



Diálogos Latinoamericanos

ISSN: 1600-0110

au@au.dk

Aarhus Universitet

Dinamarca

Schøllhammer, Karl Erik  
From the Malandro (Rogue) to the Traficante (Drug Trafficker) - two constellations of violence in  
Brazilian culture  
Diálogos Latinoamericanos, núm. 4, 2001, pp. 37-46  
Aarhus Universitet  
Aarhus, Dinamarca

Disponible en: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=16200403>

- Cómo citar el artículo
- Número completo
- Más información del artículo
- Página de la revista en redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Sistema de Información Científica

Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina, el Caribe, España y Portugal

Proyecto académico sin fines de lucro, desarrollado bajo la iniciativa de acceso abierto

## **From the Malandro (Rogue) to the Traficante (Drug Trafficker) - two constellations of violence in Brazilian culture**

*Karl Erik Schøllhammer\**

### **1. Moment: Post-64**

The fear of the violence and its appearance in discourse about the Brazilian reality begins in the 1950's and gains full visibility in the 70's. In this first moment, the representation of violence has two determining socio-political components. On the one hand, it was a negative result of the Brazilian economic miracle and the developmental enthusiasm that had triggered explosive growth in the urban centres and their populations, above all, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, in but a few decades, transforming a feudal, agrarian country into a predominantly urban reality where all the seeds of social problems are sown. In 1960, 45% of the Brazilian population resided in urban areas, and by the end of the century this number had grown to 78%. A new suburban reality arose that, back in the 50's, had already begun to be portrayed in pioneering works of the Cinema Novo (New Cinema) of Nelson Perreira dos Santos, *o Rio Zona Norte* (Rio-North Zone) and *o Rio 40 Graus* (Rio - 40 Degrees). On the other hand, the violence in the 60's and 70's is associated with the political conditions in the so-called *Revolução de 64* (The 1964 Revolution), whose romantic label covered up a military takeover that interrupted the process of democratisation, marking the beginning of a long period of political authoritarianism and clandestine struggle against the regime.

The artistic manifestations of this reality bear several complex facets. From among them, it is interesting to highlight an interpretation of the escalation of social violence as an allegory of the spontaneous opposition to the antidemocratic situation of the country, and not only as a negative symptom of the crisis triggered by the socio-political process. In this perspective, among the first manifestations against the military regime, we

find some examples of the visual arts, which, within a Neo-figurativa (Neo-figurative) or Neo-objetiva (Neo-objective) orientation, inspired in the international Pop Art movement, began to include in the works fragments of the quotidian, of the press of the official representations with a political content of denouncement. In 1965, the exhibition, Opinião 65 (Opinion 65) was inaugurated at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (Modern Art Museum) and the following year, in Opinião 66 (Opinion 66), we find the emblematic work of Rubens Gerschman: A Bela Lindonéia - Um amor impossível (The Lindonéia Beauty - An Impossible Love), a portrait of a young woman murdered in a passional drama, taken from a newspaper headline. The moment coincides with the first manifestations of the Tropicalia musical movement, led by the musicians, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil from Bahia State, among others. Caetano writes a song inspired by the picture, reproduced on the record sleeve. Another artist, the painter Hélio Oiticica, who had led the Neo-concretista (Neo-concretist) opposition against the positivist Constructivismo (Constructivism), predominant in the fifties, developed, in the 60's, an artistic work in direct contact with the popular culture of the samba schools in Carioca (Rio) hill shantytowns, principally that of Mangueira. In 1963, this engagement is reflected in the Bólides (Flaming Meteoroids) series, which were works - called transobjetos (transobjects) - of intervention aimed at stimulating the spectator's direct participation. In 1966, Oiticica finished a work in honour of the most wanted outlaw in Rio de Janeiro, Cara de Cavalo, in the Bólido Caixa 18, Poema Caixa 2, which contains images of the dead bandit, executed at 22 years of age, after a police hunt in 1964. It consists of a box, the inside of which reveals four photographs of the bandit's bullet-ridden corpse, stretched out on the ground, arms extended in cruciform. The inscription in the pigmentation in the background says: "Here he is and here he will stay. Complete his heroic silence." On this occasion, Hélio expressed his artistic objective with precision: "I wanted to honour what I think is the social revolt of the individual: that of the so-called marginais (social outcasts). Such an idea is very dangerous but something necessary for me. There is a contrast, an ambivalent aspect in the behaviour of the marginalised man. Next to a great sensibility there is violent behaviour and often, crime is a desperate search for happiness." (Arte nos Anos 60, p. 63).

The same year, Gerschman returns with the picture in which Lindonéia, the innocent victim of social violence, is replaced by the portrait of Os Desaparecidos 2 (The Disappeared), and in the work by Antonio Manuel, A Imagem da Violência (The Image of Violence) (1968) the newspaper headline is the explicit content of political denouncement of art.

Also in the work of Oiticica, despite his fascination for marginality and his friendly relations with Cara de Cavalo, who he knew from the Mangueira hill shantytown, we perceive in his work the symbol of the farewell to a romantic type of bandit. He is a petty offender, or Malandro, a type of outcast who lives at the margin of the law, surviving from prostitution, Jogo do Bicho (an illegal lottery), small scale sale of maconha (marihuana). He is a vagrant (the name Malandro originated from andarilho, one with a mal andar - walking the path of evil), a man without commitment, a type of picaresque figure, in his true element in the samba schools and the carnival, the Jogo (lottery) and the favelas (shantytowns), always just within or outside the law, but never in total opposition to it. The period identifies him in names like Mineirinho (Little Miner), Carne Seca (Dried Meat), Sete Dedos (Seven Fingers), Rainha Diaba (Devil Queen) and Cara de Cavalo (Horse Face). The Malandro used to survive due to his individual talent and not from any criminal organisation, was a good fighter and swift with a knife, but rarely did he use a firearm, avoided direct confrontation, preferring the jeitinho (clever way out), escape or persuasive talk maintaining the equilibrium or, according to Antônio Cândido, the “dialectic” between order and disorder. The Malandro, recognized as always acting with a certain grace and charm, despite his lack of morality and sociability, remains as a characteristic figure of the marginality of the hill shantytown, samba and the jeitinho (circumvention of the law) typical in Brazil. In Brazilian culture we have known this figure, ranging from the folkloric Pedro Malazarte to the modernist Macunaíma, as an image of a particular, national manner of being.

Later, in 1968, Hélio Oiticica plunged fully into the paradox of the hero bandit with the silkscreen image: "Be marginal, be a hero!", and at the same time the director Rogério Sganzerla released the revolutionary film, *O Bandido da Luz Vermelha* (1968), which painted a expressionistic portrait, with lyrical touches, of a thief, murderer and rapist.

It becomes clear that, in the interpretation of the artists of the period, as much the figure of the Malandro as that of the Cangaçeiro receives a political dimension. In this manner, the underworld of crime and violence recovers a certain legitimacy by indicating allegorically the spontaneous revolt to what could indicate the revolutionary possibility of political violence. Besides denouncing the social mechanisms behind the violence and, therefore, the implicit responsibility of the authoritarian state, there emerged in the literature, in the plastic arts and in cinema, a stark exposition of a new reality of crime and violence that, at times, contained a certain romanticism of the banditismo phenomenon, as much in the countryside as in the big cities.

Meanwhile, the conjunction between armed political struggle and organised crime occurs in practice, during the 1970's, as a consequence of the close contact between political prisoners and social delinquents in the maximum security prison on Ilha Grande (island), giving rise to the organisation called, at first, Falange Vermelha (Red Phalanx), and, later, Comando Vermelho (Red Command). The organisation assumes the principles of armed struggle to guarantee a support relationship between prisoners and criminals in liberty, but later it enables the growing sale of cocaine in the Rio shantytowns through a distribution network and arms with military and clandestine principles.

### ***Journalistic Neo-realism and Brutalism***

In the literature of the time we can distinguish two trends of representation of violence: neo-realismo jornalístico and brutalismo (Journalistic Neo-realism and Brutalism). The first is a reversion to documentary romance without any literary commitment, frequently written by professionals of the Press. After the Ato Institucional 5 (Institutional Act no. 5) was issued on December 1968, imposing a censorship regime on freedom of expression, including the country's newspapers, these writers found in fiction about real facts a way of dodging the restrictions.

Nevertheless, the other angle interests us more, inaugurated by Rubem Fonseca, in 1963, with his anthology of tales, *Os prisioneiros* (The Prisoners). With this book, Fonseca presents a prose, denominated by Alfredo Bosi as "brutalismo", characterized by descriptions and recreations of social violence, ranging from bandits, prostitutes, bouncers, corrupt police, to beggars. Without waiving literary commitment, Fonseca creates his own style - dry, direct, communicative - on themes in the Carioca (Rio) underworld, from which the writer drew not only the stories and quotidian tragedies but also the colloquial language that resulted in being innovative for his particular "marginal realism".

For most of the critics and for some state censors, the revelation of violent passions and dehumanisation of urban life contained an implicit denunciation of the emerging brutal reality of the repressive political regime. Quite rightly, in this literature an implicit excuse for violence can be seen, inciting violent revolt against a state machine that was without legitimacy. The Médici government had prohibited the media from broadcasting "any outward expression deemed contrary to morality and good customs." It was in this perspective that the relation between social revolt and political threat was perceived by the government censors,

leading to the ban, in 1976, on *Feliz Ano Novo*, the collection of tales by Fonseca, the accusation being that of “encouraging violence”.

At the same time, in this literature, there was an element that transcended the political motivations of the moment, an attempt at understanding an excluded social reality, already representing the reaction of the urban middle class to the threats created by the growing social inequalities: robberies, kidnappings and murders. In this aspect, the literary fictionalisation of the period may be understood in terms of resymbolisation of the violent reality emerging from the social confrontation in the big cities. The literary recreation of *chula*, a colloquial language unknown to the reading public, represented the desire to overcome the social communication barriers, and, at the same time, imbue the literary language itself with a new vitality so as to be able to break the impasse of the traditional realism in the face of the modern urban reality. Fonseca creates a pungent and crude style, almost pornographic in its ruthless exposition of all the sores of the human mind. It is never restricted only to the social element, but goes deeply into the paradoxes of human existence in which we can see the origins of the evil that perturbs mankind. In *Passeio Noturno* a rich, successful executive goes out at night in his Mercedes to run over passers-by without any apparent motive. The enigmatic side of the act of bloody violence without reason forms part of the violence revealed in the Fonseca tales, and transpires as an element that, in the 80's, becomes complex and begins to characterise the presence of violence in works of other authors, such as João Gilberto Noll and Sérgio Sant'Anna, in which crime is revealed in the enigmatic and profound perspective of human existence.

This is also the reason that for Fonseca there does not exist any dimension of political hope in the rebelliousness of the marginals in society, and although he understands them profoundly from the individual point of view, they were mercilessly of any engaged heroism. In one of the most famous of the writer's tales, the romantic bandit recovers an unexpected acidity of individual revolt, being understood as the consumer society's *Cobrador* or "debt collector", referring to the indebtedness to its excluded. "They owe me food, fucks, blanket, shoes, a home, a car, a watch, teeth, they owe me. A blind man begs for alms shaking an aluminium bowl of coins. I kick his bowl, the noise of the coins irritates me." (Fonseca; 1994, p. 492) After a career as non-conforming avenger against the icons of unequal society, the *Cobrador* finally finds his true vocation, stimulated by a lover who is a terrorist and convinces him to turn to organised violent action, and the tale ends ironically with the disquieting

premonition of the channelling of all the hate of social inequality against society's institutions and without dialogue with the political system.

The outlaw portrayed by Fonseca is not the legendary Malandro any longer, whose criminal offences allowed him to live at the margin of well-functioning society, trying to escape from social obligations, albeit, deep down, totally dependent on it. We notice the emergence of a new type of outlaw, for whom marginality, crime and violence are a condition of existence and identity, a blind and unjustifiable protest that can only be understood as contrary to the loss of legitimacy of social institutions and its democratic premises. He is a youngster, malnourished, with bad teeth, weak, illiterate and without options, like millions of Brazilians born in the 70's and 80's. He lives in a shantytown or on the outskirts of the city, and belongs, from a very early age, the drug traffic gangs, maybe, in the beginning, just as a delivery boy, called *avião* (literally, aeroplane) or *fogueteiro* (literally, firework maker). While still an adolescent, he is given a gun, and along with the weapon comes a new pair of sports shoes, a rapid leap in his purchasing power, girls, power in the community and an increasingly shorter life expectancy. The new outlaw is a result of a new criminal order in which what prevails is not the limited marijuana market, controlled by the Malandro, but, rather, the well organised cocaine business, whose financial scope is far greater, guaranteed by gangs who are heavily armed, representing the informal power in the shantytowns of the city.

In Zuenir Ventura's book, *Cidade Partida (Broken City)* (1993), in which the author depicts the criminal reality in the suburb, Vigário Geral, the drug traffic leader, Flávio Negão, is described in the following manner: "The jockey's cap turned to one side, the shirt with broad blue horizontal stripes, blue bermuda shorts and the pair of bowed legs ending in orange flip-flop sandals, would hardly identify him as the powerful local boss, if it were not for the mobile phone hanging from his waist. Physically speaking, he is a young lad like one of those, who, in a robbery, as a first reaction, provokes the urge to say: "Don't be a pain, kiddo".(p.78)

If the 70's had already seen a quantitative increase in crime in Brazilian cities, causing an overall feeling of insecurity and fear of violence amongst the middle class, responsible for closed condominiums and buildings protected with railings and private security guards, the 80's, which, on the political plane, were the advent of the return of direct democracy, started with the 1979 amnesty, are also marked by perfection in the drug trade, by kidnappings, robberies of security vans and daring bank hold-ups. The new profile of heavy crime guarantees the drug traffic's investment capital, made feasible by the introduction of military armament

in the Rio de Janeiro shantytowns. At the same time, insecurity in the streets increases considerably with the increase in armed robbery and murder, not to mention the inefficacy of the Brazilian police in handling the situation. The new outlaw is a cold murderer or a drug traffic "soldier" still in the prime of his adolescence, and bereft of the honour and marginal ethics of his Malandro predecessor. In the last years of the decade, the Comando Vermelho (Red Command) has started to lose its hegemony and split into ever smaller and more violent factions, stimulating internal wars amongst criminals and allowing, therefore, a radical escalation in crime and a general feeling of banality towards violence. A series of spectacular battles for power amongst these groups and the Military Police forces in the shantytowns right in the heart of Rio de Janeiro, like Dona Marta, puts the new era of organised crime on the front pages of newspapers and TV news, stamping in people's minds the tragic figures, like Carla from Dona Marta, 14 years old, heavily armed for the war. Once again it is the artist, Rubens Gerschmann, who, in his series of pictures, Registro Policial, started at the beginning of the 80's, had already noticed the transition to a more diffuse, irrational and glamorised reality in terms of urban violence. The quasi-military conflicts with organised crime in the Rio de Janeiro shantytowns, the high rates of summary executions of criminals carried out by special Police groups, or the massacres in the suburbs of São Paulo, reflect a new world of crime in which a high degree of professionalisation of drug traffic is accompanied by recruitment of ever younger "soldiers of the movement" and whose cold blood is only compared with the risk and possibility of dying quickly. From the point of view of the youngsters coming from lower social classes, drug traffic begins to represent an option of life style, not adopted for economic reasons, but rather as representing a risky contestation of a reality viewed as unjust. Around this delinquent option has developed a protest culture which has proved to be productive in vicarious association with such risk and struggle without a cause, creating phenomena of a much vaster scope, like funk, "surfing" - standing on the roofs of trains, and gang robbery "dragnet" style.

## **2. The 90's**

The early 90's was marked by a major rise in the number of massacres, which has led to higher visibility in the involvement of parts the Police corps in crime. In notorious cases like Acari (1990), Candelária (1993) and Vigário Geral (1993) the dangerous connections amongst the police and death squads and avengers, or the drug traffic itself, were exposed in the national and international press and triggered mobilisation



in civic demonstrations against urban violence, like “Viva Rio” and a process of internal reform in the police corps, which continues until today.

In the literary milieu two works appear whose originality is closely linked to the new reality of violence and the flagrant manner of displaying it. In 1995, the young authoress from São Paulo, Patrícia Melo launched her second book, *O Matador*, which became a best-seller. Patrícia Melo had already been praised for her first book, *Aqua Toffana* (1994), but in *O Matador* she showed her determination in becoming known as the real heiress of Rubem Fonseca’s brutalist prose. The main character of Patrícia Melo’s fictional world is Maiquel, a young lad from the São Paulo suburbs who becomes a hired assassin, a paid avenger and exterminator of disaffection in grand São Paulo society. His first client is the dentist, Dr. Carvalho, a character taken from the tale, *O Cobrador*, written by Rubem Fonseca, who, after being shot in the leg, moves to São Paulo and reappears in Patrícia Melo’s novel as an agent for murder by contract. *O Matador* is a kind of romance of (de)formation, showing the process of brutalisation of a man who starts killing by chance, becomes an accomplice of high society as the informal torturer in exchange for an easy life and police protection. Nevertheless, he falls into a banalisation process of the violence, which eventually leads to self-destruction. Despite her professionalism, the agility of her text and the narrative composition whose pace reminds us of an action film with quick flashes and breathtaking cuts, Patrícia Melo’s books display a fundamental difference if compared with the works previously mentioned. At no moment does the violence theme seem to set a significant limit, or make us feel that the rise in number of violent acts verges on a last ethical existential frontier of something unpronounceable, the evil in its very essence. The characters are emptied of content, simply ending up showing them selves to be bearers of a reality of absolute dishumanity and lose their depth in the face of this founding prohibition that makes them “people”. In this sense, the book loses its meaning because, instead of involving the reader in the drama of a man in moral decadence, it imposes on us the same indifference that terrorises him and nothing scares us. The technical qualities of the book, its quickening pace and the skilful handling of the story show the mastery of the author and justify making it into a film, but they do not legitimise the uncomfortable sensation of pornographic superexposition of the facts. In a recent novel, *Inferno* (2000), launched last year, the scenario is no longer the São Paulo suburb, but one of the more than five hundred shantytowns in Rio de Janeiro. The character in this 400-page tome is a shantytown dweller, Rezinho (Little King), who grows up with the drug dealers, learns to work for them and later becomes a powerful drug traffic leader. Instead

of telling the story in the first person, as was the case in Maiquel, Reizinho's narrative is more classical and follows the patterns of a novel of romantic realist formation. Reizinho is ambitious, conquers his world and ends up destroying himself after having destroyed not only his adversaries and disaffected, but also everybody he used to love. After a while in seclusion, in the final pages, he goes back to his origins without knowing whether what awaits him is reconciliation or death at the hands of rival bandits.

A totally different kind of ambition is to be found in Paulo Lins' first novel, *Cidade de Deus*, centred around a young black man who lives in a poor shantytown of 300,000 dwellers, on an island enclave set in the most modern district of Rio de Janeiro, Barra da Tijuca. While Patrícia Melo had already written 20 chapters of *Inferno* when she first set foot in a shantytown, Paulo Lins is one of these young Brazilians who, despite facing adverse social conditions, manages to obtain a good public schooling and graduate from a university (also public), becomes conscious through academic work of his own condition inequality, carries out a sociological work in his own shantytown, and manages, in a unique manner, to merge such influences into a very important literary work. The book can be read in several ways. It is, firstly, a document about the history of *Cidade de Deus* which was built to shelter populations who became homeless in the big floods that hit Rio de Janeiro in 1966. Its three parts -- *História de Cabeleireira*, *História de Bené* and "*História de Zé Pequeno*" depict, through the three characters, three decades of history – the 60's, 70's and 80's. On the other hand, it is a memorialistic and self-biographic narrative in which individual development – from innocent childhood, through the shock of reality in adolescence, to the cynicism of maturity - is reflected in the progressively rough tone of the narrative. Finally, it is a fictionalisation of real facts, "everything in the book is real", as Lins always insists on saying with a naturalist, or should we say anthropological, fervour, committed to his "informers". There is no doubt that in such a commitment lies the great strength and great weakness of this novel. Strength because reality is unveiled in every action of the *Malandros* or *bichos-soltos* (wild animals, as the criminals are called in the book) in a very touching manner and also because the characters' language reconstruction is performed with a great deal of dedication. Nevertheless, it is also weakness due to the fact characters seem to be stifled in their roles, predictable in such dramas where individuality seems to merge with their "types". Anyway, the result is admirable for its stamina and scope, for its scientific and sentimental commitment, as well its expressive endeavour in

the extent that the cruelty of life provides the author with poetic power for his literature.

The last years of the millennium were marked by the political initiatives against the world of crime. Slowly, the judiciary and penal system start to face their own inefficiency and police groups enter a modernisation process. Violence has perhaps lost visibility in the daily life of the streets in the big cities, but it is still a frightening statistical reality. For the artists of a new generation, violence and the world of crime have permeated the approach to reality as a referential fact present in the work. There is no longer the heroism of the banditism of the 60's, nor is there the existential mystique in face of the speechless character of violence and meaningless death in the 80's. Nowadays, in literature, cinema and art, violence represents a condition of reality, which is imposed on the artist as a challenge strong enough to break the bounds between fact and fiction. Thus, the present situation might perhaps be characterised by the penetration of the documental reality of violence in fiction and the fiction in the glamourised violence of mass media in a dangerous "cocktail". One memorable incident was the kidnapping of the 174 bus on Rua Jardim Botânico (street) in June 2000, when a thief provoked a drama in which he kept hostages at gunpoint for hours within the "sights" of the TV and Press cameras. The tragic outcome was the death of one of the victims, killed by the thief's gun followed by his own death, either due to revenge or police incompetence. Sandro do Nascimento had been a survivor, coming back like a terrible Ghost from the Igreja da Candelária (church) slaughter. Nobody could assure his identity or name. The emblematic scene was when the thief, in a trance caused by drugs and stress, and with the gun aimed at a hostage's head, shouted to the television cameras: "This is not a film! This is not a film!"

\* Professor at Pontifícia Universidade Católica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Malandragem (Brazilian Portuguese: [malɐ̃ˈdɛʁaˈzɐ̃m]) is a Portuguese term for a lifestyle of idleness, fast living and petty crime — traditionally celebrated in samba lyrics, especially those of Noel Rosa and Bezerra da Silva. The exponent of this lifestyle, the malandro (masculine adjective), or "bad boy" (rogue, hustler, rascal, scoundrel, gangster), has become significant to Brazilian national identity as a folk hero or, rather, an anti-hero. It is common in Brazilian literature, Brazilian cinema. The violence has wreaked havoc in the city for most of this year. The PCC were responsible for five days of chaos in June when they killed over 200 people. Imprisoned leaders of the group are managing to organize events from their cells and create mayhem with the city's public transportation system. The current flare-up is reportedly in protest at the proposed transfer of PCC leaders to tougher prisons, where their communication channels would be diluted. They also seem to be settling scores after the police killed dozens of their cadres in a crackdown in May. Sao Paulo's secretary for public