

## JOÃO CARLOS RODRIGUES \_OBSERVATIONS ON BLACKS IN THE BRAZILIAN CINEMA

\_There is more than one perspective based on which to study the relations between Brazilian Blacks and local film productions. Let us consider:

### 1

If we choose, for example, the History of Brazil, we will be surprised. There are a few dozen films set in the pre-abolition period, but besides the exceptions, which confirm the rule, the majority leave a lot to be desired, be it through error, be it through omission. Slave trade, so fundamental for the economy of Brazil, is not frequently found in our fiction. But there are sequences with an impressive plastic beauty, punctuated with epic music to be seen in two lesser known productions: “O despertar da redentora” (1942), a medium-length film by Humberto Mauro, a federal New State production; and the Portuguese co-production “Vendaaval maravilhoso” (1949), the biography of Castro Alves directed by Leitão de Barros, one of the Salazar regime’s favorite directors. They were both inspired by the poem “Navio negreiro”. But the entire terrible process of capturing, transporting and selling prisoners, from the African continent to Brazil, only appears with all its contradictions in “Chico Rei” (1985), by Walter Lima Junior, thus only much later. This same movie is the one that also gives us the best general picture of the slavery found among us, with the paradox of free Blacks owning slaves themselves and the white intellectual abolitionists.

In general, a simplified view of a society where all blacks are victims and all whites torturers, also reigns on television (see the two versions of “Escrava Isaura”). Pierre Verger and Gilberto Freyre have already proved that it wasn’t really like that at all. One great example of this error is “Sinhá moça” (1953), by Tom Payne and Osvaldo de Oliveira, which, despite the rest, has some good scenes of the slaves running away to the “quilombos” (their hiding places). This sub-theme (the “quilombo”, land of liberty) was approached in “Ganga Zumba” (1964) and “Quilombo” (1984), as well as in more commonplace productions, during the military dictatorship that, alongside the seminal History of Brazil, spoke of the contemporary struggle against political oppression. In the abolitionist campaign, which lasted almost 70 years and divided the nation, it becomes evident that to be either pro or against slavery was not a mere problem of race. On the side of the slaves, beside black Luiz Gama, André Rebouças and José do Patrocínio, we find Joaquim Nabuco, white and the son of a mill owner. And against emancipation, the conservative leader, Barão de Cotegipe, who was a mulatto, besides the many half-bred slave dealers, and the African kings of Dahomey and Benin, who lived off the sale of human beings. The subject is practically virgin in Brazilian cinema. It bothers a lot of people.

In this manner, Brazilian historical movies, on one hand, label blacks erroneously as being “just slaves”, but on the other side, use them as a metaphor for struggles and conquests for the population as a whole, regardless of their origin. We are all slaves (of foreign imperialism), searching for freedom. I believe that this ideological reductivism was a determining factor in the meager historical verisimilitude of our cinematographic productions, independent of the good artistic quality of this or that movie.

### 2

If, on the other hand, we prefer to dedicate ourselves to studying black and half-bred characters in fiction movies, we run up against a series of archetypes and caricatures, some with ancient origins and transposed from other arts such as literature, popular

music and painting.

Inspired by the play “Les Nègres” (The Blacks), by Jean Genet, and based on the studies of Verger on the “orixás”, I drafted a pioneering study of these characters in the book “O negro brasileiro e o cinema” (“The Brazilian Black and cinema” - first edition 1988, third 2001). Several of them possess personalities analogous to that of entities found in Afro-Brazilian cults. The number borders a dozen, but some of them stand out due to their permanence or importance.

The Old Black Granddad, for example, venerated in “umbanda”, can be found in secondary roles in movies and novels. Their female version, the Black Mother (who raised a white child), a symbol of suffering, holds a predominant place in soap-operas such as “O direito de nascer” and others. The Scoundrel has something of Zé Pelintra, another entity from “umbanda”. And the Steamy Mulatta, much of the seductive Oxum entity and the voluptuous Pombajiras. Now, the Mad Creole, a comical and irresponsible character in bodice-ripping B movies immortalized by Grande Otelo, behaves like the Erês, childish spirits venerated on the day of St. Cosmas and St. Damian; also close to Saci Pererê, who has fun playing tricks on us poor humans. Still more complex is the Black with a White Soul, who has gone to the best schools and grown up away from his original community. Whether endeavoring to improve the life of his peers, or alienating himself completely from them, he always carries a high charge of drama. Another ambiguous and contradictory archetype is the Rebel Black. He sometimes acquires a frightening sexual connotation; in other occasions he acts as the leader making demands for his community. But mostly he is a threatening bandit, thief, drug dealer and murderer (see “Cidade de Deus”, “City of God” (2002), by Fernando Meirelles, amongst many others). A significant number of Afro-Brazilian intellectuals see this as a noxious stereotype with a racist substrate. There are those who preach a type of cinema where “Blacks don’t hold guns in their hands”. However, while African descendents continue to occupy the lower tiers of society, and make up the absolute majority of the prison populations, cinematographers and screenplay writers are doing nothing more than seeking inspiration in reality. This, no doubt, affects the already low self-esteem of the black and half-bred populace, creating a vicious and cruel circle.

Every Black character in local fiction films fits into one of the archetypes and caricatures above, or in a mix of them. And thus we will continue, until society changes and others appear. It is interesting to note that foreign movies, such as the Cuban “La última cena” (1978), by Tomás Gutierrez Alléa and the American “Bamboozled” (2000), by Spike Lee, present a few of the types very similar to those listed above.

### 3

Changing the subject and focusing now on the issues behind interracial relations, we stumble on an almost suspect lack of a theme, which should be more common in this country known for its miscegenation. There is a touch of “democratic cordiality” to be found in the couples Grande Otelo played in his B movies with white partners (Oscarito and Ankito), made for popular audiences in the 50’s. But, also here, once in a while appears (even in musical numbers, inspired by Vaudeville’s plays) an ethnic joke comparing Blacks to vultures or monkeys, not rarely proffered by the Afro-Brazilian characters themselves.

This situation of conflict explodes in face of amorous relationships between black men and white women (the same adverse reaction does not exist in relationships between white men and black women). We have only a few Brazilian films on the subject, albeit expressive. The oldest and most important is “Também somos irmãos” (1949), by José Carlos Burle, a brave pioneering anti-racist, whose protagonist is a black lawyer scorned by his white step-sister. But “Compasso de espera” (1971), the only cinematographic

experience by stage director Antunes Filho, also deserves praise, where a black journalist is beaten because of his date with a middle-class white girl. (It is interesting to note that the same character is supported by a rich middle-aged white woman without causing any uproar). In both cases, the black man has dignity, is civilized, and has a “white soul”. But this is not enough. Society will accept him, as long as he doesn’t want to mix in. Almost always, when this situation appears in Brazilian cinema, the lovers end up separating. (One praiseworthy exception is “Tenda dos milagres” (1977), by Nelson Pereira dos Santos). This however, goes against the reality of the facts, as, according to the census of 1990, around 40% of Brazilians are half-bred – and the crushing majority of them, among blacks and whites.

#### 4

To wrap up, it would be interesting to reflect on whether there are fundamental differences between white and black filmmakers when they approach Afro-Brazilian themes. This subject grows more pertinent every day when a whole new generation of black actors and screenplay writers, and even directors, arrive on the market. Brazil is becoming democratic, or so it appears.

Special deference must be paid to Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Glauber Rocha and Carlos Diegues for their persistence on this theme in almost all their movies; and also screenwriter Alinor Azevedo, for the ensemble of his work. Although belonging to different races and social classes, it was thanks to them that the blacks in the Brazilian cinema have overcome the naïve Mad Creole and Steamy Mulatta found in comedies, conquering adult characters, full of reality and responsibility.

Black filmmakers we have only had a few. And it is so much more difficult to make any comparison. The oldest and the one who made the most feature films (five) is Cajado Filho, who was also an important screenwriter and scene director of B movies. None of his films ever reached the present day. Between 1950 and 1980, there were a few isolated attempts undertaken by Haroldo Costa, Odilon Lopez, Antonio Pitanga, Waldir Onofre – all actors as well. Their movies are always interesting, but none was ever successful with audiences. The Zózimo Bulbul’s case is a little different, as he opted to make documentaries, with a certain continuity, and evident political activism.

At this time, after so many years, promises of renovation appear. In São Paulo, Dogma Feijoada, a group making shorts, preach black movies about black people, without the resources of folklore and violence; and Joel Zito Araújo too, living in Rio de Janeiro, author of an important book on black characters in the Brazilian TV, which he transformed into an award winning documentary, “A negação do Brasil” (2000). His first fiction movie, “Filhas do vento” (“Daughters of the Wind”, 2004), a family melodrama, was awarded several prizes at the Gramado Festival. He seems to have come to stay, launching thus a new cycle.