

The Sertão Of Mister No: how to take seriously a comics' character

O Sertão Do Senhor Não: como levar a sério um personagem dos Hqs

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Abstract

Comics are a great form of presenting the imaginary about diverse places and people. Various studies already discussed them as legitimate dialogues between subjects narrating and narrated in the development of the stories. This paper focuses on an Italian comics, Mister No. Especially it describes the happenings of this subject while in the Brazilian *sertão*. The objective of the paper is to discuss both how this comics reflects the authors imaginary about the place and the emergence of a specific subjectivity of the main character.

Keywords: Sertão do lord; character from the comics; Italian design, Mister No.

Resumo

Os desenhos de quadrinhos são uma forma excepcional de apresentar o imaginário sobre lugares e povos diferentes. Vários estudos já discutiram estes desenhos enquanto diálogos entre os sujeitos narradores e narrados. Esse texto analisa um desenho italiano, Mister No. Especificadamente vai descrever os acontecimentos que envolvem essas personagens enquanto está no sertão brasileiro. O objetivo do texto é de discutir como esse desenho de quadrinho reflete tanto o imaginário do autor sobre o lugar quanto a emergência de uma subjetividade específica do protagonista.

Palavras-chave: Sertão do senhor; personagem dos HQs; desenho italiano; Mister No.

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Introduction

Comics are one of the main ways to achieve far places and the otherness. While considered for long time, and somehow still considered, as a genre directed to juveniles, since the middle of the Twentieth Century they started to be defined as a proper literary style (GRENSTEEN, 2006; BARON-CARVAIS, 2007; PEETERS, 2009; STEIN and THON, 2015). The definition of *graphic novel* contributed to the abstraction from the comical feature of the characters, letting the stories to expand also to political and social demands and visions (SPINAZZOLA, 2012). Starting from this redefinition of the subject, Chute and De Koven (2006) suggest assuming the stories as a “narrative work”, as a *graphic narrative*.

In this sense, comics can be observed as an expressive form that let emerge specific social perspectives of the writers and of the audience. Comics books images are related with emotions and sensations, similarly to the cinema (FELL, 1974), However, they are also related with the psychological traits of both authors and characters: “the surface which exposes the comic embodies an interior space or rather the representation of a space which is found in any transaction involving the body and its limits” (TISSERON, 2000). In this background, this paper will describe how an Italian comics, Mister No, describes the *sertão*, the arid region of Northeast Brazil. This comics can be inserted in the realistic graphic style, differencing them from the cartoons that usually deform the traits in order to achieve their communicative goals (SANTOS, 2015). The climax of the stories is obtained through the attention to the design of characters and landscapes, but mostly through dialogues that let emerge the messages and the complexity of subjects and situations. In this sense, the crossing-discourse of comics is produced in a hybrid space composed by verbal and visual mediums (CHUTE and DE KOVEN, 2006).

However, a question arises: how to take seriously the life of comics’ characters? Following Viveiros de Castro (2011), “to take seriously” is not the same of “to take literally”. The latter implies to situate others’ life (here the lives of the characters and of their authors) in a beliefs’ universe, introducing the problem of the “truth”. However, as argued by Latour (1996) such beliefs are not a subjective state, but rather the result of the relations between people. Consequently, as relation these

lives are “possibilities” (in Deleuzian sense), and as possibilities, the anthropological investigation should not search for their “mysteries”, but rather to “multiply our world” (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2011, p. 137). In this direction, comics’ characters and their authors are not simply mysterious being with which anthropologists investigate the perception of a defined context where they live. On the contrary, they propose us other real worlds to be observed through the lens of the inventive process that founds the perception of both the others and ourselves (WAGNER, 1981).

In this direction, the mind of the characters, as expressed in their discourses and actions, should be observed as the self-expression of the author, however in a dialogue with the self of the characters (PALMER, 2004). The perspective from which images and dialogues are presented is inextricably intermingled with the specific subject whom the story follows. Images are not the “point of view” of the character, but rather the context in which (s)he can express it. Consequently, analysing comics as an ethnographic panorama, imply to observe his characters as subject dialectically moving in a specific context. The starting point of this essay is that to “take seriously” Mister No – our subject in this case – we should describe ethnographically his “point of view” of the happenings. Doing this, it will be possible to let emerge a peculiar social and historical environment in which he is merged. The essay will introduce the subject Mister No; later will narrate his experiences of and in the *sertão*; and finally will discuss the specific reality that such stories describe.

Who is Mister No?

Veteran of the Korea, Mister No, an aviator of the United States Air Force, throw away his uniform since he was disgusted by the bloodbath he saw during the war in the Asiatic peninsula. The young man, however, follows on in doing his job as aviator, bringing rich tourists in the Amazon, Andean, and sub tropical America skies. Mister No is a protester of the civil world, who does not look forward the richness, who refuses the role of the avenger, who hates the violence of men but accepts the one of the nature. His only ambition is to be free... free with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and the cloche of his piper in the other hand. But it is exactly this kind of life that decided to pre-empt Mister No aspirations: the violence that he rejected follows him step by step, like a shadow... (MISTER NO, Volume 3, p. 2).

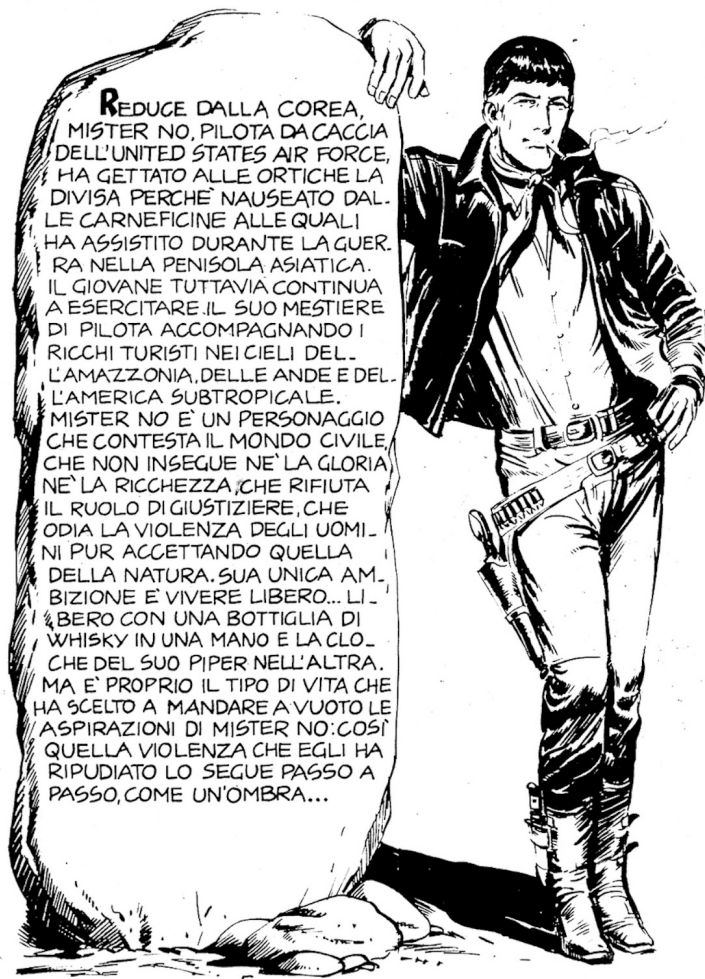


IMAGE 1: Mister No and his description (MISTER NO, Volume 3, p. 2)

The subject Mister No was born from the imagination of Sergio Bonelli in 1975. The author was the son of Gian Luigi Bonelli, the “father” of the famous Tex Willer², and owner of the homonymous editorial company. Sergio Bonelli assigns Mister No as Guido Nolita, a pseudonym that he will use until the end of the series in 2006. Sergio Bonelli was a traveller with a passion for Latin America. However, it is important to remark that his travels were not simply touristic diversions. He visited other countries moved by a real interest in discover local traditions and environmental conditions. A prove of this are the travels he realized with the anthropologist Gerardo Bamonte in Brazilian Amazon. This friendship made possible

²Tex Willer is probably the most famous Italian comics. His adventures had begun in 1948, with the authorship of Gian Luigi Bonelli and Aurelio Galeppini. He was first published in Brazil in 1951, in the Revista Junior

also the inclusion in the first numbers of *Mister No* of some annexes aimed at disseminate the knowledge of Amazon and of its inhabitants among the readers³.

Influences from the Western movies of US can be found in his father's works on Tex Willer, for example with the inspiration on Gary Cooper for design the main character. Sergio Bonelli's, alias Guido Nolitta, references are grounded in another climax, marking an innovation from the idea of "hero"⁴. His characters are problematic subjects, able to discuss and criticize the social and cultural context in which they are situated. They are "heroes" grounded in their own life stories, often with a dramatic, complex, and controvert past. Inspired by the Western movies of Sergio Leone, and the US movies of Humphrey Borgat, Paul Newman, James Coburn, and Steve McQueen, Sergio Bonelli wanted to introduce a credible and convincing character, one that is possible to find the real life (MARZORATI, 2006).

The inspiration for the subject *Mister No* arrived from two lucky encounters of the author during his travels. The first happened at Palenque, when he met a Mexican aviator, Capitan Vega. Segio Bonelli describes this aviator in epic terms:

He dressed discoloured jeans, a t-shirt not less scolorita, military shoes, and a dark mophead quite hippie that, together with a Ray-Ban glasses, could offer him with reason a role in 'Easy Rider?', together with Peter Fonda. In brutal contrast with his pacifistic "on the road" appearance, a leather belt was securing a holster, from where the gun's grip unequivocally appeared. 'Nice to meet you', he sad shaking my hand. 'I am the Captain Vega'. I did not trust to my heirs: Captain Vega? Damn, with this name, my comics' character was perfectly complete!(MARZORATI, 2006, p. 29).

However, the final decision to situate *Mister No* in the Amazon is the result of the encounter with Boris Kaminsky, another aviator he met in Amazon during his travels in the region. It is evident the relevance of these encounters in giving born to

³The annexes started with the volume number 1 and ended with the volume number 27, 2 years later. They covered several aspects of the Amazonian environment, of the life of indigenous peoples, and of their struggles for recognition by the non-indigenous society.

⁴The idea of the "hero" has a long tradition and abundant bibliography. These figures are present in diverse part of the World and ages (FEIJÓ, 1984; MCKLAIN, 2009). Here I understand these figures as the ones able to of inspiring the people in subsume the ambiguity of their daily condition (THOMSON, 2005). For a history of heroes in comics see, among others, Misiroglu (2012) and Daniels (2013). For a history of Italian comics' heroes see Sponzilli (2017).

a character that is both an aviator in the Amazon (but not only in the Amazon⁵), but also someone who is always merged in the events also when trying to escape them.

This eternal conflict between the search for his own place in the world and the intolerance for the Western society associates Mister No with the cultural movement of the Beat Generation (MARZORATI, 2006, p. 31). This is evident also in some volumes of the series (per example the volume n. 266), when he tries to move back to the US after some years in the Amazon. He found a job at the Green Village, in New York, where Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg and other singer and writers of the Beat Generation were used to meet. Mister No found new friends in this place, with whom he shared the same existential contradictory impulses. In this way, Sergio Bonelli wanted to make explicit another trait of the subject: his tragic destiny will be to not be able to escape from the violence that repulses him. This mix of restlessness and disenchantment with the western society of the time and the desire of freedom, which in Mister No are epitomized in the aversion toward tyranny and abuses, are shared with the generation of the author of *On the Road* (KEROUAC, 1957).

The complexity of Mister No is even more explosive when considering that these traits inherited from the Beat Generation are mixed with instances grounded in the Seventies. Sergio Bonelli declares: "I thought it would be better to transmit more concrete ideas instead of the usual western fiction" (MARZORATI, 2006, p.25). This aim has not been followed only by the inclusion of the didactical annexes in the first volumes of the series mentioned above. All the development of Mister no's life concur in express this claims for the social and environmental questions arising at that time. Several volumes narrate Mister No defence for indigenous people rights against the wild exploitation of their lands. Others are voted at presenting environmental problems, such as the mining and the deforestation.

The beatniks' nihilism is expressed in Mister No individualism and anti-conformism, since the first scene of the first volume, when he resolves to buy a one-way ticket to Manaus at the Coen & Brother travel agency in New York. However, the

⁵Mister No spent two years, between the 1989 (Volume 167) and the year 1991 (Volume 196) in Africa, in the desert, in the Mau-Mau land, and among the Zulu; in Asia between the year 2002 (Volume 326) and the year (Volume 341). Moreover he travelled in US, in Latin America and, as we will see, in Northeast of Brazil. Finally, also several flashbacks describing his life before the travel to the Amazon are present in various volumes.

context in which he merges, a dynamic and contradictory city in the middle of the “green hell” – the definition Sergio Bonelli uses to describe, at the middle between the ironical and the denounce, the Amazon – will not let him to spend that isolated life he desired. Mister No involvement in diverse fights for the rights of the marginalized echoes a tension toward the “justice” and the “democracy” which permeates the Seventies. His ethics, however, and it is relevant to underline it once more, does not originate from a sense of superiority of the Western vision, on the contrary it starts from the a detailed study of the local contexts, and from the direct and personal experience of the author. Clear examples are the travels Sergio Bonelli realized among the indigenous people and also in the Northeast of Brazil (including the Museu Historico de Canudos): “in Mister No I used my experience as traveller, which brought me to the Amazon when Manaus and the Forest were far from every touristic circuit” (BONELLI, n.d.)

The complexity of this tension emerges in the encounter between Mister No turmoil and the stories developed by the author. The plot of the events appears as independent from the subjectivity of the author, since it is grounded in the multifaceted reality of the Fifties in Brazil, which is able to move Mister No along trails that demonstrate the inefficacy of his moral principles. In this sense, Bonelli’s approach is tested by the violence and exploitation suffered by the marginalized sectors of the population. In this sense, the stories developed in the *sertão* constitute an excellent example for observing these dynamics of relations producing a “true life” for the subject Mister No. The experiences in which he is involved will drag him in fights that are external – against the injustice and the violence – and internal – in a critical reflection on his own ethics and its efficacy.

L’Ultimo Cangaceiro

The history of Mister No in the *sertão* begins in the first year of publication of the comics. It is exactly in the third volume that he travels from Manaus to Bahia. He arrived there bringing a passenger, Mr. Hannicut, who has not money to pay him for the flight. The dialogues is illumination on Mister No business skills:

Mister No: "Are you satisfied with the flight, Mr Hannicut?"

Mr Hannicut: "It cannot be better, my funny compatriot! You have also been a great spkenman and I am sad to give you a bad news!"

Mister No: "A bad news? I do not understand."

Mr Hannicut: "Oh, It is easy... I would like to tell you that, being without moneky, I cannot pay you the travel dispenses."

Mister No: "What? I am afraid to have not understand... Can you repeat please?"

Mr Hannicut: "There is no problem, I annunciate you that I have no money at all and that I cannot pay you!"

Mister No: "So is it? When yesterday night at the Hotel Amazonas bar we fixed the price of two hundred dollars you already know well that you would not be able to pay me!"

Mr Hannicut: "Exactly! I know it is not very correct, but I had no choice... I should arrive at Bahia. Unfortunately, the air companies have the bad vice to ask for the money in advance!"

Mister No: "Yes... and I have been so stupid to trust on your words, isn't it?"

Mr Hannicut: "Well... Not exactly... more than stupid we can affirm that you have been confident... and your confidence will be compensated, because if one day I will be able to see again the colour of dollars, I will pay you my debt!"

Mister No: "Oh yes... you sad 'one day', but I have to pay be fuel today... the airport taxes today, and if it not bad for you, I should eat today!"...

(MISTER NO, Volume 3, p. 33-35)

This introduction in Bahia well explain how Mister No arrived in this place moved from forces that he cannot control, and he finds himself in a condition of necessity caused by his trustiness in other people. What should have been an easy and well-paid job becomes the beginning of turmoil of uncontrolled events. After spending the day in Salvador da Bahia, searching inconclusively for some client – it is time of Carnival and everybody is merged in this event –, he finds an announcement of a tournament of fighting. This tournament offers a prize for the one who would defeat the "famous *capoeira* fighter" Antonio Moraes. Due to his habits of fighting, Mister No thinks to be able to defeat him, but he discovers at his own expenses that *capoeira* is very different from boxing. However, due to his courage in the fighting, the organizer offers him a prize, a small amount of money that Mister No decides to spend in a local bar buying a bottle of *cachaça*. Once in the bar, a classy man approaches him. He scorns the liquor that Mister No is drinking and offers him a bottle of whiskey. Than he asks to Mister No if he can seat with him.

Mister No: "Damn! After such a premise, you are very welcome, sir...? What is your name?"

Classy man: "Carvalho... or Peixoto, or Rocha... what is the importance of it? Also you do not give so much importance to names, isn't it Mister No?"

Mister No: "You... Do you know me?"

Classy man: "Well... We can say that I know something about you. I know that you have a plane, and also that you are not passing through a financial happy time".

Mister No: "It is true! I invested my last million of dollars in company that wants to sell ice to the Eskimos".

Classy man: "Really funny! I know you are someone that does not demoralize easily. I believe that when I will offer you one hundred thousand *cruzeiros* your attitude will let you do more funny jokes".

Mister No: "Did you say one hundred thousand *cruzeiros*?"

Classy man: "Exactly: twenty thousand now to let you organize the plane for leaving, and the rest tomorrow night at the end of the job".

Mister No: "Ok Mister X; I am all yours".

Classy man: "Very well! In this case you should be ready tomorrow morning. Two men of mine will take your piper with a couple of bags. You will have only to do a survey in the inland... until you will find a group of shepherds that lost themselves in the *sertão* and that are without supplies. Once you will find them, you will bring them the bags with the supplies and a map to find the way to home".

Mister No: "Only this?"...

Classy man: "Only this". (Idem., p. 33-35).

He organizes the piper and the next morning the two men punctually arrive. The board and the flight start. They survey the *sertão* until a village called Santa Isabel. Following on in the same direction they meet a group of more or less twenty people sitting around a fire on the ground. One of the men, Paulo, tells to Mister No to pass on them a first time, and then another time. Mister No starts to doubt of the intention of the trip because the men on the ground do not call for them: "They do not seem to be in difficulty" (Idem., p. 63).



IMAGE 2: The first image of the *cangaceiros* (MISTER NO, Volume 3, p.

Once he turns back to say something to the passengers, he sees one of them moving a machine gun outside the window. He tries to context, but one of the two

men shows him a gun: "This will do a hole in your head if you will not obey" (Idem.). Forced with the gun to do what the two men want, Mister No passes again on the zenith of the group on the ground. The two men start to shoot on them. When they finished the massacre, Mister no asks them who they were, and one of the men answers him:

Paulo: "They were villains, stealers of cattle, for which the police was looking for. One time the police would arrest them, but our boss prefers to economize time and to solve him the problem".

Mister No: "How is it possible? Also if they were stealers, none has the right to do justice in this way. You forced me to take part in this massacre, but you should not believe to have my complicity. I will go to the police and I will denunciate with details what happened and ..."

Paulo: Ah!Ah!Ah! Do you hear him? You are a dreamer, American... Yu can go to the police, you can go to the Governor too! Nobody will trust on the words of a *gringo*, of a foreigner. Moreover, how will you demonstrate to do not one of ours? Our boss has very influent friends everywhere in Bahia. Trust on us... if you want to follow on living quite in Brazil, forget this story!" (Idem, p. 72-73).

When they return back to the airport, the men give to Mister No the rest of the money, but he tears up the notes in front of them. His commentaries are full of fury for having been manipulated by the Classy man and his lackeys, and he decides to go the airport bar to forget the story. Once there, he asks for a bottle of whiskey, but other men arrived in the bar stopping him. After a tense situation in which they would like to kill him thinking that he is paid by the Classy man, the barman guarantees for him. Mister No narrates all that happened. After a quick conversation, he discovers that one the men is Capitão Curisco, the leader of the group. He decides to help them, however asking for an explanation of the situation.

Cusirco: "Did you ever hear about the *cangaceiros*?"

Mister No: "*Cangaceiros*? No, it is new term for me!"

Curisco: "The word comes from *cangaço*, which means brush. The *cangaceiros* were the one escaping to the justice living in a blur in the immense regions of the *sertão*. The phenomenon happened in 1925, and still now it is object of diverse and often partisan interpretations. For someone the *cangaceiros* were only criminals living of robberies and that unload their violence on everybody in indiscriminate way. For others, it was a revolutionary movement that, also without clear ideological proposals, let to grow among the people the first symptoms of the revolt against nestesr and corrupted governors. These were subjugating the miserable people of the Northeast of Brazil with their power. In any way, in that period several armed groups born, they realized raids against the rich landowners of the region. Sometime, these were forced to pay a tribute to the *cangaceiros* to

avoid worst things. More frequently, they were protected by the governmental authorities, which organized a ruthless manhunt. The natural environment played a role in pro of the *cangaceiros*, since they were people of the region, used to the hard life of the *sertão*. Tireless walkers, they crossed by walk unbelievable distances, resisting like no one else to the hunger, thirstiness, the warm, the infinite rains. No less courageous and resistant, several women followed their husbands in their movements, acting, depending on the cases, as warriors, nurses, and sutler... Moreover, they sewed colourful and unusual dresses that contributed to make the figure of the *cangaceiros* fascinating. Some of them became the subject of several stories. The most famous one was Virgulino Ferreira, called Lampião, and his wife, Maria Bonita, inspired one of the most beautiful songs of our land. Also others entered in the popular tradition: names as Zé Bahiano, Tiburco, and Curisco, called the white devil. The adventure tragically ended in 1938, when the *macacos* [militaries] massacred the last group, led by the mythical Ferreira"... (Idem, p. 87-89).

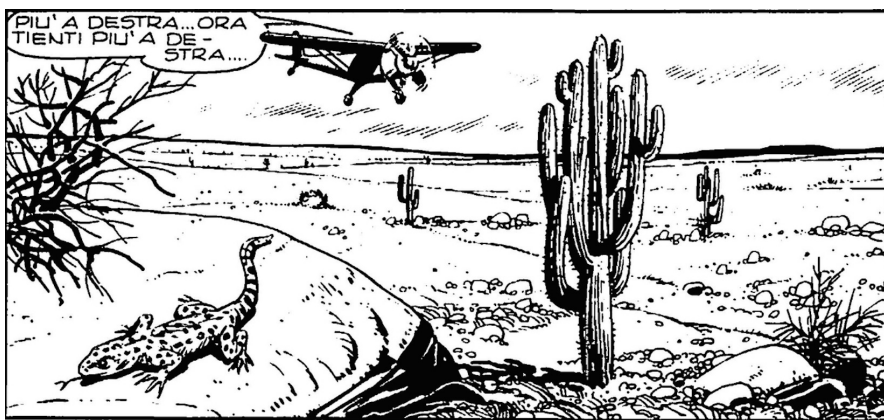


IMAGE 3: Mister No and Capitão Curisco flying over the *sertão* (MISTER NO, Volume 4, p. 15).

The narration continues and Curisco explains to Mister No that the situation did not change. The story of Mister No is set in 1952, so only twenty years after the "adventures" of Lampião. For this reason several farmers of the Colonel Fonseca, the classy man, decided to take the arms to claim for their rights. However, the distance of the central government let the local landowners to do justice by their own. Curisco explains to Mister No that he decided to leave the university and to assume names and features of previous "legendary" *cangaceiros* to obtain the population friendship and support (Idem., p. 94). Moreover, this strategy could provide also the necessary media attention to achieve the central government, but it was unsuccessful in this direction due to the great influence of the Colonel Fonseca on the local medias.

The day after, Mister No and Capitão Curisco leave the small airport in direction of the mainland. They decide to fly over Fonseca's *fazenda*, since it is known to be a fortress. Mister No's sense of humour emerges when they discuss about the possibility of a future assault to the house, and he compares Capitão Curisco with Napoleon. Once on the zenith of the Fonseca's *fazenda*, his cutthroats recognize Mister No and they do not hesitate in shooting at the plane. He decides to move away, toward another *fazenda*, Carlos Machado's one, where the vice of Capitão Curisco, Zé Baiano, should be. However, in the middle of the travel, they discover that a bullet broken the tank. For this reason they decide to try a crash-landing: "In this flatness there is only to choose.... Behind that hovel there is a good place.", Mister No sais. Once landed, the owner of the house receives them with rifle shots:

Rotten... Scoundrel... With all the *sertão* for you, you should land here with your scary vulture... just in the few meters where I have been able to let some vegetables to grow up! Murder... thief... I broke my back to bring the water here! But I will you pay for this, as true as my name is Anjo da Costa! (MISTER NO, Volume 4, p. 21).

Earing the name of Anjo da Costa, Capitão Curisco recognizes one of the supporters of the *cangaceiros*, however, when he tries to identify himself, the other does not trust on him, since: "Capitão Curisco? Are you joking? He would not ever have the money to travel by plane!". So, Capitão Curisco decides to expose him self to be recognized, and Anjo da Costa immediately recognize him. Once Mister No is introduced to the other he wants to apologize for the struggle he caused in his garden:

Mister No: "I am sorry for your vegetables, but the bullets of Colonel Fonseca did not let us to choice another landing place!"
Anjo da Costa: "Do not worry! In the *sertão* we are used with the hungriness, and everything will be fine with another tighten of the belt". (Idem., p. 24).

After they have explain what are they doing, Capitão Curisco and Mister No start to walk in the *sertão* to arrive at the *fazenda* where Zé Baiano should be. The first explains to Mister No how to walk in the hostile weather of the region: "This is not the Sunday walking at Central Park, but a march that the sun and the powder will make very hard" (Idem., p. 28).

Soon the *sertão* shows its true face! A clay plain marked by deep crevices extends until the eyes can see... without showing the minimal vegetation, but only cactus and small spiny shrubs are excluded. Sometime, bizarre gusts of wind lifting swirling dust... disappear as quick as they appear leaving the field to the rays of an implacable sun (Idem., p. 29-30).

Finally, when the night already is arrived, the two find the Carlos Machado's *fazenda*. Once they approach the building, they ear some voices singing. Immediately, Capitão Curisco recognizes his men, since the song is one of the time of the ancient *cangaceiros*. They enter the *fazenda* without being noticed, and when Capitão Curisco sees Zé Baiano with a bottle of *cachaça*, he shots to the bottle. The men recognize their leader and celebrate him, but soon a tension between the leader and his vice emerges because of the abundance of food and beverage they are consuming. Capitão Curisco wants to know what happened to Carlos Machado and his family, and, entering the house, he discovers that they have all been killed. He decides to punish Zé Baiano, and they fight in front of the men. However, when Zé Baiano challenge him to a duel, he refuses since he is the elected leader. After that, the night passes calm, until the next morning when a patrol of soldiers arrive at the *fazenda*. After a short gunfight with the soldiers, the *cangaceiros* band decides to move toward a quitter place. However, once more, Zé Baiano does not agree with the leader, and breads his payback.



IMAGE 4: Mister No and the *cangaceiros* walking in the *sertão*, while they are singing a song (MISTER NO, Volume, 4, p. 65).

Once they arrive at the *fazenda* of Carlos Cordeiro, the owner receives them with friendship. Zé Baiano does not hesitate in challenging again Capitão Curisco, calling him a coward. At this point Capitão Curisco accepts his challenge, and the two confront each other with a machete. Mister No, seeing his friend with a wounded arm, decide to substitute him in the duel, and when he is objected that this is a typical local fight, he affirms to be able to win: "I had more than one fight with samurais' katana during a hand-to-hand at Tarawa some years ago and I think that the difference is not so much...". Mister No defeats the enemy, and he kills him. However, this happening unsettles him so much.

Mister No: "Damn! I come to Brazil because I would like to have a quit life, instead, in few hours, I transform myself again in the same death machine that mowed down human life in the battlefields across the globe! Please, let me have that gasoline, Curisco. I feel that the violence burdening on this unlucky region is going to engulf me too... and I do not want to be involved! I need to go back to the bulimic life of Manaus, to abandon myself to the quiet and anonymous Amazonian life!"

Capitão Curisco: "I understand how much did it cost to you, my friend... And I promise you that in a few days you will be back to you life forgetting the drama of the *sertão's* people!"

Mister No: "To forget? It will not be easy, damn... But I have to do it! Also if my heart is ready to take up the cause, that I think is right! But I am tired to kill, tired until the nausea!" (Idem., p. 80-81).

Mister No decides to have a walk alone, asking for the solace of the night. Suddenly, he finds Carlos Cordeiro leaving a pigeon to fly.

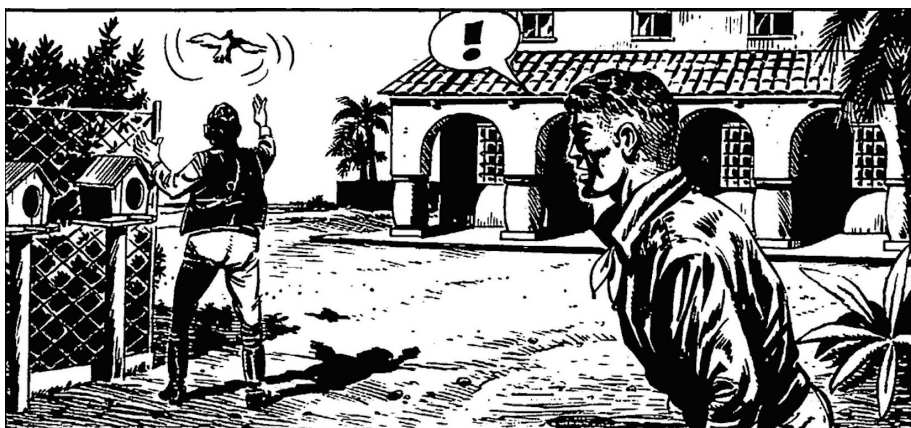


IMAGE 5: Mister No finds Carlos Cordeiro while leaving a pigeon to call the soldiers (MISTER NO, Volume 4, p. 84).

They talk a bit, and when he goes back to the *cangaceiros*, he finds them singing the same song they were singing the day before and during the march. He is going to sleep thinking to the Amazon: “After a lot of powder and threadbare land, I want the clean air of a thousand of meters of altitude, and the green of the forest, the blue of the rivers, and...” (Idem., p. 91). However, some dogs barking disturb his sleeping, and a man close to him shares his sensation of danger. While he is telling him that there is no danger, a hundred of soldiers start an assault to the *fazenda*.

A bomb explodes close to Capitão Curisco, and Mister No tries to help him. In the mean while, the soldiers are approaching the *fazenda* after a strong bombing, but the *cangaceiros* do not demoralize:

“They are coming on this side!”

“Damn! Also on this side”

“Fire, fire”.

“Hell, we are only few surviving... it is best to surrender...”

“”To surrender? And what will be our destiny? They will do with us the same they did with Lampião’s *cangaceiros*! Some cutted heads to show in the villages! Listen the old Galeco... here none will surrender, *meninos*, we are going to fight!”

“Come *macacos* [soldiers], come!” (MISTER NO, Volume 5, p. 9).

Despite the courage of the *cangaceiros*, the soldiers are entering the *fazenda*, and Capitão Curisco ask to Mister No to give him a gun so that he would kill some soldiers more before dying. When Mister No is giving the gun to his friend he perceives that the floor hides a gap, big enough to let them both to seek for a refuge there. The sounds of the guns outside is becoming rarer:

One after the other the rebels felt down under the fire of the enemies...The young Mergueña dies... Caixa de fosforos, who was able to transform a matchbox in a musical instrument, dies...Labareda, José Camela, and Zelação die...Also Teofanes dies, hit by the same gunshot that destroys his inseparable guitar... (Idem., p. 14-15).

Once the battle ends, a man of the Colonel Fonseca arrives to congratulate with the lieutenant that leads the soldiers:

Fonseca man: "Do not forget that tomorrow there will be a party at the *fazenda*, with wine and *cruzeiros* for your soldiers, and a sure promotion for you dear lieutenant. And Capitão Curisco? Didi you find his body?"

Lieutenant: "No, none has been able to identify him, and we are not sure that he was here. Do not forget that the message we received told about the *cangaceiros*, and this will confirm some information that he would be in Bahia in this moment!" In any case, alive or dead, without his desperate gang, he is not a preoccupation anymore for the government neither for the farmers!"

Fonseca man: "Ah!Ah!Ah! Usually the dove is a peace sign.. instead for us the pigeon became the announcement of a slaughter!"...

Lieutenant: "Sergeant, take the van and pick up wounded men and heavy armies"

Sergeant: "Yes sir! And the corpses?"

Lieutenant: "To the hell! Cordeiro's workers will take care of them! They complain that the *sertão* is unfruitful, but will so much fertilizer they will be able to make a garden of it!" (Idem., p. 19-21).

Mister No and Capitão Curisco listen everything, and the first narrates that he saw Ramos Cordeiro sending a pigeon the night before. After waiting for the soldiers to leave the place, the two exit from the gap to find Ramos Cordeiro. Carlos Curisco is very weak, and Mister No helps him to walk, until they arrive at the chapel of the *fazenda*. Here, they find Carlos Curisco praying with his family.

RamosCordeiro: "You are alive! It is a miracle! Our Lord of Bomfim made a miracle. The heaven will be lodato".

Capitão Curisco: "Do not disturb our Lord, Ramos... and lose from your face that phony accent! I know everything, I know that you sell me to the Colonel and I am here to kill you!"

Ramos Cordeiro's daughter: "No, no .. you cannot do this!"

Ramos Cordeiro's wife: "It is not hisfault, he was forced to do it!"

Ramos Cordeiro: "No... let him kill me! I deserve this, the death, because I betrayed my best friend! ... kill me Raimundo, you are right, and I do not need my life anymore! I had to save my daughter, and this... unfortunately, I obtained but with a atrocious price!"

Capitão Curisco: "Your daughter? What does she matter with this?"

Ramos Cordeiro: "Do you see her? Do you see my Miranda? She came back only few minutes ago, when the soldiers finished their bloody job... The Colonelkidnapped her and held her hostage. He damned, known that sometime you stop in my *fazenda*... and he told me that he would release her only if I would help in your band destruction! Look, look at her, Raimundo! Her body has the marks of the torture she suffered to defeat my resistance! I must do it, Raimundo! I tried to save you and your American friend, but you were obstinate to stay with your boys and... Pull the trigger. Your bullets will be less painful than to see your blood and the remorse for what I have been forced to with you..."

Capitão Curisco: "What will help to kill you now? You are only a poor victim of the arrogance of that miserable, an involuntary puppet of his game... I..., I will not kill you, Ramos. It is not suppressing the weak that the things will change in this country... American, American, are you earing me?"

Mister No: "Yes, Curisco, I am earing you".

Capitão Curisco: "I am finished, but you are strong and honest... go and tell to the World what happens here... in the *sertão*..."

Mister No: "I would like to do it, my friend... but, damn! Who will ear someone like me? I will do something else, Curisco. Something that they taught me to do very well... I will kill my friend to revenge you!". (Idem., p. 30-34).

Capitão Curisco dies on Mister No arms, and this is really furious. He defines Colonello Fonseca the one who has no respect for anybody and for anything, the one able to transform friends in enemies, and to put brothers one against the other. He decides, so, to take part to the party at Fonseca's *fazenda* the next night, despite tentative to discourage him made by Ramos Cordeiro and his family. He decides to bury Capitão Curisco where the land is most arid and miserly, in the middle of the *sertão* that his friend loved and for which he sacrificed his life. Impressed by his determination, Miranda offers to Mister No to go with him to Fonseca's *fazenda*, and he accepts since also her has the right to take her revenge. The next morning they move from the *fazenda* and they arrive at Anjo da Costa's house, where Mister No repairs his plane and move it to the garden in order to be able to flight away quickly if necessary. Once he finishes, he and Miranda move with a jeep toward Fonseca's *fazenda*. Despite the tension and dangers, Mister No does not loose his humour. He offers her the bottle of *cachaça*, and she refuses, than a cigarette and she refuses, so Mister No offers her a suggestion:

Mister No: "Listen to me: if you do not decide to grant yourself some bad habit, later on you will be so much old to do it!"

Miranda: "I will listen you! Since you seem to be a great expert in bad habits!"

Mister No: "They steeled me four years of life with their damn wars and now I have to rum to make up for lost time!"

Miranda: "Mmm... You are a strange one... but, all in all, I do not believe you are so cynical as you want to show! I trust that if I would ask you something about your past..."

Mister No: "Economize this effort lady... my memories do not exist anymore... vanished... miserly drowned in a mix of whiskey, rum, and since I have no money, also *cachaça*... However this is not the time to think about the past, but about the future... we have a project to finish!"...

Miranda: "What is moving you? You are not involved in this thing... You are part of a different World, and probably you do not understand the reasons..."

Mister No: "I do it for Capitão Curisco, for the boy massacred in the *fazenda*, and I do it for your father, who has been in a cowardly way forced to betray a sacred bond... and I do it for the ones that are like slaves in this God-damned land!"

Miranda. Have you seen? You are and authentic idealist!"

Mister NO: "No, in truth I do it basically for myself! That bastard tricked me in the bar, and I do not like to be fooled!". (Idem., p. 46-49).

The girl smilestinking that Mister No wants to appear as a tough and egoist boy. Once they arrive at Fonseca's house, they see several men controlling the perimeter, and Mister No ask to the girl to pay attention and to go away if she would be in danger. However, she answers him that she will wait for him, being sure of his return. At the same time, inside the *fazenda*, Fonseca's men and soldiers are enjoying with *samba*, *cachaça*, and girls dancing. Mister No approaches a soldier close to a truck and tricks him with the excuse of drinking something together. However, the soldier does not accept his invite. To solve the situation, Miranda appears (despite Mister No suggestion to stay away) and convinces the soldier to dance with her. Mister No takes advantage of the situation e stuns the soldier.

Once the dressed the soldier's uniform, Mister No enters the house. Following Miranda's explications, he searches for the Colonel Fonseca office, where he is making a toast to the victory with the Lieutenant. Mister No enters the office and interrupts the two men talking, with a gun on his hand. The Colonel try to corrupt him promising money, but Mister No refuses saying that is his there for revenge his friends. However, when the moment to pull the trigger arrives, he hesitates, thinking by himself to not be able to kill someone in cold blood. In that moment, the Lieutenant takes a knife and throws it toward Mister No. This action offers to Mister No the necessary reason to shot to them. Once killed the Colonel and Lieutenant, Mister No moves away from the office, however, unfortunately he match with the two men he took with him in the plane at the beginning of the story. They immediately recognize him despite the uniform, and he is forced to kill one of them. Taking advantage of the party, and the fact that the soldiers are drunk, he exits from the *fazenda*. An idea drives him nuts: he should kill the soldier from whom he took the uniform, since he saw him and Miranda in the face and can recognize them.

However, when he arrives at the truck, he discovers that the soldier gets rid. This appears from behind him and gets a rifle right on him.

Mister No: "Damn, you?!"

Soldier: "Yes, I dress another uniform, and moreover I have a gun. Trucks are full of everything... So, you and the girl outsmarted me like an authentic idiot. It was easy, isn't it?"

Mister No: "Well..."

Soldier: "It is ok, *gringo*. I believe to be able to predict what did you do in the house... So I have only to tell you one thing... Go quickly away... An be quite! None will know you passed from here and that you took my uniform!"

Mister No: "What? I do not understand..."

Soldier: "I told you that you are free... And that if you will not tell to anybody what happened, I will do the same! I am a soldier, unfortunately, and I took part in the massacre. However, I am also the son of poor farmers like the one who live in this damned *sertão*... So I cannot accept Colonel Fonseca methods. Whatever thing did you do in the house, you can trust on me..."

Mister No: "I will trust on you, my friend..." (Idem., p. 83-84).

Mister No returns to the jeep, where he finds Miranda waiting for him. His thinking are sad: "This land, with its contradictions, will make me crazy! Respectable citizens are in truth crueltyrant... cutthroat soldiers reveal themselves as sensible and responsible men..."; "I moved to this country to avoid the violence that involved all my life, and in a few days I am forced to kill more people than in Guadalcanal!" (Idem., p. 85-86). Miranda tries to comfort him, saying that the new generations will change the things in that land, because they know what is going on elsewhere and will not accept such oppression anymore. Once they arrive back to the Anjo da Costa's house, Mister No despites from his friends. Miranda asks him if one day he will be back, and he answer that first he has to understand better the country and the disconcerting people inhabiting it.

Mister No takes off with his plane, however, "I have to despise someone before living" (Idem., p. 94). He flies over Cordeiro's *fazenda*, and over the craves of the *cangaceiros*.

"Adieu Capitão Curisco... I hope that this land you loved so much will make your sleeping quite! Adieu also to you, the last *cangaceiros*... the adventure we lived was so absurd and anachronistic that it seems to me a dream... A dream of which there is no tangible tracks... Only a series of faces and a song that pounding in my hears... A song that was not so bad as I thought, and that you Teofanes played very well, despite your enormous farmer's hands... it is true, it was not so bad... not worst of whatever blues we play on my house!" (Idem., p. 95-96).

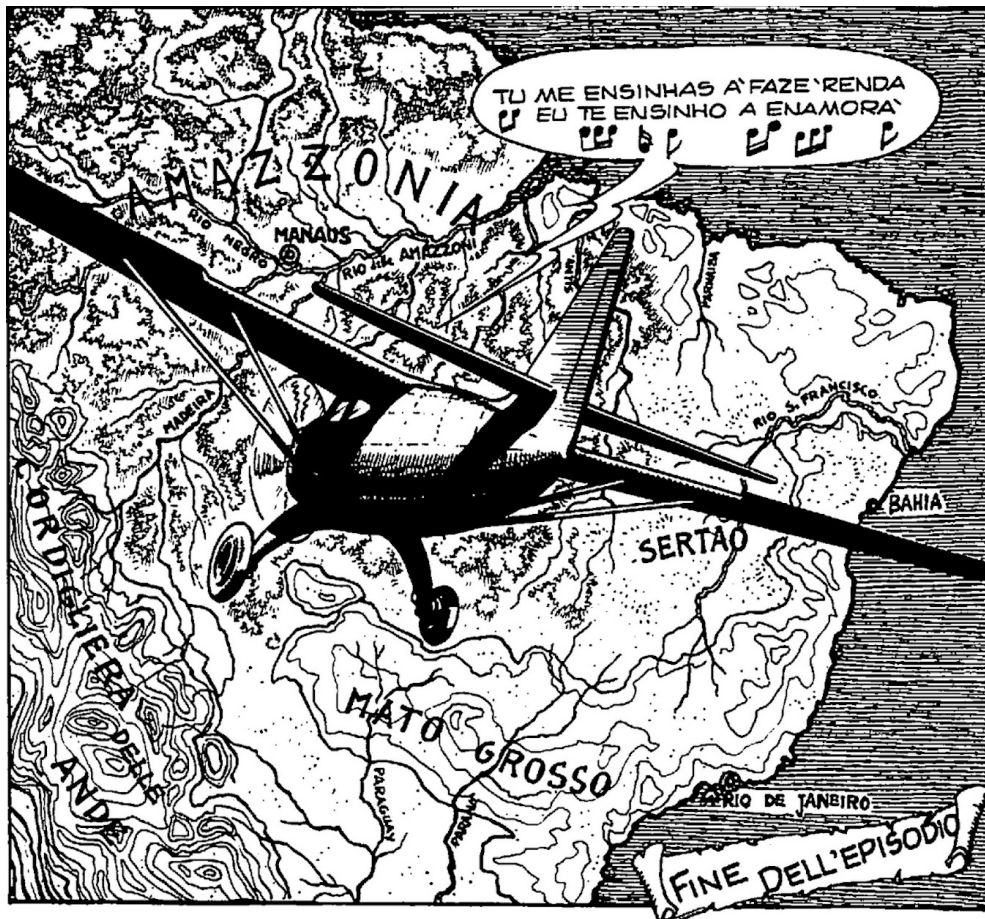


IMAGE 6: Mister No flies away from the *sertão* singing the *cangaceiro*'s song (MISTER NO, Volume 5, p. 98).

Mister No's *sertão*

To observe the development of the stories involving Mister No in the *sertão*, it is useful to understand the imaginary that produced the setting. Good starting points are the words of Sergio Bonelli, describing his visit at the Museu Historico de Canudos.

In this region where took place the revolution of Antonio Conselheiro, narrated in the famous book of Euclides da Cunha *Os Sertões*, I arrived trough deserted and arduous lanes, similar to the Sahara. I wanted to see in any way the museum dedicated to the happenings of Canudos. Once there I discovered with surprise that the so desired museum was simply a small house of few square meters. To complete de deceitful picture, I can add that the watchman with the key was occupied (as specified in a paper on the entrance door) in agricultural work at several kilometres of distance... (MARZORATI, 2006, p. 83).

This description let us to observe the sensations the local context produced in the external observer. The first one is a sensation of desolation, as expressed in the comparison between the region's roads and the Sahara Desert. Another one is a sensation of bewilderment produced by the fact that the watchman was not at the Museu but in his gardens. These images produce a sensation reproduced also in the description of the *sertão* at the beginning of the story *The Last Cangaceiro*.

The *sertão*... this is the name of a very large desert region that occupies the great part of the Northeast of Brazil. It is a barren land, very poor, troubled by weather hostile to every living being. During the summer the dryness that continues for months and the warm lies down a web of cracks on the clay ground... which, on the contrary, is ready to become a sea of mud when in the winter the downpour rains arrive... and swell of dangerous and often overflowing water the little depressions of the rivers. An immense territory, which, due to his scarce vegetation, is voted to the herds' pasture... and the numerous families that take care of the cattle receive only the minimum to survive from the few landownersthat transformed the *sertão* in a series of medieval feuds (MISTER NO, Volume 3, p. 59).

Such description echoes the words of Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*, to which Bonelli makes references in some interviews. Furthermore, it is possible to recognize the influence of the imaginary transmitted by Glauber Rocha in his movies *Deus e o Diabo na terra do sol* and *Antonio das Mortes*. Bonelli declares his appreciation for the works of Glauber Rocha explicitly: "When I saw *Antonio das Mortes* in Milan, in the Seventies... the cinema felt empty... I stayed almost alone to appreciate the splendid colours of the *sertão*" (MARZORATI, 2006, p. 84). However, while Rocha's representation is merged in the demand for a social revolution, Mister No's experiences are the result of an external observation. Moreover, while Rocha criticizes Hollywood movies, Bonelli (and with him Mister No) are strongly influenced by that style. For this reason, the *sertão* of Mister No is a place that digresses in the fantasy, with the temporal dislocation of the last *cangaceiros* in the Fifties. In this sense, the people Mister No meets in his travel to the *sertão* are reinvention of the local tradition. The appropriation of the Brazilian histories and traditions, also if Bonelli known that in first person, is largely mediated by the Brazilian movies and literature, but also by the proper Italian experiences⁶.

⁶A clear example is the *Almanacco dell'Avventura* (BOSELLI, 1994), published in 1994, in which it possible to find a selection of cases of banditry, and in which the Italian *banditi* and the *cangaceiros*, among others, are described as romantic heroes.

In the Northeast of Brazil, a great part of the traditional histories was circulated through oral diffusion, with specialized figures of story-teller, and the most famous example is the *Literatura de Cordel*⁷. Such narratives are related with an innovative and original redefinition of diverse traditions: biblical histories, European medieval histories, and others, were mixed and merged in the local contextual experience of the people. In this direction, also the history of Lampião, a *cangaceiro* who dominated the region the first decades of the Twentieth Century, was inserted in this popular signification process. Among the peculiar traits of these movements it is important to remark the transmutation of the *cangaceiros* in messianic figures. On another side, the new-born Brazilian Republic associated these movements with the last stronghold of the monarchic sectors of the society, with the consequent violent repression that raised also pacific settlements not directly involved with the *cangaço*. The consequence was a generalized sense of oppression among the people that empowered such movements with a powerful mythical trait.

Lampião was associated with the legendary figure of Antônio Silvino. This was described as the personification of the good Christian, due to the fact that when he was arrested in 1918, after having voted his life at fighting against the oppression, accepted to expiate his sins in prison. This association is even more evident in the tradition that reports Lampião's repentance of his sins after he met Padre Cicero (PICCHIO, 1978; BARROS, 2007). The overexploitation of the populations of the Northeast of Brazil (DE CARVALHO, 1961), let to easily understand how such figures personified the desires of transformation of the material and social conditions in which they were merged. The previously mentioned Glauber Rocha defined this poor condition, metonymically represented by the "hungriness" as the constitutive element of the Brazilian culture (ROCHA, 1965). In this sense, the figure of Lampião, and of the other *cangaceiros*, is the personification of the sense of rebellion of a population that desire deliverance but live in a terrestrial hell. Far from the aesthetic

⁷About this kind of literature and its functions in social identity see Slater (1982); da Silva and de Souza (2006); da Silva et al. (2010).

representation of the *cangaço* that can be found in Lima Barreto⁸, with Rocha these movements become “rebels phenomenon” (ROCHA, 2003, p. 91).

In Sixties Italy, Latin America is considered a laboratory of social transformations (CARDUCCI AND STABILI, 2004), and for this reason there is strong interest in the Brazilian *Cinema Novo*. In the main stream discourses of the time a dichotomy between the Western and the underdeveloped others is still pervasive, as exemplified in the critiques of Autera (1963), who uses terms as “outdate techniques”, “primitive”, “folkloric” and “instinctive forms of expression” to describe South American cinema. However, Rocha’s movie *Deus e Diabo na Terra do Sol* won the prize of the Festival of Cinema of Porretta Terme in 1964. Moreover, other critics underlined the originality of the aesthetic of the movie, and of the message of emancipation that it transmits (NATTA, 1965). These debates are strongly present in the elaboration of Mister No *sertão*, especially in the transformation of the local environment from a mere outline to a constitutive element of the stories of the characters and of their developments.

In the Italian panorama, the medium that most appropriated the imaginary related to the *cangaço* is certainly comics⁹. An example is the Hugo Pratt’s “*L’Uomo del Sertão*” (“The man of the *sertão*”), published in 1978. The same author collocates some stories of the famous character Corto Maltese in the *sertão*. In this sense, comics are able to “employ autobiographical devices that serve to privilege narrative authenticity and to certify documentary truth as they perceive it” (ADAMS, 2008, p. 11). It is clear how the atmospheres of the *sertão* in which Mister No is merged are constitutive of his experience of the region.

Finally, we can observe as the development of the story of Mister No in the *sertão* does not necessary should be linked with a “real” context. Aims of the scenes are linked with the character subjectivity, they appear to be connected with his mind states and moving him to choice what to do and how to do it. Mister No is able to influence the development of the happenings in a limited way. He is forced to fight

⁸I am referring to the movie *O Cangaceiro* (1953) that legitimized the Brazilian cinema internationally, while inserted in a tradition of fiction movies aimed at entertain the audience (ALBUQUERQUE, 2011).

⁹Other examples of appropriation of this *tòpos* in the Italian artistic panorama are the music band Litfiba, which inserted a song in the album *Pirata* (1989) entitled *Cangaceiro*, and the director Giovanni Fago who produced a movie in 1969 named *O’ Cangaceiro*.

against the Colonel, while he would prefer to forget the violence that marked his life, reaffirming his personality once more. The distinction between internal – Mister No’s – and external – not individualized – perspectives is complicated even more by the ambiguity of the graphic presentation of the story. The continuous movement between scenes involving directly the character and others describing the social and natural environment produce a reality with which he has to interact but that is independently from him¹⁰. Also the narrative construction, marked by an oscillation between images and dialogues in describing the character’s experience, makes the story the expression of his “point of view”.

To conclude, we would like to highlight how this subjective perspective produces the story development, in a dialogue with the author previous knowledge. Bonelli’s images of the *sertão* are well evident in the description of the environment. However, they do not force Mister No in taking on his actions. Rather, they produce the background in which Mister No can decide his own actions, moved essentially by his own personality. Mister No’s “mind in action” (PALMER, 2004) is responsible for the development of the story. His consciousness is not only moved by the sense of “justice” that forces him to take the side of the oppressed. It is a building toll that enables him to concomitantly respond to the happenings and influence them. His autonomy is not merely rhetorical, or public oriented; on the contrary it appears to be what enables the story to follow on. Observing comics’ characters as simply information mediating channels will obliterate the semiotic narrative to which they are subjected too. Mister No continually discovers the *sertão* moving on it – geographically and socially – and he produces its own meanings for it. These meaning should not be reduced to a projection of Bonelli’s ones, but instead observed as resulting from different subjectivities in dialogues. Mister No, finally, is not only the subject required to show a social and environmental context, the *sertão*, but it is also, and principally, the subject required to perceive this context.

¹⁰For an analysis of diverse graphic strategies in reporting characters’ minds, see Mikkonen (2008).

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