, is considered the first major graphic novel published in the United States. It originally appeared as a serial in a weekly humor magazine called *Brother Jonathan*.

O Mez da Grippe: Graphic Composition and Micronarrative

Valêncio Xavier is not, on global scale, the first writer to make use of the “genre” graphic novel. In 1978, Will Eisner, an American artist, published *A Contract with God*, the first well known graphic novel, published in the United States.⁸ It is a serious book with complex and puzzling stories, dealing with the “unhealthy” life, physically and emotionally speaking, of neighbors in a tenement building. This work popularized the genre, and the expression “graphic novel” was printed on the cover of later editions, establishing Eisner as precursor. Yet Eisner was also inspired by the illustrated novels of Lynd Ward, another fellow artist, who studied woodcut⁹ with the German master Hans Alexander Mueller and had contact with the illustrated works of the Frans Masereel and Otto Nuckel, while studying in Germany.

According to Christopher Murray,

The term graphic novel was first successfully claimed by Will Eisner for his semi-autobiographical *A Contract with God* (1978), which offers a melancholy perspective on the author’s Depression-era youth. [...] In the 21st century the graphic novel came to occupy an entire section in major bookstores.¹⁰

While *A Contract with God* (2000) and *O Mez da Grippe* (1981) are considered graphic novels, they differ significantly in aspect and content. The former (Fig. 1) displays a black hardcover with the title and the author’s name printed in gold (first edition, 1978), reminiscent of most editions of the Bible. The paper is similar to Pollen Bold with drawings and texts printed in sepia. It is a collection of four short stories for adults and all of them border on literature of the absurd. The latter, *O Mez da Grippe*, is a paperback edition, pb, including the cover, printed on thinner grammage paper that allows shadows of the back page to appear. It is also a book for adults, a hybrid text composed of photos, drawings, reproductions and collages, news and advertisements

⁸ Graphic novel is an expression coined by Richard Kyle in 1964.

⁹ Woodcut is a relief printing technique in printmaking.

¹⁰ Available in: <<https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel/>>.

published in newspapers, reduced and fragmented narratives, stanzas of poems, empty spaces (Fig. 2). Eisner's fictional hybrid narrative, to a certain extent, portrays the *Stimmung* of Americans during the Great Depression in the United States (1929-1939). He builds his stories around the idiosyncratic behavior of people, but he does not address the great depression itself. Xavier's work explores the Spanish influenza in Curitiba (micronarrative), and World War I (macronarrative).

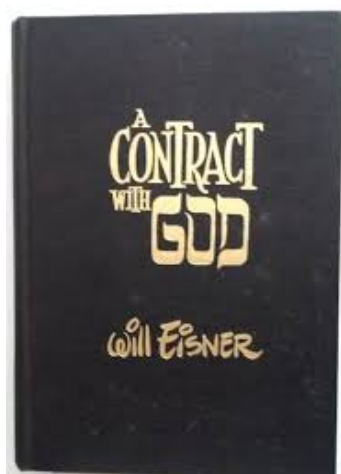


Fig. 1 – Cover of *A Contract with God*
Limited first edition (1978)
source: <<https://bityli.com/l6dKZ>>

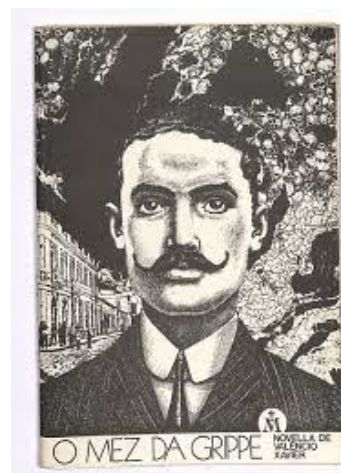


Fig. 2 – Cover of *O Mez da Grippe*
(XAVIER, 1981)



Fig. 3 – Page of *A Contract with God*
(EISNER, 2000, P.27)



Fig. 4 – Page of *O mez da Grippe*
(XAVIER, 1981, p. 28)

In *O Mez da Grippe*, we read about the history of the pandemic – the Spanish influenza – which starts in Paraná when infected people disembarked from the *Demerara*, a ship that had docked at the port of Paranaguá. The disease quickly spreads across the mountain ridge and reached Curitiba, in 1918. We see clips of news, advertisements and depositions published in newspapers of the time, all paratextual elements included in the book. We come across blank newspaper columns, texts eliminated by censorship. We follow the footsteps of a man who practices oral sex with an unknown German woman (unconscious because of high fever), through his erotic verses, we listen to other poetic voices and brief fragment of narratives of a survivor, Dona Lúcia in 1976. Therefore, the graphic novel by Xavier is also a historical and journalistic record, a poetic delirium, and a minimalist narrative with a new historicist flavor, allowing the reader to experience the calamity of the early 20th century in a small town – a calamity focused microscopically, but actually a pandemic which killed more than 50 million people.

If we consider the book *O Mez da Grippe*, keeping in mind the five manifestations of transtextuality theorized by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree* (1997), paratextuality seems to exist not only in the external elements of the main text. It invades the text itself, which consists mainly of collages, external works, which become Xavier's main material. It is in the dubious character of historical discourse and in the imprecise statistics that the reader receives information about the consequences of the Spanish influenza and (on) World War I in Curitiba.

According to Genette,

The second type [of transtextual relationship] is the generally less explicit and more distant relationship that binds the text properly speaking, taken within the totality of the literary work, to what can be called its *paratext*: a title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.; marginal, infrapaginal, terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book cover, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals, whether allographic or autographic. These provide the text with a (variable) setting and sometimes a commentary, official or not, of which even the purist among readers, those least inclined to external erudition, cannot always disregard as easily as they would like and as they claimed to do. (GENETTE, 1997, p. 3)

When we handle the book for the first time, we are immediately referred to 1918 by the use of archaic Portuguese language, similar to the language of the many collages included in the book. The title, *O Mez da Grippe, novella by Valêncio Xavier*, with the black letter “M” in a balloon and a cross above, in the center, fills the white background that, at the bottom of the page, completes the cover image. This image – a close-up drawing of a man with a rectangular face, *sanpaku*¹¹ eyes, turned inward, with black hair, eyebrows and mustaches, sensual lips and a straight nose – includes, on its left, a drawing of buildings of Largo da Ordem in Curitiba (the historical center of the city) and people who talk or walk along the place. Framing the face, on the right side, emanations of the street turn into clouds formed of skulls, revealing the darkness of the night in the empty spaces (Fig. 2). On the second cover, no information. On the third, the copyright page of the work, highlighting the name of the artist who created the cover: the designer and painter Rones Dumke. On the fourth cover, the printing of the logo of the Official Publishing House and the place of publication:

CITY OF CURITIBA
HOUSE ROMÁRIO MARTINS
CULTURAL FOUNDATION OF CURITIBA¹²

Pages 1 and 2 are blank, followed by an introductory note not “to the reader”, but “of a reader”, which, with the exception of the title, is all in italics, dated “Curitiba, February 11, 1981” and signed by Francisco Bettega Netto. This “READER’S NOTE” immediately conveys the important role to be played by the readers, who will make sense of the assemblage of the different elements.

¹¹ *Sanpaku* eyes, means, in Japanese, “three white” of the eyes, two lateral ones and one above or below the iris. It usually denotes, according to scholars, mental disturbance or emotional imbalance. There is also a curse related to people with that look – violent and premature death. As examples Michael Jackson and Lady Di are mentioned, both with *sanpaku* eyes.

¹² Original text: “Cidade de Curitiba/Casa Romário Martins/Fundação Cultural de Curitiba”.

SEEREAD READER'S NOTE

Valêncio told me the book is “a novella”. Hence, everything the author nominates will become a “novella” (parodying Mário de Andrade, of course). For me it is, of course, a collage book. This might well suggest a simple game; but more than an inconsequential puzzle, the book is really an exercise. An exercise in pure visual language. Exercise of (skillful) assemblage of the author; exercise of (provocative) reassembling of the reader.
An open work, therefore. [...] (XAVIER, 1981, p. 3)¹³

And Bettega Netto goes on, speaking of the “various levels of reading”, “cinematographic resources”, “eminently visual language”, “graphic text to involve the reader by situating him/her at the time of the events narrated (because they were going to be ‘visualized’, or raised in a documentary manner, or would it not be equally accurate to say: ‘designated’?). We see, therefore, that the compound word “SEEREAD” suggests the reader's encounter with images to be seen and texts to be read, besides the fact that the fusion of the two verbs suggests an interaction or a dialogue between the two actions.

The epigraph by Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), a French writer, describes bodies, made of wax, piled up in different degrees of decomposition: “this macabre execution... could not be, either more expressive or truer” (XAVIER, 1981, p. 5). We cannot help associating this description with images of death by the Spanish influenza and by World War I. Trajano Reis, the Health Service Director, at that time, said: “When the gravediggers were no longer able to open graves due to fatigue, I had other people paid to do so, in order to avoid the decomposition of corpses”¹⁴ (XAVIER, 1981, p. 57).

The text itself begins on page 7 with the calendar of October 1918 and the subtitle: “Something”, at the foot of the page. The entire narrative, except for the first

¹³ Original text: “Disse-me o Valêncio ser o livro “uma novela”. / Então, passará a constituir-se novela tudo aquilo que o autor assim nominar (parodiando Mário de Andrade, claro). / Para mim trata-se, evidentemente, de um livro-colagem. Isto bem poderia sugerir então um simples jogo; mas, mais que um inconsequente quebra-cabeça, o livro é mesmo um exercício. Um exercício de pura linguagem visual. Exercício de (hábil) montagem do autor; exercício de (provocante) remontagem do leitor (?)./Uma obra aberta, portanto”.

¹⁴ Original text: “Quando de fadiga não puderam os coveiros abrir sepulturas devido a fadiga, mandei gratificar outros indivíduos para que a fizessem, de modo a evitar a decomposição de cadáveres”.

page, is dated and follows a chronological order, covering from October 20th to December 3rd, 1918. On page 33 begins the “Month of November” without the calendar image, with the subtitle: “The month of the influenza”, when there is no longer a way for the sanitary authorities to hide that the flu is killing many people in Curitiba. It reports as well the amnesty between the countries involved in the war and its end, which ironically occurs during the month in which most people die of influenza in the city. “Month of December”, without the calendar, has the following subtitle: “The last letter of the alphabet”, with the return to information on social life and the end of the epidemic in Curitiba. The calendars lead us linearly during the reading, recording daily – when uncensored – the development of the flu in Curitiba and bringing news about World War I.

To summarize, the reader follows the collage of news published in newspapers of Curitiba on the epidemic and war, on sanitary medicine, on spiritualism and homeopathy, on the hostility between Brazilians and Germans, on the amnesty between the countries at war, on the end of the war and on the increase in the number of people killed by the flu, on advertisement of disinfectants, syrups, ointments for breasts, etc., on the social life of Curitiba. We also find reproductions of information and the recommendations by Dr. Trajano Reis, Health Service Director; by Mr. Ricardo Negrão Filho, Secretary of the Health Service; by the Department of Justice and Internal Affairs – Rural Prophylaxis Service of Paraná; and the Decree 133 by Mr. João Antonio Xavier, Mayor of Curitiba. Reproductions of drawings that characterize the city and people of Curitiba at the time: Largo da Ordem, the City Hall, *Diário da Tarde* Headquarters, Nossa Senhora da Luz Hospice, as well as reproductions of postcards in German or Portuguese, and telegrams about the end of the war, news awaited by the people who long to return to normal life, although World War I, as a catastrophe, never reached the national territory.

In terms of micronarratives, we have three narratives of people (fictional or not) who lived in Curitiba at the time – the narrative constructed with the poetic erotic stanzas of the man with the black mustache, the anonymous narrative printed in bold letters that extrapolates human sanity, and Dona Lúcia's narrative, the most coherent of the micronarratives within the work and the one we will concentrate on.

The narrative sequence of Dona Lúcia, a survivor of the Spanish influenza, 58 years after the epidemic, in 1976, contrasts with the narrative enunciated by the official voice, the historical discourse in the second part of this work. Xavier inserts historical, official or unofficial information, in counterpoint to Dona Lúcia's narrative, bringing to his text one of the characteristics of new historicism, one that moves away from official information / discourse and turns to the account of an ordinary person, though fictional, who lived through that historical moment.

Dona Lúcia's narrative presents some peculiarities: sometimes it seems that she responds to questions asked by a silent interlocutor, at others it seems that she volunteers information to the listener. In the end, it seems that she was not completely unharmed by the fever, because she provides contradictory information about the same German woman, possibly the one that was abused by the man with the black mustache. But, Dona Lúcia's contradictory information can be the result of her temporal distance from the fact or of her advanced age – in 1976, date of her narrative, she would be in her late 70s. About the consequences of the flu on people's mind, she says: "Many people lost their reason. Because of the very strong fever for days. Even long after the flu, there were people who never regained their reason for the rest of their lives"¹⁵ (XAVIER 1981, p. 28). Dona Lúcia seems to answer to possible questions, when she says: "I was, yes..." (XAVIER, 1981, p. 20), "Yes, eucalyptus leaves..." (XAVIER, 1981, p. 25), "How do you know how many died?" (XAVIER, 1981, p. 35), "There, in that house..." (XAVIER, 1981, p. 38),¹⁶ in which she seems to respond to questioning while walking with her interlocutor through the streets of Curitiba. She also seems to give some voluntary information, such as, the description of burials of entire families dead, of lack of medicines, of the consequences of fever on people's minds, of the lack of shrouds and coffins. "A couple of Germans lived... the woman... her name was Clara"¹⁷ (the only name mentioned in her narrative), etc. Let us linger here a bit to

¹⁵ Original text: "Muita gente ficou com o juízo abalado. Por causa da febre muito forte dias e dias. Mesmo muito tempo depois da gripe encontrava-se gente que nunca mais recuperou a razão, pro resto da vida".

¹⁶ Original text: "Fiquei, sim...", "É, folhas de eucalipto...", "Como saber quantos morreram?...", "Ali, naquela casa...",

¹⁷ Original text: "Morava um casal de alemães... a mulher... seu nome era Clara".

see how Dona Lúcia's narrative dialogues with the description of the same person made by the aggressor:

There lived a couple of Germans, the woman tall, blond, very pretty. Clara, her name was Clara. They did not receive many visitors; they did not get along with people in the neighborhood. They both fell ill with the flu, no one noticed. Imagine the two, one in each room, suffering without assistance. It was many days before a neighbor came in and found them both.¹⁸ (XAVIER, 1981, p. 39)

Let us now look at the description of the unconscious blond woman, made by the aggressor who invades the German couple's home:

Big hands like a horse's.
Right sitting on the slow breathing of the stiff sinus.
The left, the wedding ring over the white sheet
White bare arm, field of blonde fur (p.19)
[...]
Nothing matters to me now
nor the stain of the ejaculation in my pants
I did not even take my jacket off
The husband?
A cough that echoes throughout the house...¹⁹ (XAVIER, 1981, p. 57)

Following the last passages of Dona Lúcia's narrative: when the announcement of the Mass and the thanks of the husband (and children) for the presence at the wake of his wife Clara Margareth Heisler are published, we have three different versions by Dona Lúcia, prior to and following the first and second publications: the narrative about the German couple begins on page 39:

¹⁸ Original text: "Morava um casal de alemães, a mulher alta, loira, muito bonita. Clara, isso seu nome era Clara. Não recebiam muita visita, não se davam com a gente do bairro. Os dois caíram com gripe, ninguém notou. Imagine os dois, um num quarto, outro no outro, sofrendo sem assistência. Passaram muitos dias até que uma vizinha lá entrou e encontrou os dois".

¹⁹ Original text: "Mãos grandes como de cavalo./A direita assentada sobre o lento respirar do seio rijo./A esquerda, a da aliança por sobre o lençol branco/Branco braço nu, parca seara de louros pelos. [...] Nada mais me importa agora/nem a mancha do gôzo em minha calça/Nem paletó cheguei a tirar/O marido?/tosse que ecoa por toda a casa [...]".

No, they were not dead, no, but almost. They had to take them both to the hospital. (XAVIER, 1981, p. 43)

I'm not sure what her husband did, I think he owned something. They barely spoke to their neighbors. Her husband was away all day. (XAVIER, 1981, p. 48)

What we saw was the woman in the yard, taking care of something. Very white, tall, long hair shining even when there was no sun. Blonde. (XAVIER, 1981, p. 50)

She, the woman, was never in perfect mental health. She was ok sometimes, until she had a son, a beautiful child. Suddenly, there was like a sadness in her, she would walk through the streets alone, always with a bottle of poison in her hands. She would never let go that poison, not even when she was normal, happy with her husband and son... (XAVIER, 1981, p. 62)

[...] until one day she took the poison on the street, died, they found her already dead. It was a long time later, I think it was around the 30s.²⁰ (XAVIER, 1981, p. 71). (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5 – Passage before the first publication of the husband with an invitation to Mass in memory of Clare. (XAVIER,1981, p. 71)



Fig. 6 – Passage following the second publication. (XAVIER, 1981, p. 72)

²⁰ Original text: “Não, não estavam mortos, não, mas quase. Tiveram que levar os dois para o hospital.” “Não sei bem no que o marido trabalhava, acho que era dono de alguma coisa. Eles quase não falavam com os vizinhos. O marido passava fora o dia inteiro.” “O que a gente via era a mulher, no quintal, cuidando de alguma coisa. Muito branca, alta, o cabelo bem comprido brilhando mesmo quando não tinha sol. Loiro.” “Ela, a mulher, nunca mais ficou de juízo perfeito. Passava uns tempos boa, até ter um filho, criança linda. De repente, dava assim como uma tristeza nela, saía a andar sozinha pelas ruas, sempre com um vidrinho de veneno nas mãos. Nunca largava o veneno, mesmo quando estava normal, alegre com o marido e o filho...” “... até que, um dia, tomou o veneno na rua, morreu, acharam ela já morta. Foi muito tempo depois, acho que foi lá por 30”.

[...] a beautiful girl, single, died because of the flu. She could not resist the high fever. Very white, tall, very long blond hair. She died during the flu.” (p. 71 – passage following the first publication) [...] “No, she died during the flu. The husband was saved, but she died. I saw the body, very white, the hair so blonde that it looked white, white shroud. (Fig. 6)

No, she was not married at the time. Beautiful, single girl. Very white, blonde. He married, had children, but was never mentally healthy. She had periods of sanity, married after the flu, had children, but she was never got right in the mind again.²¹ (XAVIER, 1981, p. 71 – passage following the second publication)

The fact that Dona Lúcia said “There lived a couple of Germans, the tall woman, blonde, very beautiful. Clara, yes her name was Clara”, on page 39, seems to indicate that this was probably the only couple of Germans who lived nearby and that she saw the woman regularly. All the descriptions of Clara are similar, the full name appears in the publications of the mass invitations, but Dona Lúcia’s narratives are contradictory, possibly a reflection of the author on life > insanity > death, a thought that is also suggested in the news about the interns at the Nossa Senhora da Luz Mental Hospital in Curitiba.

O Mez da Gripe: historical references and generation of meaning

When we look at other details of the text, we see why *O Mez da Gripe* is a narrative that, if interpreted from an historical viewpoint, provides the reader with a set of internal orientations, with the function of guiding the achievement of meanings, in the spaces between the juxtapositions of the fragments that compose the work.

This second moment of the article intends, then, to provide a reading that finds references in History – namely: what is the direct relation between World War I and the

²¹ Original text: “[...] moça bonita, solteira, morreu de gripe. Não resistiu a febre forte. Muito branca, alta, cabelo loiro bem comprido. Morreu na gripe”. “Não, ela morreu na gripe. O marido se salvou, mas ela morreu. Vi o corpo, muito branca, cabelo branco de tão loiro, mortalha branca”. “Não, na época ela não era casada. Moça bonita, solteira. Muito branca, loira. Casou, teve filhos, mas nunca mais ficou certa da cabeça. Tinha períodos de lucidez, casou depois da gripe, teve filhos, mas nunca mais ficou certa da cabeça”.

Spanish influenza in Brazil? – and from this question, bring to light the Iserian thought about the relationship between text and reader. According to Iser (1999) this relationship is successful only if representations are modified. That is, how the act of reading using elements referring to History can promote the dissolution of the dominant asymmetry between text and reader, taking into consideration that for Iser this is not reached randomly as a result of reading. The text suggests, gives the key, but the doors for meaning generation can be multiple. History, in this case, is one of them.

On the first page, we have the item in the newspaper that says: “Peace is interrupted”. And the statement that follows the title shows that the process of pacification is interrupted between Allies, led by the United States (under President Wilson), and the German forces. Next, we see the report of Dr. Trajano Reis, the Health Service Director, dealing with the process of contamination of some residents in the coastal city of Paranaguá. Contamination that occurred when they received a visit of relatives from Rio de Janeiro who brought the “illness within”.

This parallelism between the World War I, in its decline, and the event of the Spanish influenza in Brazil (with Curitiba as the center of attention because it is the fictional space of the work) permeates the entire narrative. WWI is one of the few events that is (initially) outside the spatial context of Curitiba, where practically all the other actions and facts of the work occur. The same can be said of the contamination by the “disease” in Paranaguá, early in the story. From the beginning of *O Mez da Grippe*, this gap, this indetermination about what would be the direct relation that can be established between WWI and Spanish influenza exists. And this, as we may perceive, has a primordial function in conducting (for the reader) the generation of meanings. For Iser (1999), the process of communication is set in motion and is regulated not by a code, but from the dialectic between showing and hiding; subtext and text, and this, in turn, may alter our reception, in the end, when what it was referring to comes to light.

Disregarding the “historical bridge” between the flu and the war present in *O Mez da Grippe*, one may incur in a lesser understanding of the juxtapositions between the fragments dealing with WWI and those dealing with the Spanish influenza in Curitiba. Thus, we are led to think how the programming of the text can change the interpretations

of “subjective response”, since “the text certainly allows us several readings, but it does not authorize any reading” (JOUVE, 2002).

According to Iser (quoted in LIMA, 2002), the interaction between text and reader fails when only the projections of the latter are triggered, excluding the various possibilities provided by the text itself (quoted in LIMA, 2002). Only if the representations are modified, can the text generate a multiplicity of representations for the reader. Thus, the dominant asymmetry begins to dissolve to give way to communication through a common situation. For Iser (1999), the complex structure of the text, however, makes it difficult for the reader to define indubitably this situation; the difficulties show that the reader needs to abandon or readjust their representations, thus correcting them and causing a horizon of references for the situation to arise. One reference – which has the possibility of being found (programmed by the text) in *O Mez da Grippe*, and that is within a historical perspective, as already observed – is WWI and its relationship with the Spanish influenza in Brazil. But at what point, in Xavier’s fiction, can such a relationship be more directly created?

After a first reading, some key details may be overlooked in order to establish such a relationship. The first fragment of the newspaper (Fig. 7) that appears on this page comes with the news: “The plague of war here imported by the ‘Demerara’ and received with the affectionate title of ‘puchapucha!’”²² (XAVIER, 1981, p. 23). Above, in the right corner, we have the figure of a black ship. The term “plague of war” may confuse the most inattentive reader, who runs the risk of relating the image of the ship only to the imminent danger of war in Brazil.

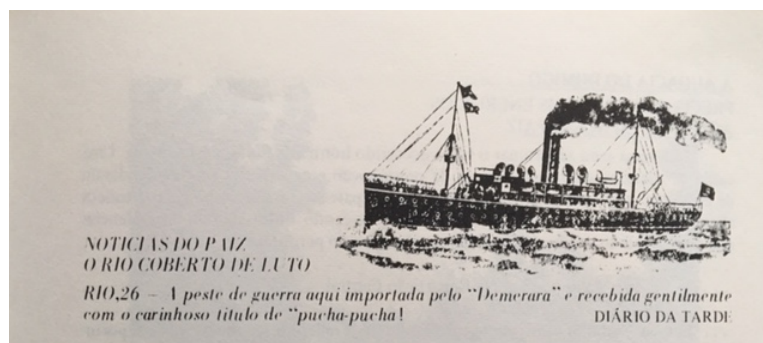


Fig. 7 – XAVIER, 1981, p. 23.

²² Original text: “A peste da guerra aqui importada pelo ‘Demerara’ e recebida com o carinhoso título de ‘puchapucha!’”.

However, if the reader engages in a second reading, as the complexity of this fiction by Xavier demands – and here we recall Jouve (2002), for whom the rereading is not only desirable, but necessary – he or she will perceive that the “plague of war” acts as an omission of the term “plague of the flu”. Demerara is the name of one of the ships that probably brought the influenza virus to Brazil. The contamination of the first Brazilians would have occurred after the ship arrived in Dakar, a largely contaminated city, in Senegal. About this, Liane Maria Bertucci-Martins (2003) says:

After the many stories about the passengers of the Demerara, who had landed (sick?) in the country [...] the newspaper of São Paulo *O Combate* did not hesitate to announce in an explosive way: “The ‘Spanish Lady’ has arrived in Brazil”. Even with text that put in relative terms the blunt statement, the impact on people must have been great. (BERTUCCI-MARTINS, 2003)²³

This is a historical reference that makes it possible to make the understanding precise. Therefore, it is not inappropriate to say that although *O Mez da Gripe* has strong verbal and descriptive restraint by the very nature of its verbal-visual construction, the subtext that permeates its configuration does not lead the reading to boredom and fatigue, a limitation that, according to Iser, may indicate the end of the game, the end of the reader’s participation. On the contrary, this device (which we may call a historical device) within the work operates as if it were a reference change trigger for reception, an update trigger which stops the reader in relation to the potential of the text and to (re)construction, (re)interpretation of the “aesthetic object”. According to Iser, the textual models describe only one pole of the communicative situation. Because the repertoire and the textual strategies are limited to outlining and pre-structuring the potential of the text; it will be the reader's task to update it to build the aesthetic object. Therefore, he structures the text and this act constitutes the two poles

²³ Original text: “Depois das muitas histórias sobre os passageiros do Demerara, que teriam desembarcado (doentes?) no país, escrevendo sobre esse outro navio que chegava, o jornal de São Paulo *O Combate* não titubeou em anunciar de maneira explosiva: “A ‘espanhola’ já chegou ao Brasil”. Mesmo com texto que colocava em termos relativos a contundente afirmação, o impacto sobre as pessoas deve ter sido grande”.

of the communicative situation, which is thereby fulfilled as the text is presented as a correlate of consciousness.

If for Iser the process of communication is activated and regulated by the dialectic show/hide, having in the subtext the stimulus for the acts of constitution, but at the same time having this productivity controlled by the text and modified when the referred to comes to light, then, when erecting the historical bridge by means of the device Demerara, other meanings are created and the reading intensifies, filling its blanks. The reader circulates with greater possibility of success (in the interpretative field) within the text. The representations change. Example: when we return to the fragments of the initial page of the text with a historical perspective on the events, we will see, not surprisingly, that the report of Dr. Trajano Reis is juxtaposed to the fragment that says “Peace is interrupted”. The historical record reports that the coastal cities of Brazil suffered before the others with the Spanish influenza, precisely because the contaminated ships, such as the Demerara, docked:

[...] the number of sick people and deaths actually increased in several cities, first harbor cities, such as Salvador and Recife, as well as Rio de Janeiro. In a few weeks the whole country was sick. In the newspapers the current explanation was one: the Spanish influenza had arrived in Brazil, the same one that killed in Europe and Africa and advanced in other continents.²⁴ (BERTUCCI-MARTINS, 2003)

A tension is then imposed on *O Mez da Grippe*, from the new reading of the first fragments: the flu is approaching Curitiba. “Peace is interrupted” in the city: this could be a reading of this beginning of the narrative, for the reason, we understand, of approaching the programming provided by the text. Chronology is another important element linked to historical facts. It is not by chance that *O Mez da Grippe* begins on October 20th, 1918. While the whole country had been alarmed since early October, the official and media discourse in Curitiba avoided being explicit about what was actually occurring in the capital of Paraná. Only on page 29, October 30th (in the

²⁴ Original text: “[...] o número de gripados e mortos realmente cresceu em várias cidades, primeiro as portuárias, como Salvador e Recife, além do Rio de Janeiro. Em algumas semanas o país inteiro estava enfermo. Nos jornais a explicação corrente era uma só: a influenza ou gripe espanhola havia chegado ao Brasil, a mesma que matava na Europa e na África e que avançava pelos outros continentes”.

fiction), do we see a note on *Diário da Tarde* dealing more clearly with the Spanish influenza, which is already killing people in Curitiba.

Until that date, at least in fiction, official and media discourses do not assume (sometimes because of repression, as in the case of *Diário da Tarde*) that influenza is already a real danger to society. Other places, shortly after the first half of September 1918, days after the Demerara returned to Brazil, printed news not intending to hide the facts:

In the newspapers the current explanation was one: the Spanish influenza or flu had arrived in Brazil, the same one that killed in Europe and Africa and advanced in other continents. Now, besides the war and famine, there was the plague: the Spanish flu, as the Paulistas quickly discovered.²⁵ (BERTUCCI-MARTINS, 2003)

This “hiding the facts” promoted by the official discourse and media in Curitiba, reported in *O Mez da Gripe*, can be interpreted as a criticism of local provincialism that obviously marked this period. And in contextualizing the reading of the work in more current times, we can find in *O Mez da Gripe* a criticism that still persists in relation to the provincialism of the city, as evident in the tales of Dalton Trevisan and the chronicles of Jamil Snege, for example. Xavier, it is not improper to say, provides the reader with some references from the past so as to deal with a critical view of the present: that Curitiba is still seen as an oasis within the country, regardless of its real problems. The development of time in the work, starting only on October 20th, 1918, shows the whole process of delay in admitting the epidemic in the capital of Paraná, while in the rest of the country, days before, the disease had already been acknowledged and its combat had begun:

²⁵ Original text: “Nos jornais a explicação corrente era uma só: a influenza ou gripe espanhola havia chegado ao Brasil, a mesma que matava na Europa e na África e que avançava pelos outros continentes. Agora, além da guerra e da fome, era a peste: a gripe espanhola, como os paulistanos rapidamente descobriram”.

In Brazil, it seems, by telegraphic news, that the first cases of influenza were imported by the "Demerara"; on September 26th it appeared in Bahia; on September 30 the disease was manifested in Niterói, after already raging in Rio; on October 8 in Pernambuco, 10 in Pará, and 12 in Rio Grande do Sul. (BERTUCCI-MARTINS, 2003)

Soon after the news published by *Diário da Tarde*, on October 30th, the outcome of the first part of *O Mez da Grippe* follows: the reproduction of a list of advice to the population on how to combat the influenza virus in Curitiba (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 – XAVIER, 1981, p. 36.

There is a change of tone in the second chapter. The tension is definitively established. Month of November, the month of influenza in Curitiba. Funeral icons and death statistics appear more frequently. Rival newspapers, *Diário da Tarde* and *Commercio do Paraná*, continue to oppose each other. The former insists on dealing with reality. The latter now shows the previously hidden facts; however, intends to alleviate the situation, as seen in the note on page 51, in which the newspaper reports on the decline of the epidemic / pandemic which, according to the fragments on page 49 (Fig. 9), is practically at its apex in the city. The phrase “Now many people are really dying” (p. 47) makes clear the real effect of the epidemic / pandemic in Curitiba and the increase of the number of victims.



Fig. 9 – XAVIER, 1981, p. 49.

Final remarks

Boris Schnaiderman and Décio Pignatary, Brazilian writers, professors and critics, mentioned in the third paragraph of this paper, were both impressed with Xavier's *O Mez da Grippe*. The first considered the book as “a chorus of many voices” and “a combination of words and images”, that is, a graphic polyphonic fictional creation. The second considered the book “the first Brazilian graphic novel”, relating the juxtaposition of text and images in *O Mez da Grippe* to the famous American genre, popularized by Will Eisner. Xavier, himself, called his book a “*novella*”, probably because it is shorter than a novel and/or different from it. But the etymology of the word

“novella”, in archaic Portuguese, leads us back to the Latin word “*novellus*”, which means “new” or “fresh”. Having the etymology of the word “novella” in mind, Xavier’s work is new and fresh, because it is the first and only production that combines two media – text and image – in a fictional work that focuses on the Spanish influenza, a real pandemic, and the effects of WWI, a real conflict, in Curitiba in 1918.

The text in itself is a combination of micro and macronarratives. The most enlightening micronarrative being Dona Lúcia’s fragmented, short information given to someone she is talking to in the fictional universe. While she tells her stories about the Spanish influenza, she seems to be walking on the streets of Curitiba, answering some questions and showing the places where the people mentioned in her narrative lived. The macronarrative comprehends the pandemic and WWI. News about the pandemic are first shown as blank columns in newspapers (censored texts) and, later, with reports about it. The effects of WWI are mainly demonstrated by the animosity between Germans and Brazilians (descendants of other countries in Europe) who lived in Curitiba, while WWI moves towards its end in November 1918. Therefore, the reader finds, when censorship is over, information given by Trajano Reis, the Health Service Director, by the Sanitary Department, and news about the end of WWI, illustrated by newspaper clips with text and images, old photos, postcards, advertisements, and so on – all paratextual elements included in the book. But the historical events reported here for the narrative construction of *O Mez da Gripe* are not sufficient to account for all the generation of meaning by the work analyzed, but they open another perspective, another way for what we understand to be a reading predicted by the author himself (Xavier) and his fictional narrative studied by us. It is also worth remembering the Iserian concept of negation, that is: the questioning of certain elements coming from the external world that, by their presence in the text, are somehow “fictionalized” (quoted in JOUVE, 2002). From this fictionalization, the reader does not lose sight of these familiar or determinant data – in this case, the historical references of the period of the Spanish influenza in Brazil and of the WWI –, however, he/she changes position in relation to them and amplifies the result of his/her own reading, widening his/her interpretive repertoire. Thus, the reader acquires a more comprehensive view of this narrative of Xavier. More specifically, as we tried to demonstrate, one can have, then,

in the relation (ever permeating the work) of the Spanish influenza with the WWI a historical bridge that clarifies the arrival of the pandemic to Brazil through the ships that left with the Medical Mission in support of the allies. This moment, strongly marked by death, whether due to war or the pandemic, also makes reference to the leitmotiv Thanatos / Eros that permeates *O Mez da Grippe* and is very characteristic of the production of Xavier. Other readings, as a result, are obviously possible. Example: a reading about the necrophilia that takes place connected with the figure of the man with the mustache and his sexual intercourse with a sick, unconscious woman. Or, a study of the symbolism of death that builds, in *O Mez da Grippe*, a catwalk where Thanatos parades with ease (through crimes, necrophiliac sexual acts, influenza deaths, etc.). And the power of Thanatos gains much more force in the work when it is known that, although there are not many deaths in Curitiba because of the flu (384 deaths in a population of 73,000 inhabitants), it killed more people in the world than the First War itself, and contaminated millions more.

But in the end, Eros emerges in *O Mez da Grippe* in the form of a drawing of a lady in an *art nouveau* style, wearing a feather hat and which, for Boris Schnaiderman (1993, p. 108), seems to tell us that, despite death and apocalypse, life goes on, there are smiles, glamorous gestures, dainty looks.

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