

2.1. *Punk comix*: a journey through the “flirting” of comics and punk in Portugal

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Abstract

The communication is focused on the way punk is depicted in the Portuguese comics and what the Portuguese comics tell us about punk in Portugal. It is an outcome of the work I have made with KISMIF's project both as activist of independent publishing and a worker in the Lisbon Bedeteca. The interest in this project is due to the fact that most of my work as author and publisher has been influenced by the aesthetics and political logics of punk or the underground - not considering myself punk because my crest only lasted a few weeks and if I've slept in an occupied house it wasn't on purpose - maybe the underground culture in general is more significant to me than punk, whose canons and dogmatism do not appeal to me.

Keywords: punk, Portuguese comics, underground culture

Questions and statements

This paper seeks to analyse the way in which Punk has been treated and portrayed in portuguese comic books, and what these may have to tell about Punk². It is grounded on a basis of a personal testimony, empiric writing and an investigation on the public and personal records on the matter (especially those of the “Bedeteca” in Lisbon).

This article serves as a reference to those who wish to approach Punk, urban cultures, music, DIY culture, graphical and editorial arts from a comic book perspective. Comics (from the french *bande dessinée*) is subject to social and institutional recognition, related to as a mass produced object, and aimed at an infant-juvenile target age group. It is seen as “freak art”, for using simultaneously texto and image, which usually annoys the well behaved and stationary things which could be placed on a literary or visual category. It is precisely this hybrid

¹ Comics Library of Lisbon/ BLX, Municipality of Lisbon, Chili Com Carne Association, MMMNNRRRG label, KISMIF Project, Portugal.

² It the the “Keep it simple, make it fast! Prolegomenons and punk scenes, a way into Portuguese contemporaneity (1977-2012)” (PTDC/CS-SOC/118830/2010) shortened to KISMIF. It is under scientific coordination of Paula Guerra. Besides the author of this text, other members of the project include: Ana Oliveira, Ana Raposo, Andy Bennett, Augusto Santos Silva, Carles Feixa, Hugo Ferro, João Queirós, Luís Fernandes, Manuel Loff, Paula Abreu, Pedro Quintela, Rui Telmo Gomes and Tânia Moreira. It is a project financed by the Science and Technology Foundation and FEDER (COMPETE operational program), developed in the Sociology Institute of the University of Porto (IS-UP), in partnership with the Centre for Cultural Research (GCCR) of the University of Griffith e a Universitat de Lleida (UdL). Other participant institutions include: Faculty of Economics of the University of Porto (FEP), Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto (FPCEUP), Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra (FEUC), Centre of Social Studies of the University of Coimbra (CES) and Municipal Libraries of Lisbon (BLX).

state in which it lives that makes it interesting to those who need images or texts in an investigation on culture – such as that of KISMIF on punk.

Despite its bold and original beginnings, Portuguese comics has a lack of generalized production forms, due to the little funding given by publishers both to commercial and author books. Worse even is to note how few works tell us about Portugal and its people, even when masked as fictions and self-fictions. One could blame Fascism or even the peripheral geography of the country for the lack of content; but after the 25th of April, and until today, very few works have taken the form of “reports”, “journalism”, “chronicle”, “journal” or “autobiography”.

Furthermore, there is little observable regularity in the production of each author for a continuous analysis of evolution on a specific theme to take place. The works and authors seem to skip through times – some authors make two comics albums separated by 17 years – and there seems to be incipient dialog between author and work. To have a more complete framework to think “Punk comics” it is necessary to access other sources, be them illustration or the independent publication world.

Given these general limitations it is to access “all” of the productions surrounding Portuguese Punk comic books. Luckily, through the archives of the Bedeteca of Lisbon, it is possible to access almost all editions (even the more underground ones) to work on this theme – or any other for that matter.

Despite the Portuguese productive “misery”, one can find several curious and valid works to study punk in Portugal.

Questions were raised as to who should investigate, study and answer on the importance of the construction of comic books in Punk culture. From the beginning one can find New York magazine *Punk Magazine* (1976/79) of John Holmstrom which is closer to an underground comic book than a music magazine. In Lisbon we have the case of the “Mundo da Banda Desenhada” (later called Op) store, which, between 1977 and 1987 was a common meeting place of Lisbon’s punks and bohemians. The case pointed out by Paula Guerra, Pedro Quintela and Júlio Dolbeth in catalog *God Save the Portuguese Fanzines* (2014) about the importance of the comics found on the first Porto punk fanzine, *Cadáver Esquisito* (1986).

Are there works which approach punk in Portugal?

Yes there are and in several ways. The first comic book to depict punk characters did it in 1983 with a female character – something to be taken in consideration in such an androcentered setting as comic books and punk. *Sabina* and *Sangue Violeta* are the characters/comics which come to us through the hands of Fernando Relvas in the *Se7e* weekly publication. After that, punks slowly fade out as other subcultures are born and raised in the last decades of the 20th century, serving as “urban furniture”. They are brought back in the beginning of this millennium with the arrival of the Autobiography of Portuguese comics. In this they are treated as more than stereotypes, and seen, criticized, questioned and asked to testify real events and facts.

There is a greater proliferation of short stories, since they took their medium to be “precarious” publications (such as fanzines), or as ephemeral “gags” in newspaper pages. This is the case of the work of Nuno Saraiva. For the most cases, the role of punk is always secondary to the comics, but in longer works it seems to take a greater protagonism, such as the work of Relvas, *88* by Nunsky and *Punk Redux* by João Mascarenhas. It is however in these

same shorter comics that the most interesting and documental content can be found – authors such as Teresa Câmara Pestana, Marcos Farrajota, José Smith Vargas.



Figure 1 - Sangue Violeta, Fernando Relvas, 2004

The first comics with Punks arrive in the newspapers – Relvas in *Se7e* and Diniz Conefrey in *Blitz* – but its media presence fades out as it loses impact as an urban culture during the

90s. Comic books with punks come officially back with the reprint in book form, from 1996 onwards, catching the Portuguese comics boom of the time. In a savage calculation, nonetheless, most Punk comics arrive in small scale editions such as fanzines and self-published books by Rigo, T.C. Pestana, Associação Chili Com Carne, comics fanzines (*Ritmo*, *Epitáfio*, *Nuxcuro*, *Hips!*, *Mesinha de Cabeceira*, *KBD* e *Azul BD3*), punk fanzines (*Cadáver Esquisito*, *Morte à Censura* e *LBN Punx Zine*) and also punk comics fanzines: *Over-12*, *Os Positivos* e *Ezequiel*.

What documentation do those works present on the reality of punk?

Accordingly to the worries of the KISMI project, there was an attempt to locate topics which can help investigators of further studies proceed in their approaches: the bohemian portrait of environments connected to the urban cultures of Portugal; the identification of punks connected to music, bands and concerts; aesthetic and behavioural codifications; the sociabilities with other urban tribes, especially the neo-nazi skinhead culture; sexual behaviours, drug use, okupa movements and finally aging in punk.

In what concerns bohemia, Portuguese comics has several works which present realistic cases of the places most frequented and the respective "fauna". It pertains mostly to the capital of the 80s and 90s, in the works of Relvas, Ana Cortesão (whose untitled 1993 work, later reprinted in the album "*My life is a sewer*" is of the utmost importance to understand cosmopolitanism and gentrification of the late 80s Lisbon), the collective album *Noites de Vidro* (CML, 1991), about the Lisbon nightlife sites, and the three comic books of the (anti-heroic) *Ruivo* by Diniz Conefrey in *Blitz*. As for the representation of punk musicians, one can conclude that João Ribas (1965-2014) is the archetypical super-punk. He is the most portrayed musician, by several different generations: Relvas in *Sangue Violeta* (in *Se7e*) in 1984 with the band Kú de Judas; Diniz Conefrey in the *Blitz* newspaper (1992) and by Afonso Cortez-Pinto and Marcos Farrajota in the disc *Raridades* (2009) in his time in Censurados. There are several other bands represented, not necessarily punk but underground, mostly in the 90s.

Comics also proves excellent in representing behavioural and aesthetic codes of urban tribes and we would find several works already mentioned (Relvas, Rigo, etc...) as well as later, in the case of other tribes, portraying it. In the first volume of the series *Loveboy* by Marte and João Fazenda, we can see the globalized behaviours of an "alternative culture" marked by MTV. Surprisingly enough, the presence of skinheads in comics, mostly as figurines but sometimes as antagonists to the main characters, is quite distinct, especially during the 90s. The only realistic portrait of these individuals is given by the first comic book of *Ruivo* (by Conefrey), which takes notice of a *weird and stupid game of giving slaps to each other*. Other urban tribes (rockabillys, dreads, "vanguards", freaks and metalheads) appear in other comics in relatively pacific coexistence. Police violence is never portrayed, asides from a brief mention in a comics by T.C Pestana in a *Gambuzine*.



DE ALGUNS ANOS PARA CÁ A TASCA DO TI MANEL JÁ NÃO ERA A MESMA. UMA VAGA DE JOVENS EM BUSCA DE SENSACÕES INVADIRA A INTIMIDADE DO ESPAÇO, A MARIA ENVERGONHADA NUNCA MAIS CANTARA O FADO, E A JUKE-BOX PASSAVA ÉXITOS DO ROCK MAIS AO GOSTO DA NOVA CLIENTELA.



HOJE A TASCA DO TI MANEL JÁ NÃO EXISTE. NO SEU LUGAR ENCONTRAMOS UMA LOJA QUE VENDE ROUPAS MODERNAS, COM ASSINATURA PERSONALIZADA, PRODUTO DA INSPIRAÇÃO DE UM JOVEM ESTILISTA NOS VALORES TRADICIONAIS DA FACÇÃO TÍPICA DO POVO PORTUGUÊS...

Figure 2 - n/t, Ana Cortesão, 1993



Figure 3 - Ruivo, Diniz Conefrey, 1991-92

We sought mentions to sex but there were few interesting results, besides from the same standards of sexuality of all portuguese comics – a mostly heterossexual point of view. Among fiction works, there are erotic fantasies in the punk imaginary space, as shown by Nunsy, in two editions of *Mesinha de Cabeceira*. As for drugs it seems almost synonymous with Punk, and therefore “she” (that is, heroin) is always associated to it, be it in fiction, humor or fantasy. The most real case would be excellent work of Pestana – *O meu vizinho* in the *Gambuzine* of 2008 – which retells the personal experience of the author in an “okupa” in Hannover in 1989, amongst drug addicts. It is assumed that Portuguese punk okupas only took place in the 90s, and maybe because of that they took a longer time to figure in comics. Only in this millenia are there records of them, despite mentioning as far back as 1989, like the work of Pestana, which, despite taking place in Germany, and needing a certain socioeconomic distance, reflects its zeitgeist suitably. There are two cases of Portuguese “okupas”, one in the book *Boring Europa* (Chilli Com Carne, 2011) about the destruction of the SPCC, probably the last Lisbon “okupa”, and José Smith Vargas about the dismantlement of the building where the social self-sufficient Es.Col.A project took place, in the Alto da Fontinha, Porto.

Regarding aging, the situation is further complicated, since there is no parallel to the work of north-american Jaime Hernandez, *Locas*, in Portugal. It is necessary to skip through the magazines, in the records of several authors, to offer identical situations. The research will need to be about authors who use autobiography as source for their work, such as Marco Farrajota, Marco Mendes and Teresa Câmara Pestana. It is necessary to bridge them, though there are real confrontations between two of these authors – Pestana criticizes Farrajota for

being an “office punk (...) almost authentic”, in a number of *Gambuzine* (2001). This is an interesting situation, with an active participation in DIY culture and comics worlds in 1995, 2001 and 2011, collaborating in several zines about the “state of the art” of his life, on a mostly professional level. Mendes has practiced an autobiographical work since 2007 and 2012, talking of themes such as Porto bohemia, precarious work and the misery of the Portuguese social crisis of the XXIst century. Both situations are a worry of a “mérda³” class (using Pestana’s term) and not of punk culture, but can be analogous in the analysis of the life of creatives in Portugal in the last decades. Finally, there have been “existential” questions directed towards punk and underground culture by Farrajota in the brazilian zine *Prego* (2011), in the booklet of the DVD of the 15th anniversary of the Barrocelas Metal Festival (2011) and the Slovenian magazine *Stripburger* #62 (2013)



Figure 4 - O meu vizinho, Teresa Câmara Pestana, 2008

³ Note of translator: this expression, left in the original portuguese due to the impossibility of translation, is a play on the words “média” meaning average, and “merda” meaning shit.

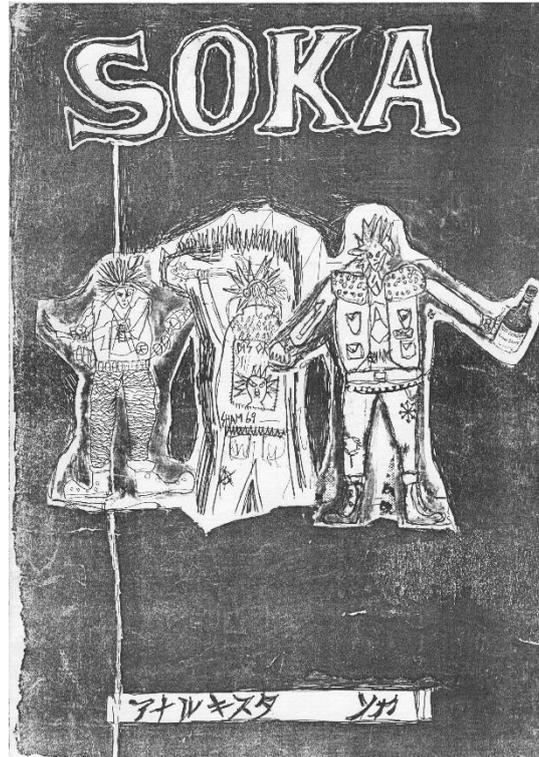


Figure 5 - Soka, José Smith Vargas, 2000

In what way is punk treated in comic books?

Badly treated, of course! Mostly in fiction and fantasy genres, in the line of the official culture, the punk individual is portrayed as a little street criminal, a marginal or a drug addict, generally identified with a mohawk. Even the main characters of the works about punk themselves portray less than human images of life – what does *Violeta* by Relvas tell us? As much as the widely known “No Future” slogan. One could state that there are no interesting punk characters. There are no “anti-heroes” in Portuguese punk comics either – no Portuguese *Peter Pank*, *Tank Girl* or *Bob Cuspe* to be seen.

Only by the late 90s and on this millenia are punks treated as people (Pestana, *Boring Europa*, Farrajota) due to two reasons. First, because punk in Portugal started as something shallow, an urban tribe to escape the post-PREC monotony, and only in the 90s did it transform into a fully underground circuit, which include structures and militant lifestyles; and second, because only in the 90s did portuguese comics access new paradigms of “Alternative Comic Book” creation, both from north-america and europe. These were the pioneers of the documental genre, until then forgotten or inexistente – oddly enough, when the pioneers Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro and Carlos Botelho did chronicles exhaustively.

Are there authors who were/are punks?

The discussion on this topic is complicated because one would have to identify punk authors in a very large list of Portuguese comics’ authors who are connected to a DIY ethic. This DIY culture in national comics is justified by the lack of interested publishers who wish to dedicate themselves to Portuguese authors, be it in commercial or non-commercial works. To identify

the artists who have published their fanzines or created independent structures of publishing shows a true movement rarely seen in other creative areas in this “country where nothing happens”. More than to have existed punk authors, there were authors who “flirted” with Punk and DIY culture, some more militant than others, rarely using a mohawk.

Trying to use international models to identify “punk authors” positions identical situations, with the due reserves. The case of the British Simon Gange, the king of punk comics, that is, of a genre comics in a very specific market niche, could be found in the case of Portugal in authors such as Marcelão and Valter de Matos who published and still publish respectively the fanzines *Over-12* and *The Positives*. Circumscribed to the smaller circuit of Portuguese Hardcore and Straight Edge, it makes them nearly invisible to the “public eye”, compared to the “fame” of Gane in the international underground. However, in this millenia, the Portuguese underground has professionalized, and despite its comics do not reflect directly a punk lifestyle, we find the names of André Coelho and José Smith Vargas to be recognized more for their graphic work on posters, disc covers, skates, T-shirts of the underground music international world. In the case of Jaime Hernandez, or a “comics with traditional looks which portrays a scene”, the cases of Relvas, Conefrey, *Loverboy* and Mascarenhas have already been mentioned, focused mostly on the situations of bohemian Lisbon, but grasping tenously the phenomenons of aging and giving voice to a cultural minority. In the case of the French Matt Konture, or “An autobiographical comics of the punk scene” there is TC Pestana, who is situated in an underground lifestyle and a deep contact with this culture. And to match Gary Panter (or “comics with a graphic style which originates in punk action”) we have found no possible parallel.

In the case that there are punk authors, what graphic styles do they employ? Is there a Portuguese graphic style?

The graphic styles of Portuguese comics are severely personalized due to the lack of critical productive mass. Each author, underground or even commercial, develops his own unique graphic style, which is imitated by few and which reflects and unrepeatably career path, impossible to be followed by others.

Increasing the observation spectrum to comics’ authors who did graphic work to bands/discs/posters of punk bands, one cannot discern a single graphic pattern. This echoes the fact that in the 80s and 90s few national bands were releasing discs, a fact that only increased in this millenium and created a niche for authors like Coelho or Vargas.

We attempted to identify some common lines between national production with the base characteristics of punk aesthetics. We concluded that “iconoclasy” and “humor” are not characteristics one can point out for similarly placed reasons. In the first case, because of the scarcity of collage in comics, or rather, the exclusive employment of that technique; in the second, the impact of the Brazilian magazine *Chiclete com Banana* (where *Bob Cuspe* figured) by Angeli, went beyond the punk “ghetto” and was found on several humorous or generalistic productions of Portuguese comics. It is also to consider that scatological and silly humor is too universal in punk production to be thought as a national exclusive.

The “brutism” (or spontaneous dirtiness of the drawing) and “DIY” (not an aesthetic value in itself) are characteristics which bring together a series of authors of comics, punk or not, which have dealt or not with punk questions since the 70s. In part this is due to the advent of cheap reproduction techniques (print machines), which allowed each and everyone to publish

without having to ask, and allowed the authors to explore the limitations of those same technologies in the treatment of their images, which helped to develop their styles.

It would also come to be the technological development of digital means (starting with text processing to Photoshop) which would mark the “cleaning” and graphic leveling of the underground. It eventually created a professionalized environment which mixes itself with official culture, from the mid 90s onwards

Finally, approaching the production and self-publishing of the fanzines, the “chicken or the egg” doubt is born in portuguese comic books. To look at the great production of portuguese fanzines which dates earlier than the 25th of April of 1974, it leads one to wonder if the influence of Punk on Portuguese comics is nothing but a parallel phenomenon, subject to something bigger which was happening. A question which undoubtedly merits its own investigation. The portuguese production of comic books is built essentially on an amateur setting, strongly DIY, and which seeks to exist throughout the times and especially after the Carnation Revolution due to the low level of professionalism. Very few series are published in newspapers and magazines, and even fewer the orders of books on the subject. Almost all of the post-Revolution production is made of self-publications and small-scale publishers. One could state, in a single slightly demented and exaggerated phrase, but one which nonetheless deserves some thought: the Portuguese comics is Punk!

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