

# Blacks in Brazilian Cinema: An Essay in Comparative Methodology

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## THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Brazil is the New World country which most strikingly resembles the United States both in historical formation and ethnic composition. Both countries began as colonies of European states - Great Britain and Portugal. In both countries specific groups - pioneers in one case and *bandeirantes* in the other - conquered vast territories and cruelly subjugated the native Amerindian peoples. And most important for our discussion, both countries massively imported slaves from Africa, ultimately forming the two largest slave societies of modern times before the "peculiar institution" was abolished, with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 in the United States, and the "Golden Law" of 1888 in Brazil.

Within these overall similarities, there were important differences. The colonial formation of the two societies was quite distinct. Portugal had an abundance of subjugated labour in Brazil - indians, blacks, and the *a mestico* mass of unemployed peasants - while the thirteen North American colonies received an army of European peasants and artisans who became the free workers who formed the basis of the new society. While Brazil was colonized by soldiers of fortune in search of legendary treasures, the United States was peopled largely by pilgrims who came to settle with their families and to reproduce in the New World the style of life they had practiced in Europe. While the United States was linked to the dynamic capitalism of England, Brazil was linked to the suffocating and decadent colonialism of a Portugal which was itself subordinated to British mercantile interests. As a consequence of this colonial formation, Brazilian formal independence in 1822 led only to British free-trade imperialism throughout the nineteenth century and to American neo-colonialism in the twentieth, while North American independence in 1776 led to real political and economic independence.

The institution of slavery, furthermore, was hardly identical in the two countries. Frank Tannenbaum has argued in *Slave and Citizen* (1947) that Latin American slavery was less harsh in the sense that it recognized the moral and spiritual personality of the slave, who was regarded as temporarily degraded rather than essentially and eternally dehumanized. More than a decade later, Stanley Elkins claimed in *Slavery, A Problem in American Institutional Life* (1959) that North American slavery embodied an unbridled capitalism

which mercilessly exploited slaves, while Latin American slavery was tempered by religious institutions which prevented the reduction of blacks to being mere commodities. As a result, the slaves' chances for manumission were greater, and the status of free black people, both before and after abolition, was not very different from that of lower class whites.<sup>1</sup>

This academic discussion of the relative "humanity" of slavery in the two countries has something obscene about it, rather like comparing the relative "comfort" of the accommodations in Auschwitz as opposed to Treblinka. Slavery in and of itself is an unspeakably cruel commodification of human beings, and no discussion of comparative niceties can alter this fact. In any case, the theories of Tannenbaum and Eikins were subsequently disputed by North American as well as Brazilian scholars. Whatever the church's respect for the slave's soul, it was pointed out, the slave's body was treated with terrible harshness and in some respects Brazilian slavery was physically more rigorous than the North American. While slavery in the United States endured and even expanded on the basis of reproduction alone, slaves in Brazil were not quite guaranteed sufficient health or well-being to reproduce in large numbers. A number of practices documented in Brazil, furthermore, find no counterpart in the North American experience. Female slaves, for example, were often exploited as prostitutes, and in some cases masters lived on the earnings of these slaves. Brazilian slave-owners also frequently 'freed' their ill, aged or crippled slaves; that is, they freed themselves from the responsibility of caring for the human beings they had exploited.

## THE PRESENT SITUATION

It is not our purpose to develop an elaborate comparison either between slavery in the two countries or the current racial situation in Brazil and the United States. Some initial generalizations, however, might be useful by way of backdrop to the question of the participation of blacks in Brazilian cinema. First, blacks in the United States are a minority both in terms of numbers and in terms of power. Black and mulatto Brazilians, on the other hand, form part of a marginalized majority of Brazilian citizens. The definition of blackness, moreover, differs in the two countries. The American system defines blacks by ancestry; persons with any black ancestry are considered black. The American system is binary; a person is either white or black, there is no intermediate position. Brazil, on the other hand, is less concerned with ancestry and sees a wide spectrum of colours, ranging from *preto retinto* (dark black) through *escuro* (dark) and *mulato escuro* (dark mulato) and *mulato claro* (light mulato) and *branco* (white). Racism in Brazil, in terms of attitudes, consists less in a supremacist white-over-black than in a subtle suggestion that, over a broad spectrum of colour, white is somehow "better".

Many features of Brazilian life and society give a humane face to what remains, in structural terms, a racist society. Brazilian history since abolition has not been marked, for example, by the virulent racism of a Ku Klux Klan. Unlike the United States and South Africa, there is no tradition of ghettos or racial segregation, nor has there been a history of racially motivated lynching or murder. Because of wide racial mixing, Brazil is in fact a deeply *mestiço* country. Unlike the United States of slavery days,

no special onus is attached to interracial sex or marriage. The carnivalesque festivities which greet the sexual liaison of the ex-slave Xica and the richest Portuguese official on the Minas Jesais diamond frontier in *Xica da Silva*, would be quite unthinkable in a North American context. Indeed, the legendary power which Xica temporarily gathered in 18th century Brazil would be inconceivable in the United States of the same period.

Brazilian cultural life, similarly, is less ghettoized than that of the United States. Many of the greatest Brazilian literary figures, for example, such as Machado de Assis, Lima Barreto, Jorge de Lima, and Mario de Andrade, were black or mulatto, but they are thought of simply as Brazilian writers, not as 'black Brazilian writers'. Black and mulatto singers and composers are not set apart as 'soul singers'; they form part of the mainstream of Brazilian cultural expression. White singers and composers, meanwhile, often pay tribute to Afro-Brazilian cultural expression. Africanized religions such as *candomblé* and *umbanda* are respectable, even fashionable, among white Brazilians (a fact made obvious in such films as *Amuleto de Ogum* (Ogum's Amulet, 1975) and *A Prova de Fogo* (The Test of Fire, 1981)). Many of the national cultural symbols are Afro-Brazilian in origin. The national dish is *feijão*, improvised by blacks from low-quality materials in the days of slavery. The national music is samba, whose African polyrhythms set all of Brazil to dancing. It is no accident that films like *Xica da Silva* (1976), *Tenda dos Milagres* (Tent of Miracles, 1976), and even *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976) concentrate on these cultural phenomena as part of the Afro-Brazilian contribution.

Despite the prestige of Afro-Brazilian culture, however, black and mulatto Afro-Brazilians remain economically, politically and socially oppressed. The causal relation between oppression and skin colour is somewhat obscured by the lack of apparent racial tension and by the fact that blacks and mulattoes often share similar living conditions with many lower-class whites and near-white *mestizos*. This sharing of life conditions with lower-class whites means that many blacks and whites occupy similar positions in the class structure. It also implies a wide range of social intercourse between the two groups - constantly evidenced in films such as *Rio 40 Graus* (Rio 40 Degrees, 1954) or *Cinco Vezes Favela* (Five Times Favela, 1962) - ranging from friendly and superficial contacts on the job and in racially mixed neighbourhoods to more intimate friendships and marriages. Nonetheless, the fact that many whites share living conditions with blacks and mulattoes because Brazilian capitalism oppresses poor whites as well as blacks, does not mean that this oppression is not also racial. Race, in this sense, is both a kind of salt rubbed into the wounds of class, and a wound in itself. The important point is that blacks and mulattoes are largely deprived, by the structural mechanisms of the Brazilian social formation, of economic and political power. Blacks are under-represented in positions of power; they are virtually non-existent in the military government and the diplomatic corps and under-represented in the universities. They are over-represented, meanwhile, in the favelas, in the prisons, and in the ranks of the unemployed. Much of this parallels the situation in the United States; the difference is that while the vast majority of black citizens of the United States know they are oppressed, some black Brazilians, because of the factors we have mentioned, believe they live in a 'racial democracy'.

Before addressing methodological questions concerning the black participation in Brazilian cinema, it would perhaps be useful to sketch the overall outlines of the black image as it evolved over the course of eight decades of Brazilian cinema.<sup>2</sup> In very schematic terms, we may suggest that Brazilian cinema went from having a "white" cinema in the silent period (in the sense that blacks played virtually no role in the fiction films of the period) to a "mulatto" cinema in the thirties, forties and fifties (in the sense that mulattoes and occasional blacks were featured in minor or background roles in the *chanchadas* and as maids and servants in the films of Vera Cruz) to a "black" cinema in the sixties (in the sense that the Cinema Novo directors emphasized the black presence), and finally to an "Afro" cinema in the seventies (in the sense that the films of this period rendered frequent homage to the vitality of Afro-Brazilian cultural expression in the form of *candomblé*, *capoeira*, *umbanda* and *samba*.)

Having provided this schematic survey of the black presence in Brazilian cinema, we may move on to some of the methodological challenges of such a study, and suggest some tentative generalizations about Brazilian cinema *vis-à-vis* North American cinema in terms of black participation in the production process as well as the treatment of black characters and themes.

#### THE PROCESSES OF PRODUCTION

The first question has to do with the structure of the film industry. To what extent have black Brazilians had access to positions of power within the Brazilian film industry? To answer this question we must ask a prior question: Who are the black Brazilians? Although the answer to such a question might seem 'obvious', in fact it is quite complicated. Given the fact that the Brazilian racial spectrum differs from that of North America, and given the complex inter-articulation of questions of ancestry, appearance, social status and self-definition in determining exactly where one is situated within that spectrum, it is difficult to say exactly which Brazilians are "black". North American definitions of racial descent assume that a person with any African ancestry is black; Brazilian definitions tend to assume the opposite. If we transpose North American racial definitions into the Brazilian situation, we would conclude that there has been a high proportion of black film makers; if we apply the Brazilian system our conclusions would be quite different. For the purposes of this essay, I will consider film makers to be black only if they are regarded as black, regard themselves as black, and show concern for black themes in their films.

Blacks have had a minimal role in the actual scripting, directing and producing of Brazilian films. The films often constitute discourse about blacks but seldom the discourse of blacks. The major area in which blacks have worked is as actors. Sebastião Prata (*Grande Otelo*) became "king of the *chanchadas*" in the forties and fifties, Ruth de Souza played the maid in the films of Vera Cruz, and Cinema Novo called attention to actors and actresses like Antonio Pitanga (*Barravento*, *Ganga Zumba* and *The Big City*), Marcus Vinicius (*Xica da Silva*, J.S. Brown: *The Last Hero*), and Zeze Motta (*Xica da Silva*, *The Power of Xango*). At times a black actor can subvert the intentions of a white-dominated film. Grande

Otelo, for example, who has acted in over 100 films, from *Moleque Tão* in 1943 through Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* in 1982, once said that he always tried to put a bit of resistance into all his roles, no matter how demeaning. A good example of this occurs in the recent Brazilian version of *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, in which Grande Otelo plays "Friday". He subverts Defoe's colonialist classic by playing a Friday who refuses to accept the colonizer's power to name, telling the Englishman: "Me Crusoe, You Friday!"

The lack of black power of decision within the film making process has serious consequences. We see an example of this in the case of *Black Orpheus*. Although often thought of as a Brazilian film, it was in fact directed by the Frenchman Marcel Camus. Virtually all the actors in the film, with the exception of the North American, Marpessa Dawn, are black Brazilians. Camus combined actual carnival footage with staged footage in which thousands of Brazilians, generally without pay, played at carnival for the cameras. The film went on to make millions and millions of dollars, none of which went back into the community portrayed, the community which, through its energy and talent, guaranteed the success of the film.

At times the vicissitudes of the production process leave traces in the films themselves. Glauber Rocha's *Barravento*, for example, shows the oppression inflicted on poor black fishermen and apparently denounces the role of *candomblé* in legitimating that oppression. Yet, in other ways, the film *affirms* the beauty and power of Afro-Brazilian religion. This ambiguity doubtless derives in good measure from the contradictions and ambivalences of the director himself. Yet it is also important to know that the film was begun by another director, Luis Paulino dos Santos, who was of partial African ancestry (a black grandfather) and who was more sympathetic to *candomblé* than was the white Marxist, Glauber Rocha. So while the film is framed by a condemnation of *candomblé* from the point of view of historical materialism (Rocha's expressed point of view at the time) the imagistic core of the film is often supportive of *candomblé*. Indeed, all the narrative events of the film can be explained either in a materialist manner or as evidence of the truth of *candomblé*. Which leads us to ask: to what extent does this ambiguous sympathy for *candomblé* derive from Rocha's own attitudes and to what extent does it represent the "trace" of the earlier work by Luis Paulino dos Santos?

It is only in the seventies that we find a number of socially significant black directors. Two of these directors had first worked as actors in Cinema Novo films. Antonio Pitanga made *Na Boca do Mundo* (*In the World's Mouth*, 1977) and Waldyr Onofre made *Aventuras Amorosas de um Padeiro* (*Amorous Adventures of a Baker*, 1975). Although these films are not at all militant, nor even primarily about black Brazilians, both betray a certain rage for expression, although within the norms of Cinema Novo. In *Amorous Adventures*, the black poet-sculptor-lover-actor Saul gives voice to this rage when he complains that he wants to play Hamlet, but that he'll probably be condemned to always playing Othello. Other black-directed films include Odilon Lopes' *Um e Pouco, Dois e Bom* (*One is Little, Two is Fine*, 1977), and also the Brazilian-Nigerian co-production *A-Deusa-Negra* (*The Black Goddess*, 1978), directed by the Nigerian, Ola Balogun.

## THE CHOICE OF ACTORS

The choice of actors for films inevitably raises the question of possible racial bias. In the United States, black actors complain that they are invited to perform only those roles which are previously designated as 'black'. In the past, there was a strong tradition of black roles being played by whites in blackface. The Brazilian situation is quite different. Although in the early fifties the role of *Othello* was once given to a white actor who used blackface (a fact vehemently protested by Abdias de Nascimento of the Black Experimental Theatre Group), there is no significant blackface tradition within Brazilian cinema. Furthermore, although there are occasional complaints about the bypassing of black actors for certain roles, Brazilian casting generally is far less race-conscious. Every black actor is not thought of as somehow incarnating the black race on the screen. The black actor Marcos Vinicius in J.S. Brown: *O Último Herói* (J.S. Brown: *The Last Hero*, 1979) plays a Brazilian who adores American detective films, to the point of wearing trench coats in the tropics and changing his name to J.S. Brown. The blackness of the actor playing the role is considered irrelevant to the film's diegesis or representation; the protagonist could have been portrayed by a white actor without significantly altering the film.

The reason for this relative lack of racial self-consciousness in Brazilian as compared to American cinema has to do, I think, with the differing social conjunctures from which the films arise. While the Kerner Commission, in the wake of the urban rebellions of the late sixties, warned that the United States was becoming two societies, one black and one white, Brazilian life is characterized by the constant social intercourse of black, white and mulatto. In the United States, black actors seem "unnatural" in certain roles because their presence evokes the life of a community that has been rendered separate and unequal by the dynamic of systemic racism. While Afro-Brazilians are economically and politically oppressed, there is not the same sense of social and cultural separation.

## THE FILMIC REPRESENTATION OF BLACK HISTORY

In the United States, at least up until the forties, blacks were generally depicted in American films within the context of the southern plantation tradition, usually as subservient types such as faithful servants or comic slave figures. These films often presented southern plantations as idyllic places peopled by charming aristocrats and contented slaves. The ante-bellum south was idealized in such films as *Birth of a Nation* (1913), *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Brazilian films, in line with official integrationist ideology, almost never idealize slavery to the same degree. Tom Payne's *Sínha Moga* (1953), a costume drama set around the time of abolition, for example, shows the institution of slavery as morally repugnant and even provides glimpses of black anger and revolt. The revolt, significantly, comes not from the blacks in the "Big House", but from the field labourers from the *senzala* (slave quarters). In any case, the film focusses especially on the love intrigue of its white stars (Eliane Lage and Anselmo Duarte) and idealizes the abolitionist movement, completely eliding the economic forces and motivations shaping that movement. (It forms a marked contrast, in this sense, with the Cuban film on the same subject: *El Otro Francisco*).

In both the United States and Brazil, there were many instances of black rebellion. A number of Brazilian films have called attention to this tradition of black resistance. The first Brazilian film to receive the ambiguous compliment of official censorship was Lambertini's *A Vida do Cabo João Candido* (The Life of Commander João Candido, 1910), a celebration of the historical episode known as "the revolt of the whip", in which the black sailor João Candido led a multi-racial revolt against corporal punishment in the Brazilian navy. Carlos Diegues' *Ganga Zumba* (1963), meanwhile, memorializes the seventeenth-century fugitive slave republic called Palmares, a republic which lasted almost a century even in the face of repeated assaults from both the Dutch and Portuguese. Other films celebrate other kinds of black historical heroes and heroines. The protagonist of *Xica da Silva*, while in many ways not a model heroine, is celebrated as an ex-slave who gained a kind of power in the ways available to her in eighteenth-century Brazil. Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Tent of Miracles* (1976), meanwhile, celebrates the turn-of-the-century black culture hero Pedro Arcanjo, a composite figure based on a number of self-taught black intellectuals, who defended the Afro-Brazilian cultural inheritance against racist theoreticians and repressive police.

Brazilian films inevitably reflect the real social and political situation of Brazil. The lack of rigid racial segregation, the fact of a truly  *mestiço*  population, the ubiquity of Afro-Brazilian cultural expression, and the reality of political oppression of blacks all leave traces in the films. At the same time, the films do not reflect in an unmediated way; the films also inflect, refract, distort, caricature, allegorize. The notion that films reflect social reality should not lead to a naive mimeticism. For example, although black and mulatto citizens formed a clear majority of the Brazilian population in the early decades of this century, this fact was not 'reflected' in the films of the period, where Afro-Brazilians constituted a kind of 'structuring absence.' (Of course, one might argue that this absence itself 'reflected' the real power situation in Brazil). A more recent film like *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* portrays a Bahia considerably less black than the real one, in this sense its 'reflection', in sociological terms, is more of a distortion. Antunes Filho's *Compasso de Espera* 'reflects' a situation of racial oppression in Brazil, yet the film's protagonist, a black poet and advertising agent who frequents São Paulo's elite, is, sociologically, a highly atypical figure.

In terms of the representation of black history, it is important to remember that historical films, even if their ostensible subject is the past, are also about the present. The idealization of the abolitionist movement in such fifties films as *João Negro* and *Sinha Moça* not only reflects a white view of history but also sends a message to the blacks in the fifties audience: that they should leave their social destiny in the hands of well-meaning whites who will take care of their interests. The representation of the past is also inflected by contemporary debates and research. The portrait of the seventeenth-century fugitive slave republic in *Ganga Zumba* (1963) will doubtless be quite changed in Carlos Diegues' forthcoming *Palmares*, because the later film will have been inflected by more recent historical research into the subject by Decio Freitas. *Compasso de Espera*, finally, quite consciously uses and even 'quotes' information culled from contemporary sociological research into racial discrimination in Brazil.

If Brazilian films at times reflect racism, at other times they oppose it and resist it. Jose Carlos Burle's *Tambem Somos Imaoos* (*We Too are Brothers*, 1949) was perhaps the first Brazilian film to explicitly address the problem of racial discrimination in Brazil.

Since then, many films have discussed racism in the past - the denunciation of slavery, at least, in films such as *Sinha Moca* and *Jodo Negrinho* - and in the present. *Bahia de Todos os Santos* (1960), *Barravento* (1962), *Asalto ao Trem Pagador* (*Assault on the Pay Train*, 1962), *Macunaíma* (1969), *Compasso de Espera* (released in 1973), and *Tenda dos Milagres* (*Tent of Miracles*, 1976), are among the films which explicitly call attention to racism in contemporary Brazil. At the same time, the films show a new respect for Afro-Brazilian cultural expression, whether in the form of samba, as in Vera de Figueiredo's *Samba da Chicaço do Mundo* (*Samba of the Creation of the World*, 1979), *candomblé* as in *Força de Xango* (*Xango's Power*, 1979) or *capoeira* as in *Cordao de Ouro* (*Golden Cord*, 1977). In this sense, the films seem in advance of Brazilian official society, which has yet to grant its black citizens full pride of place.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Some of the key texts in the comparative slavery debate include :  
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 Degler, Carl N. 1971: *Neither Black nor White, Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*, Macmillan, New York.
- <sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of this topic, see my "Slow Fade to Afro: The Black Presence in Brazilian Cinema," in *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1983.