

STAM, Robert. *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. 409 pages.

In recent years, the ethical and ideological positions associated with multiculturalism have come under attack from diverse quarters of North American intellectual life. Of course, conservative scholars and pundits have attacked multiculturalism for years as a suspicious diversion from the "real" business of humanistic education: teaching the Western canon. Recently, even sectors of the left have questioned the efficacy of pluralistic identity politics as a hindrance to class-based multiracial activism. Many Brazilian commentators have also regarded multiculturalism with ambivalence and suspicion, but often for different reasons. A cultural strategy which foregrounds heterogeneity and conflict in contemporary society is bound to be associated with an undesirable North American importation which has limited relevance to a nation which has historically celebrated racial and ethnic pluralism within a larger unitary vision of nationality.

For these reasons alone, Robert Stam's *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* is a timely and meticulously argued response to the skeptics of multiculturalism in Brazil. Early on, Stam notes: "Brazilian media tend to buy into, and often literally translate, the neoconservative caricature of multiculturalism as separatist, puritanical, and 'politically correct'" (15). Stam reminds us why the multicultural project continues to have global relevance at the end of the century and, more specifically, why it offers an insightful critique of

cultural production in Brazil. In doing so, he also provides a magnificent survey of Brazilian film, which focuses on the often oblique histories of race and representation. His analysis is further strengthened by a comparative perspective that takes North American culture, especially film, as a counterpoint to Brazilian analogues. What emerges is a rich and complex history, which confounds simplistic and stereotypical conceptions of both cultures.

In outlining his methodology, Stam explicitly rejects the notion that multiculturalism can be reduced to its context in the United States. Instead, he points to a "shared history of colonialism, conquest, slavery, and immigration" (17) as a common matrix for comparative study. Most scholarship of comparative race relations has tended to emphasize the differences between Brazil's apparent assimilationism and the absolutist and segregationist practices in the US. At least since the 1930s, Brazilian elites have celebrated black cultural contributions to a national *mestiço* identity, which has effectively obscured the maintenance of racial hierarchies. Meanwhile, segregationist practices in the United States produced separate and unequal parallel societies. Stam reviews these now familiar differences, yet goes on to make a compelling case for recognizing "convergences" between the two racial systems. Just as racial identities and allegiances have become increasingly complex and multipolar in the United States, Brazil has experienced the seemingly slow, but noticeable politicization of racial identities during the last twenty years (53).

The second chapter documents what Stam suggestively called the "structuring absences" of Afro-Brazilians during the era of silent cinema in Brazil (1898-1929). Aside from occasional documentaries focusing on carnival, samba, capoeira, and the mostly black Chibata Naval Rebellion of 1910, blacks are absent from this initial phase of Brazilian film, except to play the role of the "noble savage" in neo-Romantic Indianist films mostly based on the mid-nineteenth century novels of José de Alencar. As Stam notes, Brazilian cinema of this period evidenced little interaction with the most radical wing of the Modernist movement, *Antropofagia*, which might have yielded more irreverent and subversive representations of the Euro-Brazilian elite's racial other.

The next chapter focuses on the 1930s and 1940s, the height of national-popular cultural production that accompanied the emergence of universalist political and intellectual projects. During this period, black expressive culture was appropriated and aestheticized by the state and culture industries at the service of national affirmation. The avatar of Brazilian culture for export was Carmen Miranda, who would find fame and fortune in Hollywood in the 1940s. Her extravagant sartorial ensemble referenced the traditional dress of Afro-Bahian women of *candomblé* yet, as Stam points out, this performed identity was effaced by her generic Latina stage persona.

Miranda's international success coincided with the emergence of filmic genre for internal consumption, the *chanchada*, which typically featured light-hearted comedy. Stam devotes several pages throughout various chapters to Sebastião Bernardes Souza Prata, or "Grande Otelo", who was regularly featured in *chanchadas*, and would later go on to star in Cinema Novo classics and *telenovelas*. Several *chanchadas* that featured Grande Otelo, like *Também somos irmãos* and *Carnaval Atlântida*, critiqued in subtle and ingenious ways the contradictions of national identity and racial representation in Brazil. At the time, the cultural elite derided these films as vacuous entertainment for the masses, but Stam's analysis of the *chanchadas* suggests that some of these films were remarkably attentive to racialized tensions and anxieties in Brazilian culture. He concludes however that blacks were "shockingly underrepresented" in the *chanchadas*; even an accomplished comic actor like Grande Otelo was often cast in straight roles alongside white actors or played non-threatening, infantilized characters that could safely entertain a middle class white audience (103).

Chapter Four offers a fascinating account of Orson Welles' visit to Brazil in 1942 to direct *It's All True*, which features a segment on carnival and another that documents the struggle of northeastern fishermen, or *jangadeiros*, who sail to Rio de Janeiro to petition the Vargas government for social benefits. Historically, when Hollywood directors have turned their attention to Brazil the results have been disastrous. Just when it seemed that North Americans were only capable of making films in Brazil that were heavy on Good Neighbor propaganda

and/or simplistic stereotypes, it is nice to be reminded that an outsider like Orson Welles attempted to produce a socially-aware and self-reflexive film about Brazil. Unfortunately, too few North American directors were inspired by his experience in subsequent years. Stam's account emphasizes Welles' anti-racist, pro-black approach to Brazilian culture which produced considerable anxiety among sponsors in Hollywood and Brazilian authorities. Several powerful institutions, from RKO Studios to the Brazilian Department of Press and Propaganda obstructed his efforts and the film was never completed. A recent documentary about the film, which features the surviving footage from Welles' original segments, was released in 1993.

The Vera Cruz experiment of the early 1950s generally ignored black actors and avoided racial themes in its effort to produce a universal, Hollywood-style film in Brazil. The one exception, which Stam treats in detail, was *Sinhá Moça*, an epic about the abolition of slavery, which was hailed as Brazil's response to *Gone with the Wind*. Contrary to historical record, liberal white protagonists emerge as the great agents of social change in *Sinhá Moça*. The comparative register works particularly well here as Stam demonstrates that *Sinhá Moça* celebrates the redemptive value of abolition for all Brazilians, while *Gone with the Wind* functions primarily as a lament for the destruction of the Old South. The comparison demonstrates significant differences in how slave emancipation is understood and remembered in the two countries.

The sixth chapter is structured around an interesting counterpoint between *Black Orpheus*, a Franco-Brazilian production directed by Marcel Camus, and two films directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, *Rio 40 Graus* and *Rio Zona Norte*. *Black Orpheus* was based on Vinicius de Moraes' 1956 play *Orfeu da Conceição*, which in turn was inspired by several North American and French attempts to fuse classical mythology with black performance. *Black Orpheus* first introduced Afro-Brazilian culture to a mass international audience and remains one the most widely recognized Brazilian films. Stam convincingly shows that Camus's film was an earnest attempt to understand and sympathetically portray Afro-Brazilian culture, but nevertheless effaces social complexity and cultural conflict in favor of a decidedly exuberant and exoticized portrait

of Rio during carnival. Dos Santos's films, which in many ways announce the Cinema Novo movement, also featured Afro-Brazilian protagonists in Rio, but foregrounded their quotidian struggles against discrimination based on race and class. *Rio Zona Norte*, for example, portrays the social and existential dilemmas of a poor black samba composer who is exploited by unscrupulous agents of the culture industry yet ultimately learns to protect his own interests.

The next three chapters deal with various phases of *Cinema Novo* during the 1960s. Most critical studies on Brazilian film have focused on this extraordinary period of creativity and innovation, but few if any have attempted to interpret and critique these films on the basis of racial representation. Stam does a splendid job of explaining the Cinema Novo project in relation to Third World cinema and leftist cultural politics of the early 1960s. He dedicates several pages to Trigueirinho Neto's *Bahia de Todos os Santos* (1960), an underrated film which dramatized the repression of *candomblé* during the Estado Novo regime of Getúlio Vargas. Neto's film offers a counterpoint to *Cinco Vezes Favela*, a collection of five short films sponsored by the orthodox leftist Centro Popular de Cultura (CPC), which portrayed Afro-Brazilian expressive culture as a diversion from revolutionary politics.

Similarly, Glauber Rocha's first feature film, *Barravento*, seemed to suggest that *candomblé* hindered political activism, but Stam argues convincingly that the film is "open equally to a spiritualist or a materialist reading" (225). On a discursive level the film associates religious devotion with fatalism and alienation, but on an imagistic level it celebrates Candomblé as a dignified and counter-hegemonic belief system. Later in the decade, following the collapse of populist politics and the consolidation of military rule, Rocha made what was perhaps his greatest film, *Terra em Transe* (1967). This bitter political allegory has generally focused on the existential dilemmas and political contradictions of a self-proclaimed leftist. Stam focuses on the racial implications of this cultural moment of auto-critique, noting that "the white left was forced to name itself as white and elite rather than simply as the self-appointed spokesman of the people" (234). Indeed, the self-styled revolutionary of *Terra em Transe*, Paulo Martins, embodies the

most authoritarian and hierarchical traits of the Euro-Brazilian elite, particularly when he is obliged to suppress a group of black and *mestiço* peasants.

Rocha's *Terra em Transe* represented an inaugural moment of *Tropicália*, a radical cultural movement of the late 1960s, which was manifest in several cultural fields, most notably in popular music. Stam dedicates several pages to what might be considered the moment of high tropicalism in cinema, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's 1969 film version of Mário de Andrade's classic Modernist rhapsody, *Macunaíma*. This film mobilizes a central trope of literary modernism in Brazil – *Antropofagia* – to critique the predatory social relations of an underdeveloped nation under military rule (239). Stam suggests ways in which the film parodies the ideology of “whitening” by following the racial trajectory of the Macunaíma, who becomes increasingly exploitative as he is literally and figuratively whitened. He points out that the film has posed problems for North American audiences, which are confused or disturbed by the fundamental instability of Macunaíma's racial subjectivity (which later on elicits a useful comparison with Woody Allen's *Zelig*) and the impossibility of morally assessing Brazil's “hero without a character”. A similar point is made in a slightly different register in the final chapter, when Stam critiques the more general tendency to identify positive and negative images, which he sees as an oversimplistic approach to criticism because it often effaces the complexities of filmic representation (338).

In the conclusion, Stam offers an extended meditation on race and representation which discusses some of the contradictions of contemporary Brazilian culture: “The lack of rigid racial segregation, the fact of a *mestiço* population, and the ubiquity of Afro-Brazilian cultural expression, combined with the equally undeniable reality of the social powerlessness of the people of color, all leave traces in the films” (329).

Perhaps the only thing missing from this expansive study is a sustained dialogue with contemporary Brazilian cultural theorists who have addressed, often under different guises, the multicultural challenge. While the multicultural underpinnings of the Modernist generation (Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade) are well covered, Stam pays relatively little

attention to critics like Silviano Santiago, for example, who outlined the contradictions of Brazilian society from a multicultural perspective in seminal essays like "Fazendo perguntas com um martelo", "Os abutres", and "Apesar de dependente, universal". Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda, for her part, has argued in *Impressões de viagem* that the phase of *curtição* or *desbunde* in the early 1970s signaled an emergent interest in issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

But these are mere quibbles in light of Stam's project which has opened up the multicultural debate specifically within Brazilian film studies. To date, multicultural perspectives in Brazilian culture and cultural criticism have focused primarily on popular music as evidenced by urban movements around funk, hip-hop, reggae, samba-reggae, and manguê beat. Stam is keenly aware of this dynamic, concluding that Brazilian film stands to learn from Brazilian music ("the least colonized and the most Africanized branch of Brazilian popular culture"), which has been uniquely successful in dominating the internal market, generating international interest, and maintaining a productive dialogue with other Afro-diasporic cultural complexes. One can imagine a fascinating and productive polemic emerging from the kinds of questions he raises: "When will Brazilian cinema be as confidently intertextual, as playfully cannibalistic and as pleasurable as Brazilian music?" (363) Stam offers few concrete ideas here, but the idea is richly suggestive. Indeed, the experiences of *Modernismo* and *Tropicália* show that these kinds of multidirectional dialogues and appropriations among several cultural fields yield surprising results.

Christopher Dunn
Tulane University