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THREE STUDIES ON BRAZILIAN FILMS OF THE 90s''

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ABSTRACT

The article draws a panorama of Brazilian cinema after the passing of the Audiovisual Law in the mid 90s. From that moment on, filmmakers show a general tendency to redirect their focus towards Brazil, reverting the predominant trend of the preceding years under the Collor government, when many of them were engaged in international co-productions and shooting their films in English. From 1994 onwards, films tend to focus on Brazilian subjects, often the ones explored by Cinema Novo, among them the dry and poor Northeast of Brazil. Political and national themes become fashionable again, although an important difference can be noticed: rather than describing social situations, they prefer to draw the individual profile of their characters. Urban films also have their historical links to the past, often to the underground cinema of the 60s, but here too individual portraits are enhanced over the social context. In most cases, political commitment seems to have been replaced by political correctness.

RESUMO

O artigo analisa a transformação do cinema brasileiro desde a aprovação da Lei do Audiovisual de 1993, que abriu caminho para um reflorescer da produção cinematográfica no Brasil e para uma nova visão da realidade brasileira. Verifica-se o fim da tendência de participar em produções internacionais de língua inglesa que

ocorreu após o encerramento da Embrafilme e, simultaneamente, um retratar do Brasil mais intimista. Embora a nova geração de filmes explore ainda os temas do Cinema Novo, tal como a vida no nordeste ou na favela, predomina o indivíduo sobre o contexto social. O cinema alegórico dos anos da ditadura, que projetava uma visão determinista social marcada pela desigualdade e a pobreza, é superado por um novo realismo onde impera a experiência de personagens individuais. Refletindo o ideal Gramsciano do intelectual orgânico, o Cinema Novo utilizava elementos da 'alta' cultura para interpretar 'corretamente' o sentido da cultura popular. Atualmente, os filmes abandonam uma distorção politicamente motivada da realidade, apresentando uma visão da cultura popular que a autora denomina 'politicamente correta'. A cultura popular e a de elite aparecem em pé de igualdade, e deixaram-se de lado as interpretações ideológicas das vozes dos marginalizados, permitindo aos personagens um contar de sua experiência em palavras próprias. A religião, outrora retratada como o 'ópio das massas', é vista como um aspecto mais da cultura popular e, como tal, merecedora de respeito. De acordo com a autora, estas mudanças refletem o fato do cinema brasileira viver atualmente um momento pós-utópico. Abandonadas as esperanças revolucionárias, opta-se por uma investigação arqueológica que se esforça por reconstruir imagens do indivíduo inserido na sociedade através da paisagem e da cultura. A 'realidade' não se enxerga através de uma visão de crítica social, mas sim pela observação 'pura'. Simultaneamente, o cinema de hoje deixou de refletir o nacionalismo dos anos 60, em parte porque a cultura brasileira vende bem no Brasil, de modo que a produção cultural estrangeira, especialmente norte-americana, já não apresenta uma ameaça para a produção cultural nacional. Em contrapartida, existirá uma nova ameaça para a qual alertam os críticos: o domínio de uma cultura massificada, já não importada mas 'feita em casa'.

**WORKING PAPER: “THREE STUDIES ON BRAZILIAN FILMS OF THE
90s”**

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NEW TRENDS IN BRAZILIAN CINEMA

Lúcia Nagib

The passing of the Audiovisual Law¹ in 1993 not only led to the rebirth of film production in Brazil, but also awakened a new desire to film Brazil itself. This represented a reversal of the tendency observed during the few years of President Collor, when Embrafilme, the public production company, was abruptly shut down and film production in Brazil in the early 90s went down to near zero. As a result, directors turned to English-language international productions and co-productions, like Hector Babenco's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (USA, 1990), Walter Lima Jr.'s *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter* (Brazil, released in 1996), or Walter Salles's *High Art* (Brazil, 1990). Babenco has returned not only to Brazil but to his Argentine roots with his latest, *Coração iluminado/Foolish Heart* (Brazil, 1998); Walter Lima Jr. shot his recent *A ostra e o vento/The Oyster and the Wind* (Brazil, 1997) in Ceará and Paraná; and in Walter Salles's third feature film *Central do Brasil/Central Station* (Brazil, 1998) everything refers emphatically to Brazil, starting with the title. Even a film maker like Bruno Barreto, who has lived for over a decade in the United States, insisted in shooting one of his latest films, *O que é isso, companheiro?/Four Days in September* (Brazil, 1997), in Brazil, and his present work in progress, *Miss Simpson*, based on Sérgio Sant'Anna's novel, is also Brazilian.

However, it would be inadequate to consider this 'nostalgia for Brazil' a return to the nationalism that became typical of Brazilian cinema in the 60s. There is, it is

¹ Federal Law number 8.685, modified by Provisional Measure 1515, allows a tax rebate for those who buy shares in films under production. The limit of the rebate is 3% for legal persons and 5% for private persons of the income tax. The limit of investment for each project is R\$ 3 million. To come under the law, the projects need to be approved by a commission of the Secretary for the Development of the Audiovisual in Brasília.

true, a desire to re-discover the country, and films like *Central Station*, which runs through Brazil from the southeast to the northeast, or even *Bocage* (Djalma Limongi Batista, Brazil, 1998), which pans over the majestic landscapes of seven Brazilian states, are evidence of this desire. But now, instead of the political Brazil which the Cinema Novo filmmakers wanted to reveal, it is an intimate Brazil that they aspire to portray.

A clear example of it (which will be further analyzed below) is Tata Amaral's *Um céu de estrelas/Starry Sky* (Brazil, 1997). Its story is undoubtedly located in Brazil and in São Paulo, and even in a very precise district, Mooca. However, it concentrates obsessively on the individuality of the characters to the detriment of the social context, being limited basically to two protagonists enclosed in the tiny rooms of a poor house.

Even the films about the poor northeast of Brazil – a wide and remarkable current in contemporary Brazilian cinema, engaged in citing, honouring and even copying Glauber Rocha and the Cinema Novo – more often than not emphasize individual characters and fates, putting social issues in second place. *A guerra de Canudos/The War of Canudos* (Brazil, 1997), by Sérgio Rezende, is a good example of this phenomenon. Developing an intermediate aesthetics between the soap opera and the mainstream American cinema, the film takes so long to describe the falling apart of the members of a migrant family, that the intricate war epic breaks into large gaps, becoming at times incomprehensible.

In the case of the northeast films, this tendency to explore individual characters – who, in the old Cinema Novo films, were seen rather as social types – has been giving some interesting results. For example, *Baile perfumado/Perfumed Ball* (Brazil, 1997), by Lírio Ferreira and Paulo Caldas, whose subject is the legendary figure of *cangaceiro*² Lampião, focuses not on his activities as an outlaw, but on his private life. The frightening bandit reveals himself as a man very conscious of his looks, who, in the middle of the *caatinga* (the semi-desert backlands), enjoys perfuming himself, exchanging caresses with his wife and dancing.

A similar example would be *Corisco e Dadá/Corisco and Dadá* (Brazil, 1996), by Rosemberg Cariry, which privileges the love relationship between the *cangaceiro* Corisco and his companion Dadá, rather than his activities in the *cangaço*.

In both cases there is a strong documentary element, apparently aimed to prove the reality of the facts told, which makes these films in a sense even more ‘realistic’ than the Cinema Novo ones, which foregrounded realism. *Perfumed Ball* restores the famous images that survived from the film about Lampião and his gang shot by Lebanese peddler Benjamin Abraão, in which we see, among other things, the famous ‘perfumed balls’.³ Cariry also based his film on documentary researches, interviewing the true Dadá, who was alive until recently, and using the same footage shot by Benjamin Abraão. These and other examples sometimes succeed in giving the impression that contemporary cinema in Brazil seeks to tell the ‘true stories’ which Cinema Novo used to fictionalize.

The end of allegories

Since the 60s, it has become usual to define Third World cinema, especially that of Latin America, as a cinema of allegories. These allegories were supposedly determined, on the one hand, by the overwhelming political situation (for the general misery was more important than the individual problems); and, on the other, by repressive governments, which forbade the denouncing of the reasons of this misery unless it was made in allegorical language. Even in a recent work, Fredric Jameson, appealing to the thesis of ‘national cinemas against Hollywood’, describes the ‘imperfect cinema’ – the proposal put forward by Julio García Espinosa which, for Jameson, summarizes the cinematic aesthetics of the Third World as a whole – as ‘allegorical’ for in it, ‘the form is invoked to express specific attitudes toward the contents, as if to connote its essential aspects.’ (Jameson, 1995, pp 223-224)

Such a conception, which was already reductionist at its time, has become ineffective nowadays, at least as far as Brazilian cinema and its recent developments are concerned. Ismail Xavier, who in his *Allegories of Underdevelopment* described so well the allegorical character of Brazilian films in the period of Cinema Novo and

² *Cangaceiros*: outlaws of the northeastern backlands of Brazil, who became particularly important during the 1930s.

³ Lampião’s self-consciousness about his looks had already been noted in an article by José Humberto Dias, who describes Lampião’s arrival in Juazeiro do Norte thus: “Wearing gilded spectacles, a felt hat, leather *alpercata* shoes, a green scarf around his neck held by a diamond ring, six rings of precious stones on his fingers, a pistol and a 48 cm long dagger, Lampião parades off around town giving interviews and posing for the photographers Pedro Maia and Lauro Cabral.” Cf: ‘Benjamin Abrahão, o

Underground Cinema – movements strongly inspired by the national project – joins together with João Luiz Vieira and Robert Stam to point out the risks of ‘hasty generalizations’ promoted by ideas such as Jameson’s. The authors refer specifically to the famous essay ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, in which Jameson states that all Third World texts are ‘necessarily allegorical [...]’. Even those texts invested with an apparently private or libidinal dynamic [...] necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory; the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.’ Xavier, Vieira and Stam question such conclusions, for ‘it would be problematic to posit any single artistic strategy as uniquely appropriate to the cultural productions of an entity as heterogeneous as the “Third World”.’ (Johnson and Stam, 1995, pp 393-394)

Today more than ever, such theories would have little use in explaining the situation of Brazilian cinema. The interest in the homeland shown by the majority of Brazilian filmmakers has ceased to reflect nationalism as it was conceived in the 60s. If sometimes it betrays a certain pride (in the fascination for landscapes, for example), this is due to prevailing conditions (the market, for instance) rather than to anachronistic patriotic feelings. An important fact is that Brazilian culture can sell well inside Brazil. In several fields, foreign cultures, especially American culture, has ceased to be the threat it represented some decades ago. The most obvious case is that of popular music.

The supplement ‘Mais!’, of the daily newspaper *Folha de S Paulo* (April 12, 1998), published a series of articles on the general subject ‘The Emergent Mass Culture’. One of them, called ‘The Complicity of the Audiences’, written by musician and musicologist Luiz Tatit, makes some amazing assertions, if one compares them with the desperate cries of those who until recently accused American imperialism of massacring Brazilian culture. Tatit notes that the stars of *axé music* (including the *timbalada* and the *olodum*) and the *pagode*⁴ groups sell at least ten times more in Brazil than the greatest hits of international pop music, such as Bon Jovi, Whitney Houston or Michael Jackson. Also Brazilian rock, says Tatit, is at its height in terms of numbers. Then the author asks: ‘What now? What should we do

mascate que filmou *Lampião*’, in: *Cadernos de pesquisa* n 1. Belo Horizonte, CPCB/Embrafilme, 1984, pp 25-38.

with this reversal of expectations? Could it be that the dream has begun and we are not prepared to interpret it?’

Tatit makes an inventory of musicians of different genres and styles, stating that all of them are doing exactly what they want, for their music was not imposed upon them by the market – which had been dominated for a long time by American music, under whose shade they developed in a kind of underground, counter-current movement –, but has been naturally encompassed by the recording companies, which would never despise its potential profits. Tatit is now alarmed by a danger that would be unimaginable some time ago: that Brazil could shut itself in its own music, becoming impoverished culturally. And he concludes: ‘One can already forecast that the exacerbation of the typically Brazilian genre – and in Portuguese – will entail, in the medium term, a new boom in English and American music, if not Italian, Spanish or Hispanic-American music. For all of them are part of Brazilian expression and their long-lasting absence, unlikely though it may seem, is also a threat to our musical culture’.

As recently as 1980, Afredo Bosi still regretted that the ‘economic power of the media’ would ‘abolish, in various times and places, the expressions of popular culture, reducing them to the function of folklore for tourists.’ (Bosi, 1992, p 328) But today what the media broadcasts is nothing but Brazilian popular culture, and if it is often of bad taste, it does not for that lose its Brazilian character and its enormous popularity. Fortunately or unfortunately, mass culture today, in Brazil, is not imposed from outside, but comes, in great part, from inside: local popular culture and mass culture have become almost identical with each other.

Following this general trend, the contemporary Brazilian film maker seems to be on good terms with his or her country, although, as we know, the main problems of social inequality that plagued Brazil in the Cinema Novo days have essentially remained the same. One even breathes a certain freedom, since foreign influence has ceased to be a danger and to appropriate elements, no matter where they come from, has ceased to be a sin. The appropriations carried out in the past by ‘tropicalists’, who used to mix the national and the foreign, the kitsch and the cultivated, do not represent any scandal at all today, but a rather natural and everyday attitude.

⁴ *Timbalada*, *olodum* and *pagode* are recent developments of African-Brazilian music, all of them extremely commercial.

Because nationalism can only develop in the face of an external threat, it has become superfluous in Brazil. One can even believe that cinema will one day experience a similar phenomenon to that which is happening now to music. Indeed, Brazilian film history has gone through several periods of box office peaks in the past, for example in the time of *chanchada* (Brazilian musical comedies of the 40s and 50s) or during the climax of Embrafilme (the public production company). Contrary to what foreign film distributors insist on spreading through the media, there is a natural preference among local audiences for Brazilian cinema, which today depends principally on a better distribution system for its full development. One only needs to look at what is happening with the multiplex cinemas, a very recent phenomenon which is beginning to spread through the outskirts of São Paulo. In these numerous and ultra-modern screening rooms, European cinema is totally absent, whereas, together with the American cinema, Brazilian films such as *Central Station* or Tizuka Yamazaki's *O noviço rebelde* (Brazil, 1997), starring comedian Renato Aragão, are absolute box office hits.

If Brazilian films still occupy a minimal part of the theatres, this is certainly not due to the lack of interest of the audiences, but rather to the hegemony of American distribution chains and the absence of a local policy of screen quota, an issue that has been endlessly discussed – and never solved – since the passing of the Audiovisual Law.

The recurrence of the northeast motif

However, the question remains: why do so many young filmmakers turn to themes once explored by Cinema Novo, which was moved by the need to explain and mould the national identity? For certain, they feel the urge to look again to their country. But this new look is not politically oriented as it was in the past, because, in the real contemporary political context, nothing would sustain such attitude.

Nevertheless, the interesting Northeastern cycle of today constantly evokes, in the form of a nostalgic homage, the nationalistic tone of the past. The filmmakers themselves are the first ones to acknowledge this. Rosemberg Cariry, when he was shooting *Corisco and Dadá*, declared:

‘I decided to make films when I first saw *O dragão da maldade contra o santo guerreiro/Antonio das Mortes* (Brazil, 1969), by Glauber Rocha. He and I have in common the *sertão*⁵, the imagery, the archetypes and the same epic impulse.’⁶

And Walter Salles, the award winning director of *Central Station*, reaffirms tirelessly in his interviews his desire to pay homage to Cinema Novo directors, such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos and his *Vidas secas/Barren Lives* (Brazil, 1963), Glauber Rocha and his *Antonio das Mortes*, both films dealing with the lives of migrants, as he himself did in his film:

‘What I found in this kind of cinema is what Hélio Pellegrino [...] once said, after watching a Glauber Rocha film: “This film grabs the jugular of Brazilianness.” In fact, this is what Cinema Novo did, it created the possibility of a cinema that could be the mirror of Brazilianness.’⁷

How can one conceive a national attitude devoid of nationalism? How can contemporary filmmakers – who come from privileged social classes which are far away from the withered *sertão* they focus on and who are destitute of any political project that could connect them to it – relate to their object? Alfredo Bosi used to say that ‘high culture wants to feel a shiver before the savage’ (1992, p 330), and up to a certain point this attraction to the exotic and the different, as a kind of *chic*, could be ascribed to the new filmmakers. Despite all the changes Brazil has been through, it still continues to be a country of unjust social divisions, with great gulfs between the classes, and this is totally visible in the country’s different cultural layers and the way they relate to one another.

But if there is fascination for the different, there is certainly also solidarity. This differs greatly from the former patronizing attitude, which often resulted in populist cinema or art marked by a high degree of manipulation and distortion. The filmmakers of today, who are much less ambitious than their predecessors of the Cinema Novo (nobody aspires after a revolution or the inauguration of a new art form), seem to be simply observing and recording a people who are usually excluded

⁵ The backlands of Brazil.

⁶ Cf Helena Salem, interview with Rosemberg Cariry, ‘Amor de cangaceiro volta ao cinema nacional’, in: *O Estado de S. Paulo, Caderno 2*, 7.3.96, p D1

from the high cultural media, letting them express themselves in their own way. In the process, the old desire to denounce gives way to a respectful attitude towards popular culture, an attitude that is not political, but *politically correct*. Thus, popular art forms such as ‘cordel’ (northeastern oral literature printed in booklets) or religious chants appear in these films in a more direct manner, without the interpretative intermediary of an ‘organic intellectual’ – following Gramsci’s concept that so much inspired Glauber Rocha and other Cinema Novo directors.

It is easy to recall how the people appeared in the three most important of Glauber Rocha’s films: *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol/Black God, White Devil* (Brazil, 1967), *Terra em transe/Land in Anguish* (Brazil, 1967) and *Antonio das Mortes*. They were almost invariably a mass of zombies, in a sort of permanent trance, given to repetitive and hypnotic religious chants and entrusting their destiny to a messianic leader of dubious intentions. And there was always a middle class intellectual – in the famous definition by Jean-Claude Bernardet, in *Brasil em tempo de cinema* – in charge of interpreting the people’s will. A noted example is the sequence in *Land in Anguish* where poet and journalist Paulo Martins covers the mouth of union leader Jerônimo, while he exclaims: ‘Do you see what the people are? An imbecile, illiterate, politically unaware! Can you imagine Jerônimo ascending to Power?’

Instead of portraying, as Rocha’s films did, a people forever incapable of articulate a coherent speech, films like *Crede-mi* (by Bia Lessa and Dany Roland, Brazil, 1997) and *Central Station* prefer to offer the microphone to the people in order to let them express themselves as they wish. The interpreter of the popular voice does not seem necessary any more. Obviously, the discourse resulting from such expressions has no political content, but it remains nevertheless worthy of credit. At the beginning of *Crede-mi*, for instance, a narrator presents himself in the person of an elder, who begins to narrate the genesis of the world according to the Bible, as if God were a relative of his:

‘And there is a page that says: When God the Father created the heavens, with the planets... Now, on the second day He made the Earth and on the third day, He created all of the little beasts that exist on the face of the Earth’.

⁷ Cf. interview given to Jurandir Freire Costa, ‘Um filme contra o Brasil indiferente’, in: *Folha de S Paulo*, 29.3.98, p 5-7

The narrative develops from his words (even though it does not make reference to them) and, from time to time, the old man reappears and announces: ‘And there is a page that says this,’ and then a new part of the film begins. The old man is toothless, wrinkled, clearly poor, and his language is truncated and grammatically incorrect. But his poverty and probable ignorance or illiteracy do not discredit him as a narrator of the story. On the contrary, the shooting and editing are dedicated to conferring authority and effectiveness on his words.

Central Station opens with startling images, the first of them of an illiterate woman (the former prisoner Socorro Nobre, as the credits later reveal, to whom Walter Salles had previously dedicated a documentary film), who dictates a letter to somebody off-screen. In a frontal close-up, the woman, with her face bathed in tears, sobs her message to her companion who is in prison:

‘Darling, my heart belongs to you. Whatever you have done, I don’t care. I love you. I love you. The years you’ll spend locked inside there, I’ll spend them locked outside here, waiting for you.’

This is followed by other close-ups of people dictating letters, who are clearly lay actors chosen among the local passers-by. And if they give evidence of the unjust situation of a country that has illiterate people, their speech is by no means political in itself. They are simply speaking, using their right of expression without the mediation of an interpretative narrator.

Popular culture and religion

When it comes to popular culture, religion is the element that immediately emerges as the guide to general behaviour. Thus, inevitably, religion or the various popular religions appear in profusion in the new films. However, religion as ‘the opium of the people’ or religious feeling as a direct result of poverty – ideas that had a strong resonance in Rocha’s films, especially in the early period of *Barravento* (Brazil, 1961) – have disappeared from contemporary Brazilian cinema.

In films like *Crede-mi*, *Central Station*, *Perfumed Ball*, *The War of Canudos*, *Corisco and Dadá* and many others, popular religion (which, in Brazil, is marked by a broad syncretism and the worshipping of messianic characters who are often secular)

is a cultural element to be respected as much as any other. It is perhaps worthwhile to recall how Marilena Chauí related popular culture and religion two decades ago, expressing ideas which were also typical of some films of Cinema Novo:

‘To the poor, that cannot enjoy the benefits of science (particularly medicine), or bear the idea that their poverty is rational, the search for religions that give an answer to vital anxieties becomes an urge. Migration and isolation, illnesses and unemployment, poverty and lack of power lead from a traditional popular religion to another, of the masses.’ (1989, p 75)

Chauí concludes, interpreting the appeal to religion as a compensatory mechanism:

‘The adherence to urban popular religion (of the masses) is an effort undertaken by the oppressed to overcome a world felt as hostile and persecuting. Religion provides them with an orientation for their life style, a sense of community, and a knowledge of the world, compensating their misery with a system of “graces”: cure, employment, return home of the unfaithful husband or wife, of the criminal child, of the prostituted daughter, the end of alcoholism. [...] The requests are not made because one “chooses” the religious way, but because, at present, one knows that there is no other way.’ (pp 76-77)

This sort of interpretation, which sees religious feeling exclusively as a substitute for failing social institutions, has a simplistic character that has already been acknowledged by Chauí herself. And it has lost its meaning completely today, at least as far as cinema is concerned. In the recent films, religious feeling is by no means a direct result of economic factors. The poor are not shown as though they are condemned to religion and to the deprivation of any kind of pleasure or happiness. Religion appears instead as a cultural option among others – and in fact a rich and interesting one.

One only needs to look at new documentary films such as *Fé*, by Ricardo Dias, or *Santo forte*, by Eduardo Coutinho, or the documentary shots of the processions in *Crede-mi*, or the religious festival in *Central Station*, or even the mass said by Lampião to his gang: there is perhaps an anthropological or aesthetic interest, and certainly a respectful fascination on the part of the contemporary narrator, but not any kind of judgement.

Popular culture and high culture

In the cinema of the 60s, the combination of popular and high culture echoed both the concept of Gramsci's organic intellectual and the democratic principles of Brazilian modernism, which tried, in a single move, to banish elitism from high culture and to enhance the importance of popular culture. Such attitude permeates Cinema Novo as a whole, as Randal Johnson describes well in the chapter 'Modernism and Cinema Novo', of his *Literature and Cinema* (1982, pp 43-65).

In his films, Glauber Rocha worked tirelessly on the blending of popular and high art in music and literature. Guimarães Rosa and Euclides da Cunha were mixed with *cordel*, Villa-Lobos was juxtaposed with the romance songs of the *sertão*, furnishing the very structure of *Black God, White Devil*. However, both in the literary and the musical blending, it became clear that the high art element was interpretative in relation to the popular, providing it with direction and sense, and that this was done in order to eliminate from the purely popular expression its conformist narrowness and its naiveté, full of 'reactionary' elements. There is even an "intermediate" music – the songs sung by Sérgio Ricardo – which structures the plot of the film and whose verses were composed by Glauber himself based on Northeastern popular songs, to which was added a political meaning.

Once again *Crede-mi* offers us an example of the reverse process: it is the ordinary people of Ceará's backlands who recite the text of the extremely erudite novel of Thomas Mann, *Der Erwählte/The Holy Sinner*. Thus, the illiterate people take hold of a sophisticated text, giving it their own interpretation. In the same sense, in *Perfumed Ball*, a peddler acquires a movie camera with which he intends to film Lampião, 'the king of *cangaço*', and, in the end, it is Lampião himself who uses the machine to shoot the first takes of the film. Here again it is the marginal population which takes hold of the tools of the ruling class. The music track of the film is even more curious: composed by Chico Science and Fred Zero Quatro, it is made of a mixture of northeastern rhythms (especially the *baião*) with American pop, resulting in what they call 'mangue beat'. Lírio Ferreira and Paulo Caldas explain their intention as follows:

"Mangue beat" and cinema have everything to do with each other. "Mangue beat" and "árido movie" have in common the fact that they are regional without being regionalist, that they mix popular culture with pop, and these elements are present both in the image and in the sound track of the film.

I think we shot a pop film. We were always listening to this music while driving to the locations, and this ended up influencing our way of making the film. *Perfumed Ball* has a pop cut, I think.'

When film directors no longer take high culture but mass culture as their own point of reference, the hierarchy in relation to the popular is naturally changed: classical, popular and mass culture start to interact on the same level. Consequently, the fear of 'cultural imperialism' disappears: 'mangue beat', 'árido movie', 'Chico Science', etc are intentional juxtapositions of English and Portuguese words, within that same Northeast once chosen by the nationalists as the cultural storehouse of Brazil, but today – at least in the cinema – internationalized.

Such a vision would perhaps fit in with the critique already addressed by Roberto Schwarz to the 'globalists' of today, who would have us believe that 'the reign of mass communication is liberal or acceptable from an aesthetic point of view' (Schwarz, 1987, p 34). Also because, as Schwarz argues,

'external ideological imposition and cultural expropriation of the people are realities that do not cease to exist just because there is mystification about the formula used by nationalists in this respect. The latter, for good or evil, were connected to real conflicts and gave to them some kind of visibility. Whereas the modernists of the media, even if they have some reason in their criticism, want to make believe in a universalistic world, which simply does not exist.' (p 34).

I do not believe, however, that today's filmmakers are triumphalists or blind to Brazil's social problems. They seem, instead, before taking any side, to be researching, analyzing, observing from a certain distance, testing the reality they find – hence the highly documentary aspect, already noted, of films like *Crede-mi* or *Perfumed Ball*.

Post-utopian moment

This apparent political vacuum, at the same time inextricably linked with a politically correct attitude, occurs at a moment in Brazilian cinema that could be called 'post-utopian'. The utopia of the past is recalled in today's films with reverence and nostalgia, but as something already gone, or even something that has already been realised.

The sea was the main symbol for the revolutionary utopia that inspired Cinema Novo. The prophecy of the *sertão* that turns into a sea, expressed in *Black God, White Devil*, announces the social revolution that will close a historic cycle of Brazil. The film is thus structured in a circular form, opening with long-lasting aerial shots of the *caatinga* and closing with other aerial shots, this time of the sea. Giving a sequel to this ending, *Land in Anguish* begins with even more monumental visions of the ocean, taking place in the fictitious country of Eldorado, that is, the Eden dreamed of by the Portuguese and Spanish discoverers. In *Black God*, the broad images of the *sertão* and the sea correspond to the prophecy, used by Glauber Rocha in a revolutionary tone, that ‘the *sertão* will turn into a sea, and the sea will turn into the *sertão*’. This phrase is proffered by Manoel’s leaders ‘Saint’ Sebastião and then the *cangaceiro* Corisco and, finally, taken up again by the song, written by Glauber Rocha himself together with Sérgio Ricardo, which constitutes the off commentary.

The prophecy is taken from *Os sertões*, where Euclides da Cunha quotes it from small handwritten and anonymous notebooks found in Canudos.⁸ The original actually stated that ‘the *sertão* will turn into a beach and the beach into the *sertão*’. The phrase, in an apocalyptic tone, predicts an inversion of values, in which the Brazilian coast, which is historically wealthy, would become poor and the poor rural areas, that is the *sertão*, would become wealthy. The announcement of the great transformation continues, predicting the appearance of a paradisiacal land, where rivers of milk flow and mountains of corn couscous rise up.

Another of Rocha’s sources (not only for *Black God, White Devil*), *Grande sertão: veredas/The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, by Guimarães Rosa, also works with mythical images of the vastness of the backlands, equivalent to that of the waters. “The *sertão* is everywhere” is the book’s famous universalizing refrain, for which Rocha found a very appropriate image in the opening shots of *Black God*. Minas Gerais, where the story of *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* takes place, has no seacoast, but Rosa plays with the vastness of the São Francisco river (rio São Francisco), from which he takes the name of the main character, Riobaldo, besides comparing the green eyes of Diadorim, another protagonist, with the vastness of the sea: ‘*Morreu o mar, que foi*’ (‘the sea has died and gone’), says the text, at the time of the death of this character (Rosa, 1984, p 562).

The origin of these images of sea and vastness, so frequent in Brazilian literature and art, is perhaps connected with certain indigenous myths that see paradise as a sea or a great river. Rosemberg Cariry states that he used the image of great waters in *Corisco and Dadá* based on this mythology:

‘I open the film to the cosmos. I have evoked the indigenous myths of a world without evil, represented by the sea. The sea as a symbol of paradise, the *sertão* that will become a sea, the myth of the waters of the Tapuyas of the northeast. I work with the *sertão*/sea duality, where the infinite backlands somehow approach the sea. As Guimarães Rosa says, “the sertão has no closure”. The story of Corisco is told close by the sea, in order to balance out the film’s dramatic and visual effect.’⁹

Cariry is not the only one to use the *sertão*/sea imagery, consciously making reference to Rocha and Rosa. It is indeed a curious thing to observe how the filming of these great water expanses is again a constant part of recent Brazilian movies. The ghost of Rocha is far from being exorcised from Brazilian cinematic imagery. *Sertão of Memories* (by José Araújo), although set in the arid backlands, begins and is interlaced with images of great bodies of water. *Perfumed Ball* lingers over grandiose images of the Capibaribe river and ends with a solitary Lampião in aerial shots over the banks of the impressive river.

In *Crede-mi*, the long initial tracking shot over the sea, which in the beginning does not give a clearly defined image, could be seen as a reproduction of the primordial chaos from which God created the world: it is nearly a vision of paradise. From this image of the sea appears the superimposed hand of the old man who narrates the genesis. Throughout the film, as the old man ‘turns the page of the book’, new images of great waters appear, calling up the myth.

Still another film, *Bocage* (by Djalma Limongi Batista), seeks, more than any other, to render a vision of the totality of Brazil, having been shot in seven Brazilian states: Ceará, Amazonas, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Minas Gerais, Paraná and São Paulo (and also in Portugal, a fact that once again shows the wish to approach the origin). The film opens with monumental aerial images of the sea, on which the poet wanders, imprisoned in a floating cage. The poet’s arrival on terra firma is,

⁸ Site of the settlement of Antonio Conselheiro and his followers, where the famous war of Canudos took place in the first years of this century.

⁹ Cf Helena Salem, *op cit*, p D1.

incidentally, a kind of discovery of Brazil that recalls and parodies the one staged by Rocha in *Land in Anguish*, with allegories of the First Mass.

In all these recent films, the aspiration for the future (the revolutionary hope) gives way to an archaeological investigation (the myth of the origin), which tries to dig out historical facts in order to reconstruct the image of an individual character, connected to a landscape and a culture; only after that, in a second stage (they seem to say) would it be possible to think about proposals for change. For now, what is being done seems to be, above all, a careful work of recognition.

Uncritical behaviour

This basic structure of the recent films on the northeast is in general repeated in the urban films. There is a search for something like a political exemption, one limits oneself to the respectful observation of the other, the different, that is, the one coming from another social class. An accomplished example (and, in my opinion, very well done indeed) is the already mentioned *Starry Sky*, by Tata Amaral. The story takes place in a *húis clos*, between two basic characters: Dalva, a hairdresser who has won a trip to Miami, where she intends to take part in a contest; and Vítor, her ex-fiancé, who rebels against the impending departure of the girl. Vítor forces his way into Dalva's house, tries to make up with her, and, failing to achieve it, kills Dalva's mother, before finally being murdered by Dalva herself. This sequence of events develops in an extremely ambiguous way: several times Dalva gives in to Vítor's pressures and even has sex with him right after he murders her own mother.

In the same way that the *sertão* films make explicit references to Cinema Novo, this *paulista* film is reminiscent of São Paulo's underground cinema of the late 60s and early 70s. In them, we find again those degraded, camp, ugly characters, coming from a shabby, mediocre lower middle class, almost totally devoid of beauty and pleasure, who were so common in the films by Sganzerla, Tonacci and others who shot the city of São Paulo in those decades. In *Starry Sky* the basis of the plot is political – the decay of an old labour district, that is now plagued by unemployment –, and emphatically so in Fernando Bonassi's novel that was the origin of the film.

The script went through innumerable versions, made by Amaral herself and others; the final version was the work of Jean-Claude Bernardet and Roberto Moreira.

The changes introduced by the scriptwriters are significant in their elimination of social-political references. In a recent public talk, Tata Amaral stated:

‘From the point of view of the construction of the characters, I have learned, during this process, to work without social or psychological justifications. Jean-Claude insisted a lot on that. We were not looking for a logic in the characters’ attitudes while writing the script. [...] The dialogues don’t explain anything, much to the contrary. Working without psychological or social references makes you face such problems as: “This character is not acting in a logical way.” But human beings are not always logical.’¹⁰

Amaral insists that human incoherence and a person’s reactions cannot be explained in a mechanical way by the social context. ‘In the film, Vítor is not fired, he resigns from his job. It is not the victim of a system who forces himself into his ex-fiancée’s house.’¹¹

This radical attitude leading to the elimination of political and psychological justifications actually first came from Jean-Claude Bernardet, who explains it in an article called ‘Tragedy’:

‘In the novel, Vítor was fired from the factory. In the film and the play (the novel was also adapted for the theater), to avoid the implication of a relation of cause and effect between the fact that he had been fired and his emotional state, Vítor resigns from his job. Thus, his attitude toward Dalva is denied both a psychological reason (the fact that he has lost his job) and a sociological one (unemployment). These characters have lost their references.’¹²

There is no doubt that the characters are Brazilians, and from a very specific region of Brazil. They are, moreover, entirely determined by the cultural, economic and political factors of this region. However, the film tries to show them as human beings, without judging them and without presenting solutions. Again, there is some kind of respect for their kitschy taste, their houses decorated with cheap, bad taste objects; there is something human about all this, which is what matters in the story.

It is easy to conclude that *brega* (kitschy) music is not exactly the taste of the authors of the film, who come from a different social background from the film’s characters. However, a song by Carlos Sukowski, in the style of Roberto Carlos (the

¹⁰ Cf. journal *Estudos de cinema*, year 1, n 1, Educ, p 34.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Cf journal *Cinemas*, n 3, Jan/Feb 1997, p 83.

most popular Brazilian singer and composer), plays at a revealing moment, moving the characters deeply and nearly effecting a reconciliation: from the street comes the sound of the song on the radio of a car, from which a young man calls his girlfriend. Moved probably by the memory of his own past with Dalva, Vítor starts to shake in the rhythm of the music, to sing along; he approaches Dalva from behind and folds his arms around her and, for some seconds, he dances with her. During this scene, there is no reverse shot showing the outside of the house. The confinement of the characters is complete and, if there is a realistic effect, this is due to the patience of the camera in describing individual behaviours without giving any opinion.

Of course, underground cinema, especially that of Sganzerla, had already explored a similar kitsch in São Paulo, in the so-called '*boca do lixo*' ('garbage mouth', or the prostitution zone), with their sentimental singers and songs, their bad taste icons, their uncultivated and mixed religiosity. In Sganzerla's films, however, there were permanently distancing elements – irony, *escracho* (a deeply sarcastic attitude), the self-awareness of decadence, elements, in short, of a critical-political character. In the case of *Starry Sky*, one cannot speak of irony: the way these kitschy icons are treated is serious, no attempt is made to ridicule or condemn them.

We are, therefore, faced with something which is the opposite of the metaphysical camera of Cinema Novo, that used to fly over *sertões* and seas, in search of the reasons for human misery and pointing to the ways of redemption. The camera in *Starry Sky* is a perplexed spectator, enclosed within the four walls of a house, ignorant of the reasons that move the characters and patiently waiting for them to be revealed. Throughout the film there is ambiguity about everything. And when in the end, but only after the final credits, the objective point of view is shown through the eyes of a TV camera, we have a totally different view of the facts. We see Dalva as a passive and fearful victim, when actually she was a decisive agent in the events. In this way, the 'reporter spirit', so typical of the new waves of the 60s all over the world and very much developed in the underground cinema of São Paulo (particularly in *O bandido da luz vermelha/Red Light Bandit*, by Sganzerla, Brazil, 1968), is denied as a truthful vehicle for reality.

Reality now does not emerge from criticism, but from pure observation. At least this is what *Starry Sky* and other recent Brazilian films suggest.

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**BLACKS AND MUSIC IN BRAZILIAN CINEMA - THE CASE OF *ORPHEUS*,
BY CARLOS DIEGUES**

Lúcia Nagib

ABSTRACT

Orpheus, 1999, directed by Carlos Diegues, one of the few contemporary films to talk about blacks, takes the usual but ambivalent option of making a panegyric of the Afro-descendants of Brazil for their musical gifts. An adaptation of Vinicius de Moraes's play *Orfeu da Conceição*, and a kind of remake of the film *Black Orpheus*, by French director Marcel Camus, Diegues's *Orpheus* is not, however, the realm of simple and humble kindness, as it had been portrayed in the French film. On the contrary, it opposes to the Greek idealistic myth the realistic dimension of present days' *favelas* in Rio, where violence is the daily bread.

RESUMO

O texto versa sobre o filme Orfeu, um dos poucos filmes contemporâneos brasileiros que descreve a experiência negra. A autora constata que apesar das boas intenções do realizador, Carlos Diegues, o filme - uma adaptação da peça de Vinicius de Moraes, *Orfeu da Conceição*, e um 'remake' do filme *Orfeu Negro*, do realizador francês Marcel Camus - perpetua a imagem estereotipada do negro como especialmente dotado para as artes físicas (a música no caso concreto), e pouco dado às atividades abstratas ou intelectuais. Diegues esforça-se por permanecer fiel à peça de Moraes e para desmascarar o exotismo do filme de Camus, retratando o negro como um povo livre na sua criatividade espontânea. Na visão de Moraes existe um universo totalmente negro no qual o negro transcende a sua condição e se torna divino. Moraes universaliza a música negra, retirando-a do enquadramento popular, recorrendo ao mito grego de Orfeu e elevando a música negra a um nível onde impera a pureza espiritual que redime os excessos do corpo. Camus, por outro lado, caricaturiza a visão de Moraes, transformando em puro exotismo a presença negra no carnaval do Rio. Camus encerra o negro numa felicidade idealizada que não perturba a ordem social. A autora demonstra como Diegues se esforça por recuperar a dimensão realista da história de Orfeu e, simultaneamente, por reter seu poder mítico e trágico. O Orfeu de Diegues e as outras personagens do filme são retratados portanto de forma realista. Seus diálogos são realistas; são as vozes dos traficantes de droga, da polícia, dos jovens artistas, dos evangelistas, dos compositores de samba e dos muitos personagens da favela que falam. A ação desenrola-se numa cenário de favela especialmente construído onde transparecem todos os detalhes picarescos e sórdidos da vida da favela carioca. No entanto, a utopia de Orfeu, seu sonho que a favela venha a ser um lugar feliz, bem como a sua transcendência mítica, contradizem o 'realismo' do filme de Diegues. Será a morte de Orfeu, justamente no momento em que se anuncia a vitória da sua escola de samba, que assinala o regresso à dura realidade.

Black themes, a frequent political banner in Brazilian cinema from the mid 50s through the end of the 70s, practically disappeared from the film scene with the decline of the Left and the increasing depoliticizing of the arts which began in the 80s.

Orpheus, 1999, directed by Carlos Diegues, one of the few contemporary films to talk about blacks, takes the usual but ambivalent option of making a panegyric of the Afro-descendants of Brazil for their musical gifts. It is well-known that music and sports – in Brazil as well as in other former colonies with a past of slavery – are areas where blacks do not seem to be discriminated against; indeed, they are especially successful. Although this fact is due to the extraordinary talent of African peoples and their descendants for such activities, it means in reality a kind of segregation with a clearly deprecating element, which is constantly pointed out by blacks themselves, for both in music and sport physical gifts are supposedly predominant over intellectual ones. The popular phrase that “samba (or football) cannot be learned at school”, while praising the instinctive vocation of the artist or the sportsman (both, in Brazil, predominantly Afro-descendants), in a way exclude them from activities of an abstract nature.

Carlos Diegues’s good intentions are not being questioned here. He has in his CV a history of engagement in the black cause. He started his career as a filmmaker in the early days of Cinema Novo with *Ganga Zumba* (1964), a film about the rebel slave who became a leader of Quilombo dos Palmares in the XVII century, a period drama, with an exclusively black cast, allegorizing the problematic of the black in contemporary Brazil. *Xica da Silva* (1976) and *Quilombo* (1984) are Diegues’s further incursions into the slavery period, allegorizing situations of oppression and rebellion in the present. Thanks to him, several black actors became famous, such as Zezé Motta, who since *Xica da Silva* has been directing a non-governmental organization for black actors. In *Orpheus*, besides the already traditional presence of Zezé Motta, here in the role of Conceição (the protagonist’s mother), and other noted black actors such as Milton Gonçalves (playing Inácio, Orpheus’s father), Diegues placed his bet on a new talent, young Toni Garrido, the Cidade Negra band leader; of course, it is not an accident that he is a musician.

The director explains that for a long time he had been longing to shoot a new version of the play *Orfeu da Conceição*, by Vinicius de Moraes, which would so to say “correct” the questionable interpretation of the same play made by French director Marcel Camus in his film *Black Orpheus*, which made Brazil known worldwide as a

black musical country, and which won the Golden Palm in Cannes as well as the Oscar for best foreign film in the same year of 1959. Diegues recalls:

“In 1959, I had already made some short films, mixed up in the primal soup of people and ideas that would soon result in the Cinema Novo. At that point, I saw with great disappointment the film *Black Orpheus*, a French production directed by Marcel Camus, based on *Orfeu da Conceição*. Despite his sincere fascination for the human and geographic landscape of Rio de Janeiro, and although he even showed a certain tenderness for what he was shooting, the film gave an exotic and tourist view which betrayed the meaning of the play and completely abandoned its fundamental qualities. I truly felt myself personally insulted, and from then on I began to dream about the film which became our present *Orpheus*”.¹³

In 1980, Diegues went as far as presenting his *Orpheus* project to Vinicius de Moraes himself, who promptly offered him the copyrights and made himself ready to co-write the screenplay with him. At that time, Diegues stated: “I could only [write the script] with him! Because the dramatic situation of *Orpheus* is archaic, the beautiful thing about it is the verse, the idea of *Orpheus*, of the victory of art, the idea of love, and the understanding of how this happens in Brazil”.¹⁴ The poet’s death in July of the same year interrupted the project, which was once more resumed and abandoned by American producers in 1991, and at last carried out, with a thoroughly new conception and Brazilian producers, in 1998.

So the main preoccupation was to be faithful to the spirit of de Moraes’s play. And the spirit of the play, according to de Moraes’s words on the occasion of the premiere of the staging of *Orfeu da Conceição* in Rio de Janeiro, in 1956, was “a homage by its author and manager, and of each of the persons that put it on stage, to the Brazilian blacks, for the enormous amount they have given to Brazil albeit in the most precarious conditions of existence”.¹⁵ At the same time, there was, for Diegues, the urge to escape Camus’s exoticism which, intending to portray the blacks as a free people in their spontaneous creativity, in reality imprisoned them in the music “ghetto”.

¹³ From the press release of *Orpheus*.

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Cf. Vinicius de Moraes. “Radar da batucada”, in: Vinicius de Moraes. *Teatro em versos* (ed. Carlos Augusto Calil). São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, p. 49.

De Moraes and the myth

Even though music of African origin has penetrated and transformed Brazilian music as a whole, it has always been qualified as a popular and uncultivated art form. De Moraes, with his play, wished to universalize black music (and consequently Brazilian music), breaking the limits of its popular realm, connected with carnival orgies and Afro-Brazilian religious trances, to raise it to the status of a sublime instrument of absolute love. Therefore, he resorted to the Orphic myth of the charming power of music.

De Moraes thus recalls the genesis of his idea:

“It was in 1942, at a dinner with my friend, the American writer Waldo Frank, when something I could call the embryo came up that, some months later, would bear the idea of *Orfeu da Conceição*. I was then accompanying the author of *America Hispana* in all his incursions into the favelas, *macumbas*, black clubs and festivals in Rio, and I felt particularly imbued with the spirit of the race. During our talks, the two of us suddenly had the feeling, through some process of chaotic association, that all those celebrations and festivities we had been witnessing had something to do with Greece; as though the black, the Carioca black in that case, were a Greek in simple clothes – a Greek still destitute of culture and of the Apollonian worshipping of beauty, but not less marked by the Dionysian feeling of life”.¹⁶

This attitude, according to Robert Stam, follows “the tradition of European primitivism and of the Negritude movement, which posited Greece as reason and Africa as emotion”. For him, “de Moraes saw Afro-Brazilian performances as bringing a Dionysian dimension to an Apollonian theme”.¹⁷

The matching with the Greek myth would therefore be a way of raising black music to a superior stage, at which the excesses of the body would be redeemed by spiritual purity. For this purpose, it was fundamental that Orpheus should be good,

¹⁶ Idem, p. 47.

¹⁷ Cf. Robert Stam. *Tropical Multiculturalism - A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema & Culture*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 168.

“an almost divine being, for the excellence of his personal and artistic quality”.¹⁸ In de Moraes’s play the characters explicitly transcend their social determinations. Through love and music, the black inhabitants of a favela overcome poverty and isolation caused mainly by their color. The intention was to transcend reality through the universality of the myth. For de Moraes, it was important that his drama did not turn “Orpheus’s myth into a realistic tragedy”.¹⁹ He thus explained it:

“All I did was to put in the hands of a favela hero, instead of the Hellenic lyre, the Brazilian guitar, and I subjected him to the sublime and tragic fate of the Greek of the same name – a fate that led him, through total integration in the music, to the knowledge of love in its highest and most beautiful sense and, through love, to the uncontrollable forces of passion, to the eventual destruction of harmony in itself and in the world around and, finally, to his own death”.²⁰

The interest in locating the drama in the carnival period was due precisely to the fact that this was the moment when “the blacks free themselves from their poverty in the luxury of their costumes bought with the savings of a year”.²¹

Another of de Moraes’s anti-realistic demands, likewise aimed to universalize the drama, related to the exclusively black cast. He justified it thus: “It seems to be a betrayal of the so-to-say Hellenic spirit to cast racially mixed actors”.²²

If de Moraes’s purism was, on the one hand, an unprecedented praise of Afro-descendants in Brazilian theatre, on the other, with its refusal of realism, it presented the obvious risk of favouring sweetened interpretations such as Marcel Camus’s. Profiting from the absence, in the original drama, of a contextualization, Camus’s film reduced the play to its caricature, turning the black presence in Rio de Janeiro into pure exoticism: a population who are poor but happy, sensual but naive, who do not seem to worry about their social exclusion and dance the samba all day long, even when they have to climb up the hill with a water tin on their heads. Stam notes with humour that the film

¹⁸ Cf. “Radar da batucada”, op. cit. p. 48.

¹⁹ Cf. José Castello. *Vinicius de Moraes - O poeta da paixão*. São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, p. 182.

²⁰ Cf. “Radar da batucada”, op. cit., p. 48.

²¹ Idem.

²² Idem, p. 49.

“offers a highly idealized view of life in the favelas: spacious, cheerfully painted, rustic cabins, complete with colored curtains, metal bed, and menagerie, offering the best views in Rio. Indeed, the film’s treatment of the favelas at times resembles a real-estate ad; anyone would love to live there”.²³

In reality, although mistakenly taken as one of the starters of the French *nouvelle vague*, Camus’s film is conservative, both in its narrative form and in the suggestion that blacks feel themselves adapted and happy in the favela hills, which are the ideal place for their way of life and the creation of their samba. There are, thus, two different points of view: de Moraes’s one, creating an entirely black universe where the Afro-descendant transcends his condition and equals the gods; and another that encloses the blacks inside an idealized happiness, which can cause no damage to the social order. No wonder that Vinicius rejected Camus’s film and refused to sign the co-authorship of the script.

Trying to be faithful to de Moraes, but still using some cinematic solutions of Camus’s, Diegues found his own way of connecting classic Greece and Afro-descendants in contemporary Brazil.

The realistic dimension

As Stam has noted, de Moraes’s play had appeared at a point when it was fashionable to update Greek myths, often the same Orpheus. Jean Cocteau had been shooting his Orphic trilogy over a period of three decades: *Le sang d’un poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1949), and *Le testament d’Orphée* (1959). *Black Orpheus*, the title of Camus’s film, is what Jean-Paul Sartre had called his famous foreword to the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de la langue française*, by Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor, at the end of the 40s.

These European influences in the poet’s thoughts have not been always well received inside the Brazilian black community itself. Abdias Nascimento, the creator of the Black Experimental Theatre and one of the actors in the first staging of de Moraes’s play, has sharply criticised this:

²³ Cf. Stam, op. cit. p. 174.

“Blackfaced white actors, Black Christ, Black Orpheus: in the last analysis they all conspire in the historical rape of my people. African religious culture is rich and alive in our religious communities all over Brazil. We have no need to invoke Greece or the Bible in order to raise it to the status of mythology. On the other hand, Greece and Europe owe to Africa a great deal of what they call ‘Western Civilization’.”²⁴

Obviously, a contemporary adaptation of de Moraes’s play could not ignore such objections, nor literally translate its pioneering purism. Thus, the approach of Diegues and his various co-writers of the script, has been to attempt to recover the realistic dimension of the story at the same time without losing its mythic and tragic one.

In fact, *Orpheus* associates itself with the strongest realistic tradition. In one of its initial sequences, there are aerial shots of a dazzling Rio de Janeiro, followed by others of the scary accumulation of cabins in a huge favela, stuck in the heart of the city, a sequence that immediately reveals the contrast between social classes. This is a clear homage to the famous opening of *Rio, 40 Degrees* (1956), in which incidentally the city is introduced as “the name before the title”, that is, the leading actor: “The city of São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro in... *Rio, 40 Degrees*”.

The citation of Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s film, in its turn, sends us back to the neo-realistic cinema, main influence for dos Santos at the time, and to Rossellini’s documentary style films in which cities appear as characters – Rome in *Rome, Open City* and Berlin in *Germany, Year Zero* –, making the social context a decisive factor in human behaviour. The favela in the new *Orpheus*, adapted to contemporary conditions and music, is shown in the sequence just mentioned in short cut shots, as if in video-clip rhythm, following the rap beat – a black music style (often of protest) which is mixed throughout the film with the samba-enredo, composed by Caetano Veloso, and with the bossa nova songs by Tom Jobim and Luís Bonfá (words by Vinicius de Moraes) originally made for de Moraes’s play and Camus’s film.

Another realistic element is the variety of details referring to the history of blacks in relation to carnival and the favela. A policeman who invades the favela meets composer Orpheus and sings for him the refrain of the samba-enredo composed by Orpheus (in reality, Caetano Veloso) for that year’s carnival: “When Hilário left/

Pedra do Sal/ The Golden King appeared/ It is carnival” (“Quando Hilário saiu/ Lá da Pedra do Sal/ Rei de Ouro surgiu/ É carnaval”). This refrain – in a song commissioned to Veloso by Diegues – points to the Bahia origin of carioca carnival.

Hilário Jovino Ferreira had been one of the thousands of freed Africans and Afro-descendants from Bahia who migrated to Rio de Janeiro during the XIX century in search of work. They concentrated initially in a place called “Pedra do Sal” (salt stone), in the Saúde district, near the harbour, where they were hosted by their countrymen until they could settle down by themselves. On the basis of the catholic and nagô (yoruba) traditions from Bahia, Hilário founded the “ranchos”, a kind of procession which would give origin to the typical “blocos” of Rio carnival.

Roberto Moura explains that the “rancho” was initially proposed as a Christmas party, characterized by the dramatic procession of the Epiphany, but the Dionysian way with which blacks had embraced catholic feasts “caused protests and prohibitions, as a result of which the main black feasts were shifted to the uninhibited carnival time and became clearly profane”.²⁵ In addition, Moura notes the political importance of the “ranchos”:

“The ‘ranchos’, a religious but playful and democratic retinue of musicians and dancers, already existing in Bahia, would struggle carnivalistically to impose the presence of blacks and their expressive and organizational system in the streets of the Republic’s capital”.²⁶

Veloso’s lyrics about Hilário also has a political character. It refers to the Bahia (and African) origins of carnival, shaped by a population concentrated on the edge of the city, that would later on start the first favelas on the hills of Rio. One of these first favela hills, incidentally, was the “Morro da Conceição”, which inspired the title *Orfeu da Conceição* of de Moraes’s play.

This historical retrospective, insistently repeated in Veloso’s refrain, places the black simultaneously in the origins of the samba, the carnival and the favela hills. More than the celebration of the birth of samba and carioca carnival, it is also the

²⁴ Apud Stam, idem, p. 169.

²⁵ Idem.

²⁶ Idem, p. 89.

recollection of slavery, the former slaves' migration from Bahia for lack of work, and their exclusion in the new city.

The fact that this refrain is sung for the first time in the film by a policeman, who, with his colleagues, violently invades the hill in search of drug dealers, points to the situation, a long way from paradise, in which blacks live nowadays with their music. It is a carnival day, the press goes up the hill to interview Orpheus – the official composer of samba school Unidos da Carioca – and then fireworks start to go off. Is it a celebration? No, just a warning to the drug dealers that the police are approaching. In fact, soon the noise of the fireworks is replaced by that of gunshots, mixing the joy of carnival with the daily tragedy of the favelas, with their children dying from stray bullets and corrupt policemen dealing with drug gangs.

Metacinema is also used as an alibi for another realistic insert. It is the short clip of a famous scene from an Atlântida chanchada, *Carnaval Atlântida* (1952), in which Grande Otelo, dressed as a Greek, dances carnival in a ball with Helen of Troy. The scene is shown on a TV screen, in a room where Eurydice is trying her carnival costume. This citation allows a short digression about the entry of blacks into Brazilian cinema.

Cinema started early in Brazil. The first screening of “animated views” took place on the 8th of July, 1896, in Rio de Janeiro, only six months after the Lumière brothers organized the first film session in the world in Lyon. Such technological precocity contrasted, however, with a backward society, which had freed its slaves only eight years earlier.

While Italian immigrants were preparing to take their first motion shots, which would give birth to film production in Brazil, newly freed black people crowded to the few paid fields of work accessible to them. Besides jobs in harbours, workshops, factories and shops, they found an especially fertile ground in the popular theatres, circuses and cabarets.

In this way the path that would later give the former slaves access to cinema gradually took shape: the performing arts. From this time up to the present, circus comedies, music, and dance represent the area where blacks find shelter, even though, in the past, they were often turned into folklore objects as a result and their actions limited by discrimination and prohibitions. It may be useful to remember that the rare blacks that ever had the chance of directing a film in Brazil have all started as actors (some of them coming straight from music). This is the case with Antônio Pitanga,

Zózimo Bulbul, Waldyr Onofre and even Haroldo Costa, who started as a musician and was the first to play de Moraes's Orpheus on the stage. (A work supposedly more intellectualized and more powerful than the actor's one, film direction remains an inaccessible activity for blacks in Brazil. At present, to my knowledge, there is not a single black person directing a film in the country.)

The 30s opened a new perspective to the black actor with the coming of sound in cinema. Afro-Brazilian music – the samba and the carnival rhythms – were already dominating ingredients on the radio, and in musical theatres and casino shows. The combination of the musical experience in these three fields is at the origin of the small film producing companies that appeared in Rio in the mid 30s. Cinédia, Brasil Vita Filmes and Waldow Film are forerunners of Atlântida, which, through the 40s and 50s, would produce the most popular genre ever made in Brazilian cinema: the chanchada.

Musical comedies that parodied Hollywood cinema, profiting from successful radio and carnival songs and employing musical theatre actors, the chanchadas gave fame to the comic pair Grande Otelo and Oscarito. Actually, Grande Otelo had already been a big name as an actor all over Brazil. Short, with thick lips and protruding eyes, he had all the characteristics to become the caricature of the African type. But he overcame all obstacles thanks to his multiple and extraordinary talent as an actor, mimic, singer, composer and dancer, gifts shown since his early childhood.

One must note that the comic Grande Otelo from the chanchada cited in *Orpheus* plays also the talented composer of the favela hills from *Rio, Northern Zone* (1957) – another film that Diegues pays homage to –, an Orphic character whose songs are stolen and signed by whites from the noble districts of Rio.

This historical retrospective, suggested by Caetano Veloso's song and the quotations of the seminal films by Nelson Pereira dos Santos and of the chanchada, reconstructs the lineage of pain and struggle of the present Orpheus through his ancestors. His current happiness costs a high price and is thus very different from the permanent idyllic state of Camus's characters.

However, despite his humble origin, and never forgetting the history of his people in his songs, the new Orpheus is a successful black. He is a wealthy composer; instead of having his songs stolen as Grande Otelo's character once did, his name is widely recognized and respected by all sections of society. Far from being an illiterate, he has an almost intellectual face, wearing spectacles while working on his

portable computer, and has a permanently ringing mobile phone. He is furthermore a black who lives on equal terms with the whites in the favela. Incidentally, the introduction of white characters – something that goes against de Moraes’s original idea – once more confirms Diegues’s realistic intention, for he breaks the idealistic uniformity of the Hellenic world.

The other characters of the new *Orpheus* are in general equally realistic, for they are part of the portrait of a contemporary carioca favela hill. They express themselves realistically, this time following de Moraes advice in this sense: “because it is a play where the popular slang plays a very important role, and because popular language is extremely changeable, every time the play is staged it should be adapted to the new conditions”.²⁷

Thanks to the collaboration in the script of Paulo Lins – a black writer, the author of the book *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*, an amazing portrait of a favela in Rio – the dialogs are made with a detailed realism, employing the slang of drug dealers, policemen, young artists, evangelists, samba composers and all the varied favela population.

Far from being the realm of simple and humble kindness, as it had been portrayed in *Rio, 40 Degrees*, *Rio, Northern Zone*, or even *Black Orpheus*, the favela population is now complex. Violence is its daily bread: a young man is exterminated just for fun, by the drug gang, just because he had sex with his adolescent girl friend. Gossip and jealousy are a constant note among the women. Prejudice is abundant. “I hate paraíba”, says sergeant Pacheco, a phrase that comes straight from *Cidade de Deus*, and refers not only to his own prejudices, but to the competition between blacks and northeasterners in the favelas.

According to Diegues, the favela in *Orpheus* corresponds to the third phase of its historic development: not the romantic and naive favela, peopled by the good characters of *Black Orpheus* and *Rio, 40 Degrees*, not the infernal favela of the urban expansion and the chaotic migrations, but “the favela of the struggle for affirmation, for the pride of being a favela person, even if one is dealing daily with adversity”.²⁸

The mythic dimension

²⁷ Cf. “Radar da batucada”, op. cit. p. 54.

Orpheus's plot develops in a specially built favela, so that none of the sordid or picturesque details which exist in reality were forgotten. There are the labyrinthine stairs, the filthy trash deposits, and also the pirate radio station with its loud-speakers spread everywhere, reporting the favela news in the flexible and creative local language in rap/funk rhythm. There are the scruffy bars where samba players get together (and the film does not fail to pay homage to such celebrities as Nelson Sargento) and the small evangelist temples for those who wish to flee alcohol and dissolution in the pleasures of music.

In this scenery, intended to be entirely faithful to reality, the two main characters, Orpheus and Eurydice, end up totally fictitious. From the very beginning the beautiful erotic opening scene, in which Orpheus makes love to his girlfriend Mira (two dazzling black actors, Toni Garrido and Isabel Filardis), shows the pleasures of sex only to exclude them from the rest of the story. Orpheus is actually tired of Mira and wants to get rid of her. On the other hand, his only night of sex with the virgin Eurydice later in the film is not shown, which indicates another quality of love: a sublime, spiritual love.

In fact, Orpheus and Eurydice do not belong to that universe. Eurydice arrives in Rio by plane, like an angel fallen to Earth. In Diegues's politically correct film, she is not black or white, but an Indian coming from the distant Acre (although actress Patrícia França is the typical African and Portuguese mixed type), an absurd, almost supernatural being in the favela.

During the film it becomes clear too that Orpheus has ceased to belong to the reality of the favela. Even the policemen ask him why he still lives there since he is so successful. Orpheus, the unrealistic, utopian character, destined to a tragic ending, believes that the favela can become a good place. Believing that his own good intentions can win over the social realities, he naively tries to force Lucinho, the top drug dealer, to leave the favela with his gang. He loses, of course. Eurydice is killed by Lucinho – who nurtures a kind of homosexual love for Orpheus – and Orpheus is killed by his ex-lovers, after he has recovered the Eurydice's body from the favela precipice, the real "hell", packed with corpses, lumber and all sorts of trash.

"A felicidade do pobre parece/ a grande ilusão do carnaval" ("The happiness of the poor is like the great illusion of carnival"): this remains the truth of the favela,

²⁸ From the press release of *Orpheus*.

as stated in the famous verses of the song “A Felicidade” (“Happiness”) by Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, in the film, childishly performed by Maria Luiza Jobim, Jobim’s adolescent daughter.

Orpheus’s utopia, his mythic transcendence, ends up contaminating the whole realistic construction of the film. Rio’s dazzling landscapes, the majestic carnival parade led by Joãosinho Trinta (who, coincidentally, in 1998, presented an allegory of the “Orpheus” theme with his school, the Viradouro from Niterói), even the Apollonian beauty of young Garrido, point to a black paradise where only love can exist.

However, Orpheus’s death at the very moment when the victory of his samba school is announced, throws the favela people back to reality. The boy Maicol (an adopted name in honour of Michael Jackson) and Inácio (Orpheus’s father, a former samba player and current evangelist), the former with rhythmic cries of desperation, the latter with an untuned whistle, make up a new song, showing sadness as the real origin of the favela music. Once more, de Moraes’s verses become valid: “Tristeza não tem fim/ felicidade sim” (“Sadness has no end/ but happiness does”).

PATHS TO UTOPIA – AN ANALYSIS OF *THE FIRST DAY*

Lúcia Nagib

ABSTRACT

The film *The First Day* denies the suggestion of the inaugural myth implied in its title. Like many other recent Brazilian films, instead of starting a new wave, it chooses to give a historical sequel to issues traditionally explored in Brazilian cinema, at the same time paying homage to films and directors of the past. However, its revisiting of old subjects, such as the *favela* (shanty town), sheds a new light at them, through which class alliances and conflicts, revolutionary utopias and popular religion are re-interpreted and updated. Glauber Rocha's prophecy that "the *sertão* (backlands) will become a sea" is resuscitated and translated for the turn of the millennium, when a poor north-eastern migrant reaches the wealthy seashore. But, betrayed by a corrupt society, he dies on the beach, within sight of the Promised Land.

RESUMO

O texto analisa a ambigüidade da noção de novos começos e da idéia de utopia sugeridos pelo título do filme *O Primeiro Dia* (1998), realizado por Walter Salles e Daniela Thomas, baseado no romance de Zuenir Ventura, *Cidade partida*. Para a autora, o filme não constitui um novo começo cinematográfico, nem a sua história promete uma verdadeira utopia. Por um lado, tal como muitos outros filmes recentes, explora temas tradicionalmente analisados pelo cinema brasileiro. Celebra portanto os filmes e os realizadores do passado: a promessa de um novo cinema dá lugar a uma reverência pelo cinema de outrora. Por outro lado, a idéia de utopia é negada pelos acontecimentos e os personagens do filme. O Primeiro Dia foi encomendado pela cadeia de televisão francesa ARTE e foi pensado como uma reflexão sobre o novo milênio. No entanto, o filme fala de novos começos apenas para negá-los ou ironizá-los. Três das quatro personagens principais morrem com violência e a quarta escapa o suicídio por um triz. Não fazem já sentido a promessa de riqueza adquirida numa cidade costeira paradisíaca e as esperanças revolucionárias dos oprimidos por um mundo melhor: a utopia é vazia. No entanto, para a autora, a negação da utopia e de novos começos é incompleta ou ambígua. Por um lado, embora recorra ao velho mito da favela, o filme oferece uma nova perspectiva sobre o tema; a favela não é retratada como um lugar de opressão e ostracismo mas como um local de onde emana um poder alternativo, com a suas próprias regras, o seu próprio ethos. Como tal, *O Primeiro Dia* pertence à 'Família' de novos filmes sobre a favela que celebram o 'orgulho de ser morador de favela'. Por outro lado, tal como em muitos outros filmes recentes que versam sobre a temática do nordeste, está presente o mar, com toda a sua carga utópica. Assim, ficam sem resposta as perguntas sobre a possibilidade da criação de novas utopias e do início de verdadeiros novos começos.

The film *The First Day* (1998, directed by Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas) already contains in its title the suggestion of the inaugural myth which distinguishes Brazilian history as much as Brazilian cinema. Brazil is said to have been “discovered” 500 years ago, although it had been inhabited for thousands of years before that. And Brazilian cinema undergoes periodical births and rebirths and, after brief peaks, is afflicted by sudden deaths and prolonged silences. At each new awakening, the films seem to be the “first” ones, disconnected from the past and history.

The First Day was commissioned by the French television ARTE to be a reflection on another beginning, the coming of the new millennium. However, the film does not seem to believe in the proposal lying at its own origin, for it speaks of beginnings only to deny or ironise them. Of its four main characters, three die in some violent way at the very beginning of the new millennium and the fourth escapes suicide by a hairsbreadth. Even the firework apotheosis at the zero hour of the millennium is mixed with the terror of gunshots.

The film story also denies its title and rejects the inaugural myth by setting against the widespread idea of Brazil as “the land of the future” a land of the past. The *favela* (shanty town) and its problems, a favourite theme of Brazilian cinema since Humberto Mauro’s *Favela dos meus amores* (1935), is once again the subject here, appearing as the privileged repository of Brazilian society’s contradictions. Although *The First Day* is one of the best achievements of “new” Brazilian cinema – said to have been “reborn” in the mid 90s, after so many premature deaths – instead of inaugurating something, it is aimed at making a synthesis of the historical – and cinematic – processes of Brazil, proposing a sequel or closure to them.

In this way, the promise of a new cinema gives place to a reverence for the cinema of the past. This gesture, incidentally, is a constant in the Brazilian cinema of the 90s, which never hesitates to pay homage to classics and veterans. As soon as the results of the Audiovisual Law – the key factor in the recent cinematic “rebirth” – started to appear in the mid 90s, there came a torrent of films about the northeastern *sertão* (backlands) and the *cangaço* (the activity of the outlaws in the *sertão*), a combination which constitutes the most recurrent genre in Brazilian cinema at all times. A few examples of it: *Corisco and Dadá* (1996), by Rosemberg Cariry, that

explicitly quotes Glauber Rocha and one of the latter's main literary sources, Guimarães Rosa; *Perfumed Ball* (1997), by Lírio Ferreira and Paulo Caldas, who resort to the film images of *cangaceiro* Lampião and his band made by peddler Benjamin Abraão in the 30s; *O cangaceiro* (1997), by Aníbal Massaíni Neto, which is a remake of Lima Barreto's classic of the same name; *The War of Canudos* (1997), by Sérgio Rezende; *Sertão of the Memories*, by José Araújo; *Crede-mi* (1997), by Bia Lessa and Dany Roland; and the famous *Central Station* (1998), Walter Salles's incursion into the Northeast.

The fact that Salles and Thomas now turn their attention to the *favela* simply confirms their adherence to Brazilian cinema's traditional concerns. It is common knowledge that *favela* and *sertão* are two sides of the same coin and, if they had been appearing in Brazilian films since the early times, they became the obsessive subjects that launched social cinema in the 50s, with Nelson Pereira dos Santos (*Rio 40 Degrees*, 1955, and *Rio Northern Zone*, 1957), and the Cinema Novo (in three fundamental films of 1963-64: Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil*, Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Barren Lives*, and Ruy Guerra's *The Guns*).

Free from the obligation to be novel, present day filmmakers take a delight in re-exploring these themes, not only for their social and political relevance, but also for their obvious visual and cinematic potential. The *sertão*'s blinding light and large expanses of sun cracked earth had already composed the aesthetics of early Cinema Novo; in the recent films, they sometimes result in landscapes of touristy appeal, such as the views of the *sertão* bathed in the smooth red light of the sunset in *Corisco and Dadá*. And the privileged location of the *favelas* in the Rio hills offers the most overwhelmingly pictorial views of the city, which is the reason why Nelson Pereira dos Santos used the city, with its tense proximity between rich and poor districts, as the "main character" in *Rio 40 Degrees*; Santos's images, incidentally, would be quoted and re-elaborated in several later films, from Marcel Camus's *Black Orpheus* (1959) to Carlos Diegues's *Orpheus* (1999), and even in *The First Day*.

In a recent article, Ivana Bentes, noticing the recurrence of these themes in contemporary Brazilian cinema, states that, together, *favela* and *sertão* build the "other side of positivist and modern Brazil".²⁹ Indeed, the *favela* is (or used to be until recently) as divorced from the "asphalt" or the city as it is identified with the

problems of the Northeast – those relating to both the victims of drought and the legacy of slavery. Alba Zaluar quotes João do Rio, who says that in a *favela*, he felt himself “in the countryside, in the *sertão*, far from the city”.³⁰ This deep chasm between rich (from the “city”) and poor (from the hills), although concerning neighbouring populations, can be observed even today. It gave origin to Zuenir Ventura’s book *Cidade partida (Divided City)*, which lies at the basis of *The First Day*.

It is known that the hills of Rio, even though they were inhabited from the end of the 19th century, became *favelas* thanks to the soldiers who returned from the expeditions to Canudos in the first years of the 20th century. As Jane Souto de Oliveira and Maria Hortense Carcier explain,

“the word ‘favela’ evokes in its origins the place in the Bahia *sertão* where Antônio Conselheiro’s followers concentrated, and its use became popular in Rio from the occupation of Providência hill by soldiers returning from the Canudos campaign. They were the ones who gave the name Favela to that hill”.³¹

The word comes from the Favela range, in Bahia, the birth place of many of the “cabrochas” (black mixed girls) who came to Rio with the soldiers. From the beginning of the 20th century on, the hills were also subjected to increasing occupation by the former slaves who had migrated from Bahia and then been expelled from their homes in the harbour districts of Rio. More recently, the *favela* has been also occupied by north-eastern migrants fleeing the drought. These started to fight with the black population for the scarce remaining space.

In short, the Brazilian Northeast is concentrated in the Rio hills, represented both by descendants of African slaves and poor Portuguese and Indians. In a certain sense, it could be said that in the *favela* the remnants of Palmares and Canudos, that is, the heirs of the greatest rebellions of slaves and north-eastern peasants in the country, have survived and multiplied.

²⁹ Cf. Ivana Bentes. “The *Sertão* and the *Favela* in Contemporary Brazilian Film”. In: João Luiz Vieira (org.). *Cinema Novo and Beyond*. Nova York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1999, p. 113

³⁰ Cf. Alba Zaluar. “Introdução”. In: Alba Zaluar e Marcos Alvito (eds.). *Um século de favela*. Rio de Janeiro, Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1998, p. 17

³¹ Cf. Jane Souto de Oliveira e Maria Hortense Marcier, “A palavra é: favela”. In: Zaluar e Alvito, *op. cit.*, p. 64

Therefore, it was only natural that Brazilian cinema, while searching in the 50s and 60s for the so called “Brazilian reality”, would turn to the *sertão* and the *favela*. In 1965, these themes had been already so thoroughly explored, that Gustavo Dahl suggested its exhaustion and the progressive move to an “urban” cinema (significantly, he does not include the *favela* in this latter category):

“As regards the old opposition between urban and rural cinema, it is clear to me that, when Cinema Novo started off with its first films, [...] it evolved in the area where the problems were most radically presented and where, therefore, it could evolve more swiftly and efficiently. This is why it concentrated on the Northeast and the favela. Obviously, once these problems had been proposed, they were rapidly exhausted, thanks to their typical simplicity. Thus, there is a need to open up the range of problems, to extend the same approach established for the Northeast and the *favela* to other regions, other environments, other social zones.”³²

The fact that such subjects, after more than 30 years, have not yet died and today they even experience a revival, points out to unsatisfied social and cinematic hopes, unfulfilled promises, miscarried utopias.

Favela fashion

This reassessment of past themes certainly does not mean a nostalgia or a lack of interest in the present. This has been recently shown by the example of *Perfumed Ball*, from Pernambuco, which gave a pop treatment to the images and sounds of the *sertão*, updating it in the light of a globalised world in which the *cangaço*, far from its traditional traits of brutality, ugliness and rudeness, is provided with a glamour of creativity concerning the costumes, the language, the dance and the gestures. If Lampião kills, he also spreads his perfume through the thorns of the *caatinga*.

Incidentally, the handsome actor Luís Carlos Vansconcelos, the Lampião of *Perfumed Ball*, has been exported as a revelation of male beauty straight to the *favela* of *The First Day*, which, thanks to his presence, acquires an attractive look, becoming almost fashionable. His seductive looks charm the no less attractive female middle

³² Cf. “1965 – Gustavo Dahl, Carlos Diegues, David Neves, Paulo César Saraceni”. In: Alex Viany, *O processo do Cinema Novo*. Rio de Janeiro, Aeroplano, 1999, p. 120

class character, played by Fernanda Torres, who, for one night, leaves aside her fears of outlaws and gives herself to the most dangerous of them.

The truth is that the antiquity of the theme does not imply an old fashioned approach. The interesting aspect of the recent films is that, although they do not believe in revolutions, innovations or novelties, they do succeed in shedding a contemporary light at their themes, an attitude that includes the historical perspective and an acute awareness of the specific conditions of the present.

The First Day belongs to a “family” of contemporary *favela* films, ranging from Murilo Salles’s *How Angels Are Born* (1996) through Eduardo Coutinho’s *Santo forte* (1999). Its closest relation is certainly Cacá Diegues’s *Orpheus* (1999), which is not only a homage to films of the past (*Rio 40 Degrees*, *Rio Northern Zone*), but also a *remake* of Camus’s *Black Orpheus* (1959). In his film, Diegues tries both to correct the French director’s sweetened imagery and to describe the *favela*’s present situation, updating its history. According to Sérgio Augusto, Diegues’s idea is that

“the *favela* is currently going through its third historical stage. Up to the 50s, the form through which the hills of Rio were represented in the sambas, on the stage and on the screen was, at its best, lyrical. This happened in *Favela dos meus amores*, directed by Humberto Mauro in 1935, in *Tudo azul* (of Moacir Fenelon, 1951), in *Orfeu da Conceição*, *Rio 40 Degrees* and *Black Orpheus*. In the past, they used to publicise an idea of purity and even privilege connected with the *favela*, for *those who live in the hills are close to heaven*, as it is proclaimed in a samba of Herivelto Martins; today this is inadmissible, since the *favelas* have long ceased to be a scarcely inhabited, peaceful and bucolic place. After they became overpopulated due to urban growth and chaotic migrations, and their doors were opened to violence and crime, another stage started which Diegues named ‘the complaining phase’; that is, people started to think that living on the hills was like being close to hell. In the 90s, a new stage began, that of the fight for affirmation and for the pride of being a *favela* inhabitant, even if one has to live day by day with its adversities. *Orpheus* is intended as a faithful portrait of this stage”.³³

This understanding of the contemporary *favela*, which includes the “pride of being a *favela* inhabitant”, is also present in *The First Day* (not least because both

³³ Cf. *Press book of Orpheus*, p. 22-23

films have João Emanuel Carneiro as one of their scriptwriters). In both films the intention of separating the *favela* from the idea of an oppressed and ostracised place, submissive to the ruling powers, becomes apparent, for such an image would hardly correspond to the *favela*'s current status. Instead, they want to enhance its features as an alternative entity of power. In these films, the hill looks like a trenched battlefield, and its inhabitants are like a heavily armed army, with their all-mighty commanders, their own rules and their own structured ethos.

Walter Salles had been working on such issues for sometime before he made *The First Day*. He had been assistant-director to his brother João Moreira Salles for the documentary *Notícias de uma guerra particular (News of a Private War)*, a very interesting essay on the current situation of Rio *favelas*. The documentary alternates statements by *favela* inhabitants and policemen, descriptions of weapons by experts of both sides, and funerals of the victims also of both sides. Beyond the hatred between the adversaries, a mutual admiration and profound knowledge are visible, turning the opposing warriors into similar characters. The crude pragmatism of the *favela* soldiers, the matter-of-factness of their murdering gesture, the quiet awareness of certain death prove that the *favelas* have lost their last rural traits and entered modernity. "When you kill your enemies, you light fireworks, you make barbecue parties. It's a victory, why wouldn't you commemorate?", says an infant cocaine dealer, while another comments calmly: "Everybody has to die one day".

In *News of a Private War* the most evident aspect of urbanization is the industrial scale of the phenomena. The swelling population on the hills is reiterated in the takes of piled huts stretching beyond sight, in the similarity of the countless black mixed youths working in the drug dealing army, in the kafkaesque accumulation of seized guns stored in a warehouse of the police department. Incidentally, similar images of this gun warehouse occur in the opening scenes of *The First Day* as a background to the dialogue between the blackmailer Chico (Mateus Nachtergaele) and the policeman (José Dumont), when the former tries to extort the latter in order to pay for his family's New Year feast.³⁴

Thin boys, armed to the teeth, seem to want to demonstrate that the rebellions of Palmares and Canudos were not concluded in the past; instead, they have grown

³⁴ "Gangs" (of bandits) and "galleys" (of funk ball dancers) could be seen as epiphenomena of the urban multiplication, a theme largely explored in the literature of Paulo Lins and Zuenir Ventura, but not dealt with in the films discussed here.

and spread in the present, and the poor people now find themselves almost on equal terms with their opponents, for they are equipped with weapons identical to theirs. At the end of the movie, the dispirited statement made by a *favela* character – “The war will never end” – echoes the confession of exhaustion by one of the policemen and indicates that the official power has never been so far from winning.

Leaving aside the usual warning campaigns directed to the middle class, aiming to infuse terror at the violent *favela* inhabitants, *News of a Private War* emphasizes the change of status that occurred on the hills with the coming of the drugs and the guns. There seems to be no other answer to an enemy so irrevocably oppressive and strongly armed. At a certain point, writer Paulo Lins – the author of a very important novel about the *favela* population in Rio, *City of God*, who is also a co-scriptwriter of Diegues’s *Orpheus* – is interviewed in the film and states that the press and society started to pay attention to the *favela* only when the kidnappings and the cocaine business started. Another witness, the wife of singer and composer Adão, enumerates the advantages of a strongly armed *favela* and observes how successful the *favela* young men, armed with heavy guns, are among middle class girls

Boys in their early adolescence reveal, behind masks indicating that they are wanted by the police, the pride of being in the drug business. The charm of heroic, romantic soldiers, who bravely face a premature death, is stressed by an extreme consciousness with fashion. The care with clothes and hairstyle, and the outrageous exhibition of famous labels are detailed by Zuenir Ventura in *Cidade partida*, referring to the funk balls:

“Bermuda shorts, sneakers and caps are ‘trophy won in the war for survival’. In other words, ‘the labels are symbols of inclusion in the society of consumption’.”³⁵

The tragic future indicated by such a situation, the hell of an “endless war” lives on equal terms with the charm of the bandit of modern times. *The First Day* is aimed at describing precisely that transformation of horror into attraction on the part of a middle class character (Maria) for a character from the *favela* (João). The young woman who, in the middle of the night, wakes up in fear, thinking the fireworks were gunshots, ends up being rescued by and loving one of the outlaws she is so scared of.

Recycled allegories

The First Day, in its realistic and often documentary – therefore sceptical – approach, does not hide a certain nostalgia for the time when the desire to “begin” and to “build the future” was possible.

The urge to compose an encompassing synthesis in a little more than one hour results in gaps – and this serves the film’s purpose. The characters are not individuals, personal details are erased or thoroughly despised. The protagonists are called João (John) and Maria (Mary), that is, they have openly fictitious, fairytale names. They are a given man and a given woman from Brazil, exemplary figures of a certain society.

The remaining characters of the story follow a similar pattern of individual indeterminacy, which unites them in the sole function of representing social types. This is not the scheme usually adopted by recent Brazilian films, in general more preoccupied with the composition of individual dramas, even if dealing with major political issues. *The War of Canudos*, for example, dedicates much more time to the description of the destiny of the members of a migrant family than to the war itself. And *Perfumed Ball* describes the private life of Lampião and his band, rather than his public activities.

A detail that accentuates the mystery concerning the protagonists’ private story is the fact that they live wrapped in silence. João is a prisoner who, in an overcrowded prison, has the privilege of an individual cell, until another old prisoner is transferred there. Even with company, he insists in keeping quiet, despite the other’s attempts at a conversation, arguing that he “only wants to sleep”. Maria, the middle class young woman, is more eloquent, but has the curious profession of teaching deaf and dumb people, which also gives her an aura of living with silence. Communication, for her, seems to be a problem: she even breaks her own telephone, disrupting the possibility of contact with her departed partner. At a certain point of the narrative, after a long and quiet shower, Maria rejects all communication, likewise stating that she “only wants to sleep.

³⁵ Cf. Zuenir Ventura. *Cidade partida*. São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1997, p. 126

João and Maria are therefore the representatives of their social classes, in which there must be many others like them. As is well known, exemplary characters were a distinguishing feature of Glauber Rocha's and other Cinema Novo directors' films. This was the time of the famous allegories, intended to materialise abstract ideas about Brazil in human characters.

João, incarnated by Luís Carlos Vasconcelos, participates in several levels in this scheme, for he is the typical heroic cowboy/*cangaceiro* migrated to a *favela* in Rio. And this not only for the spectator that first met him as Lampião in *Perfumed Ball*: his origin is also indicated by the typical laconic style of the arid *sertão* inhabitants, the markedly north-eastern accent of his few lines, his foreign and almost superior attitude inside the *favela*.

This hard nosed bandit, good with a gun, is like an updated translation of the north-eastern cowboy of Carlos Diegues's *The Big City* (1966) (performed by the emblematic Leonardo Vilar of *The Given Word*) who goes to try his luck in Rio and becomes a ferocious criminal of the hills. And his foreignness makes him analogous to another emblematic character of Glauber Rocha's films, Antônio das Mortes. Just as Antônio das Mortes takes the money from the "colonels" and the church to kill the preacher Sebastião and the *cangaceiro* Corisco, João buys his freedom by agreeing to murder a friend of his. But he lets himself be seduced by Maria, the middle class character, with whom he envisages a brief perspective of freedom – while she experiences through him a kind of revelation. The commitment to the ruling class combined with the solidarity with the oppressed makes of João a tortured, lonesome being, condemned to a tragic end, just as it had done with Antônio das Mortes.

However, it would be perhaps inexact to say that the characters of *The First Day* are allegorical. In their incompleteness, they are rather slightly nostalgic reminders of the allegories of the past, when beginnings were possible, cinema was really new and the characters, with their revolutionary impulse, dragged behind them great social forces. This nostalgic trait becomes apparent in the character called "Vovô" (Grandpa), performed by the old samba composer Nelson Sargento (who also appears briefly in *Orpheus*), who, at a certain point, in the prison, sings one of his most famous songs:

*"Samba – agoniza mas não morre
Alguém sempre te socorre*

Antes do suspiro derradeiro”

(Samba, you agonise but never die, somebody always rescues you, before your last sigh)

The nostalgic overtone is also noticeable in another character. It is Pedro, performed by Carlos Vereza (made famous by his performance of writer Graciliano Ramos in Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Memories of Prison*), a character who is so fragmentary and inexplicable that he seems to have entered the wrong film. In one of his rare utterances, he reacts to an observation of Maria's (his partner) that he is too old, by saying: "And you are so young..." Pedro in fact does not seem to belong to Maria's contemporary reality, his function as a lonely writer does not fit in there, it is still lingering almost two decades earlier, in the time of *Memories of Prison*. Eventually, he and his computer disappear mysteriously, leaving Maria puzzled and desperate. Actually, Pedro's presence in the film is so ephemeral that Maria's despair seems that of somebody who has no other problems in life, a "bourgeois mood", and her suicidal desire is convincing only thanks to the actress's extraordinary performance.

These three characters allusive to past eras disappear little by little, as if they returned to their remote origins, leaving the present to those entitled to it: Grandpa dies of a stroke after learning that he will not receive the amnesty as promised for the end of the millennium; Pedro leaves the scene in the same mysterious way he had appeared; and João is murdered by those who had sold him his freedom.

An empty utopia

The character of Grandpa in *The First Day* is before anything else a homage to the old samba maker of the hills, Nelson Sargento – something normal in the cinema of the past, as, for instance, Zé Ketti in *Rio Northern Zone*, or Cartola in *Ganga Zumba*, 1964, the first feature film by Cacá Diegues. Nevertheless, he ends up performing a central role. His confusing speech is some kind of "samba do crioulo doido" (samba of the mad nigger), but it is full of clairvoyance. His predictions of future happiness alternate with disillusioned pessimism. While he awaits the amnesty, he repeats:

“It will turn, nine will turn into zero, another nine will turn into zero, another will turn into zero, and one will turn into two. The year 2000 is the year of freedom!”

But then, realising that he will be simply transferred to another cell, he cries out:

“Everything will turn to zero, nobody will remain to tell the story, you fucking guards!”

Later, when he is nearly dying, his prediction is shortened to a repetitive “it will turn, it will turn”.

If there is a utopian prediction in Brazilian cinema that up to now resonates in our ears, it is the one repeated in prose and verse in *Black God, White Devil*: “The *sertão* will turn into a sea, and the sea will turn into the *sertão*”. This prediction had been conceived with a clear logic, as Glauber himself explained it:

“[...] The *sertanejo*'s fundamental obsession is to see the sea, [...] the phenomenon of the migration always goes in the direction of the shore. As to the prophecy ‘the *sertão* will turn into a sea, and the sea will turn into the *sertão*’, it was made by Antônio Conselheiro and became well-known, and even if it does not contain a revolutionary proposal, it does give you the freedom of interpreting it in a revolutionary sense. I took the symbol and used it in my film.”³⁶

In *The First Day*, the promise of wealth on a paradisiacal seashore and the revolutionary hopes of the oppressed do not make sense any longer. Thus, the subject and the complements of Grandpa's sentence are progressively eliminated – they did not make much sense anyway, for they were nothing but numbers, nine, zero, one, two – and only the verbs remain: “vai virar, vai virar” (it will turn, it will turn). This is how the prophecy turns into an uncompleted, empty utopia.

However, the sea, with all its utopian overtones, is present in the film. And this is not an isolated case: in several of the recent films, particularly those connected to north-eastern themes, the sea or great water expanses make up recurrent images. As if to give a sequel to the unforgettable scenes at the end of *Black God, White Devil*,

when the *sertão* merges with the sea, or at the beginning of *Land in Trance*, in which the sea, taken in aerial shots, acquires cosmogonic dimensions, the sea returns in current films so insistently that it could suggest a utopia come true. Good examples of this are *Perfumed Ball*, when it shows Lampião dominating the extension of the great São Francisco river from the top of a rock; or *Crede-mi*, which opens with the image of an old northeasterner narrating the book of genesis, while his figure merges with the blue wavy surface of the sea; or *Bocage*, in which the minimal figure of the poet floats in a cage on the endless ocean; or *Corisco and Dadá* and its legendary sea... The list of examples is very long.

In *The First Day*, Maria, abandoned by her partner, is prevented from suicide by João, who found refuge on the top of the same building from which she intended to throw herself. They end up commemorating midnight together, at the sound of fireworks and gunshots, the latter fired in the air by João himself, and then they spend a night of love. In this sole moment of exaltation and joy, skilfully staged with a camera turning around the two characters in each other's arms and edited with the light of fireworks and the music of Antônio Pinto and Naná Vasconcelos, the utopia is again reborn and uttered precisely by the most sceptical character, João. Although he had previously replied to the old prisoner's announcement "it will turn" with anger: "It will turn to fucking nothing, year two thousand, three thousand, fifty thousand will be all the same shit", he now becomes a provisional believer:

"Don't sleep. It will turn, everything will turn. Nine will turn into zero, another nine will turn into zero, another yet will turn into zero, and one will turn into two. Everything will turn, right will turn wrong, wrong will turn right, and the one who kills now will save."

The morning after, the lovers discover that they do not yet have names for each other, so Maria says, looking down at the sea: "I want to get baptised in that sea". This is the point where both lovers could have turned into real, individual characters and acquired their own names and stories. But the utopia of freedom is not fulfilled: while Maria bathes in a huge, peaceful green sea, João, who had been sitting

³⁶ Cf. "1964 – Glauber Rocha, Walter Lima Jr., David Neves, Leon Hirszman – *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*". In: Alex Vianny, *op. cit.*, p. 62

on the sand watching her from a distance, is suddenly shot in the head by one of the policeman who had been following him.

The *sertão* man almost reaches the sea, but he dies at the beach. In this way it becomes clear that the ordinary sea of the wealthy Brazilian classes, who enjoy it constantly as a week-end entertainment or even – in the case of people from Rio southern zone – as a daily pastime, remains inaccessible to the northeastern poor. Here different concepts of the sea are made visible through the film editing. The frame is entirely occupied by the sea where Maria bathes; then a reverse angle shows João sitting on the sand, watching from a distance. These two takes edited together are overwhelmingly discrepant: the first one, from João's point of view, is a very little realistic image of a dream, the sea is too green, too peaceful, too clean to be true. The second take, from Maria's point of view, gives a realistic, common image of a man sitting on the dirty sand on the day after New Year's Eve, among sleepy remnants of the party and other passers-by.

Images of distinct nature separate distinct realities. At a point where the male character could have perfectly joined his lover in the sea, he remains apart in his own world, just complacently gazing from a distance at a dreamlike image that does not belong to him. With the midnight utopian dream and its fireworks at an end, the natural daylight brings the lovers back to their original places.

Negative religion

The religious solution, when reality denies the utopia, has been a favourite Cinema Novo theme, as much as the others pointed out above. Although devoid of its former critical perspective, when religious fanaticism was seen as an obstacle to political awareness, several contemporary Brazilian films turn to the analysis of Brazilian religious behaviour, particularly – as one could expect – that of the northeasterners and *favela* inhabitants. The examples are countless and it would be tiresome to list them here. But one should remember perhaps that evangelization has become an alternative to the dissolute life or gangsterism in the *favela*, as described in Paulo Lins's *Cidade de Deus* and re-elaborated by Diegues in *Orpheus*.

In *The First Day*, evangelization is emphasised as an escape frequently adopted by *favela* criminals who want to abandon their illegal activities. Chico, the blackmailer who extorts money from policeman and prison guards in order not to

denounce them as corrupt, returns to the *favela* and finds his wife evangelized, listening to religious chants. He also promises, somewhat ironically, that he will “turn to the Bible” – and here the “it will turn” refers to salvation in God, a similar utopia to that of the freedom of the sea.

When neither freedom nor salvation arrive, Chico, kneeling as he is about to be killed by his friend João, composes a prayer denying God:

“Thank you my Lord for this bullet that will come into my brains.
Thank you God, son of a bitch,
Our father, who is watching me here like a beast,
Be sanctified for the shit life you gave to me,
Let your brothel come to us,
Screw us up,
Amen.”

Another door is shut, another utopia denied.

However, the end, with equally religious connotations, leaves open the utopian possibility for the middle class. Maria’s failed suicide was intended to be a religiously inspired sacrifice: she looks at the statue of Christ, lit up on the top of Corcovado mountain, opens her arms like him and gets ready to jump, when she is held by João who suddenly appears behind her.

On the next day, after watching the real sacrifice of her one-night lover, who is shot at point-blank range on the beach, she returns to her apartment and opens the window facing the *favela* on the hill. Then light is made: the frame is entirely taken by the sun’s rays coming from outside and the film ends in a total blank.

Is it a religious illumination? Is it Maria’s destiny to “turn to the Bible”? What has changed for this middle class character who almost killed herself when she lost her intellectual partner and came back to life when she saw her *favela* lover die? Did Maria’s ephemeral contact with a formerly prohibited class bring her any kind of knowledge? Or was it just a passing enthusiasm for the charm of the armed man from the *favela*, as often happens with other women of her class?

The film gives no answer to these questions. This new baptism, this enlightened “rebirth” remains vague, another empty utopia.

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