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BEYOND STEREOTYPE AND COMEDY

*The 'Pop' and the 'Modern' Brazil on Screen**

The Northeast of Brazil has historically been stereotyped as the antagonist of the wealthy and 'modern' Southeast. Although considerable attention has been paid to recurrent depictions of the Northeast in Brazilian cinema, a detailed study that pinpoints the stereotypes associated with the region but looks beyond them to discuss the nuances of the actual geographical, socio-cultural and political space in cinematic depictions remains to be done. This article argues that such a study can illuminate profound ruptures of a supposed national unity and also can point to current strategies of reconciliation. The argument evolves around the metamorphosed Northeast depicted in a recent popular Brazilian comedy, *Lisbela e o Prisioneiro* (*Lisbela and the Prisoner*, 2003). The aim is to demonstrate that the film conveys a very clear political message beyond the obvious popular appeal of the comedy genre.

Au-delà des stéréotypes et de la comédie
Le Brésil « Pop » et le Brésil « moderne » à l'écran

Le Nord-Est du Brésil a été historiquement stéréotypé comme antagoniste du Sud-Est prospère et « moderne ». Une attention considérable a été portée aux représentations récurrentes du Nord-Est dans le cinéma brésilien. Mais reste à effectuer une étude détaillée qui pointe les stéréotypes associés à la région tout en apportant une vision au-delà de ces derniers afin de discuter des nuances de l'espace géographique, socioculturel et politique actuel dans les représentations cinématographiques. Dans cet article, nous affirmons qu'une telle étude peut mettre en lumière les ruptures profondes d'une supposée identité nationale, et indiquer également les stratégies actuelles de réconciliation. L'argument est basé sur le Nord-Est métamorphosé décrit dans une comédie populaire brésilienne récente, *Lisbela e o Prisioneiro* (*Lisbela et le Prisonnier*, 2003). Alors devient très clair le message politique véhiculé par le film au-delà de l'intérêt populaire manifeste de la comédie.

Transpondo estereótipo e comédia
O Brasil « Pop » e o Brasil « moderno » na tela

O nordeste do Brasil historicamente tem sido estereotipado como o antagonista do rico e « moderno » sudeste. As representações do nordeste no cinema brasileiro são recorrentes e têm recebido atenção considerável, porém um estudo detalhado que aponte os estereótipos associados à região nessas representações mas que olhe além deles para discutir as nuances do real espaço geográfico, sócio-cultural e político ainda está por ser realizado. Este artigo argumenta que tal estudo pode iluminar rupturas profundas de uma suposta unidade nacional e ainda apontar estratégias atuais de reconciliação. A argumentação é construída em torno do nordeste metamorfoseado que é retratado na comédia popular *Lisbela e o Prisioneiro*

* This article is part my PhD research (University of Southampton, 2008) with the support of CAPES (*Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior*).

(2003). O objetivo da discussão é demonstrar que o filme transmite uma clara mensagem política além do óbvio apelo popular do gênero de comédia.

The imagery of the Northeast of Brazil constructed by its landscape, cultural forms and archetypical characters has historically been used (not only by films) as an allegory of Brazil's underdevelopment (Xavier 1997), as well as of what is most treasured and loathed in the country, namely, its cultural roots and its social problems as seen in the acclaimed *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, Walter Salles 1998).

Other recent films such as *Cinema, Aspirinas e Urubus* (*Cinema, Aspirins and Vulture*, Marcelo Gomes, 2005) drew on similar lines also achieving international recognition¹. In the past many other domestic productions explored the emblematic potential of this geographic region to touch a nerve at home as well as attract audiences abroad. Examples range from Lima Barreto's *O Cangaceiro* (1953) to Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*, 1963) and Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, 1964), all acclaimed productions that quintessentially represent Brazilian cinema.

These recurrent depictions of the Northeast in Brazilian films have been largely discussed, but most of the lengthy existing literature focuses on the hermeneutics of stereotypes reproduced on screen. A detailed study that pinpoints these stereotypes and looks beyond them to discuss the nuances of the actual geographical, socio-cultural and political Northeast in cinematic depictions remains to be done. Such a study can illuminate profound ruptures of a supposed national unity and also can point to current strategies of reconciliation.

Much of what follows explores these issues, but remains open to future revision, as the article has been designed to promote further research more than anything. The argument evolves around the metamorphosed Northeast depicted in a recent popular Brazilian comedy, *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* (*Lisbela and the Prisoner*, Guel Arraes 2003). Despite the fact that the film has never been released internationally, and has been mainly considered merely a commercial production with little artistic merit, I intend to demonstrate that it conveys a clear political comment on relational patterns between different Brazilian regions beyond the obvious popular appeal of the comedy genre. *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* not only exemplifies the trend to revisit the 'northeast motif' in recent Brazilian cinema (Nagib 2007), but also undermines stereotypes associated with the region, exposing in the process the extent to which comedy can be revealing of both the culture and structures of power from which it springs.

The socio-cultural North-South divide on screen

Lisbela e o prisioneiro, originally written by Osman Lins as a play in 1960, has achieved great popularity since it was first performed in Rio de Janeiro in 1961. Born in the rural city of Vitória de Santo Antão, in the Northeastern State of Pernambuco,

¹ The film was shown in the official selection *Un Certain Regard* in Cannes 2005 and won a National Education Prize. It was also chosen by the Brazilian authorities to represent the country in the Oscars, but unfortunately was not nominated by the North-American Academy.

Lins carefully mixed regional cultural traditions with the universal appeal of comic stereotypes (the killer, the Don Juan and the innocent girl) in a story about love and freedom. This combination attracted the general public in the first place, as it would later win over the film director Guel Arraes. He first adapted Lins's text for television in 1993, with the help of his main collaborators, Jorge Furtado, Pedro Cardoso and João Falcão². In 2001, Arraes and Falcão re-adapted the television version for the stage. This new play, drawing on the successful television version and featuring well-known TV actors toured the country. In 2002, Furtado, Cardoso, Falcão and Arraes, together with some of the casting from both the theatrical and televisual adaptations turned *Lisbela* into a cinematic production³.

The film was shot partly in Pernambuco (most of the exterior sequences) and partly in Rio de Janeiro (most of the interior sequences) between October and November 2002. The production had a high budget for Brazilian standards (5 million *reais*, about 2 million US dollars) that was jointly financed by the Brazilian Government and commercial companies⁴. *Lisbela* was released in Brazil in August 2003 and attracted more than 3 million spectators, constituting one of the biggest domestic film hits of that year⁵.

The film tells the story of a movie-mad girl about to get married when she meets the real love of her life – a Northeastern Don Juan named Leléu. In the opening sequence Lisbela, played by Débora Falabella – a well-known Southeastern TV soap opera actress in Brazil – and her fiancé Douglas – Bruno Garcia, a Northeastern actor known for his work on theatre and television – are trying to find the best place to sit in a cinema auditorium. The camera pans across the auditorium showing the couple as well as other moviegoers as they anticipate the beginning of the main feature. Lisbela wishes to get immersed in viewing the film, while Douglas is more interested in seducing her. Both characters are young middle-class Northeasterners, but Douglas is fascinated by the style and accent of the *cariocas* (people born in Rio de Janeiro). He complains about the film they are watching: “what a joke! It's black and white. It's so outdated. In Rio de Janeiro all the films are in colour”⁶. The dialogue between them demonstrates Douglas

² Furtado is a director and scriptwriter, Cardoso is an actor and scriptwriter, and Falcão is a producer/director and scriptwriter. They have collaborated with Guel Arraes since the 1980s on the production of TV programmes, soap operas and mini-series for the Globo network.

³ Arraes and Falcão are both from the Northeast, while Furtado and Cardoso are from the Southeast of Brazil. Among the group that worked with them in *Lisbela* there are also other key Northeastern collaborators, such as actor Bruno Garcia and singer/composer Caetano Veloso, but the mixed cultural background of the film's crew and casting suggests that not only Northeasterners share the film's view of the region depicted.

⁴ According to the official website of Fox Film do Brasil, the film was sponsored by Petrobrás Distribuidora, Assolan, Chesf, Eletrobrás, Ampla, Fuji Film and BNDES, as well as the Federal Government, and the Government of the State of Pernambuco. Data retrieved from: http://foxfilm.terra.com.br/filme.php?modo=texto&conteudo=extra&id_secao=200&id_filme=461 [22 August 2005].

⁵ Exactly 3, 169, 860 according to the National Cinema Agency (ANCINE) database. Data retrieved from: www.ancine.gov.br/media/filmes_lancados_1995_2004.xls [28 May 2005].

⁶ Extracted from the English subtitles on the film's DVD. In Portuguese: “Pô, é preto e branco aê! Atrasado de montão... lá no Rio de Janeiro só passa filme colorido”.

unsuccessfully trying to imitate the Southeastern *carioca* accent, while actress Falabella struggles to convincingly imitate Lisbela's Northeastern accent. For a Brazilian audience, the humour of the scene derives to some extent from the way in which these two (the first intentional and the latter non-intentional) failed attempts at regional impersonation reflect upon and mock the supposed superiority of the Southeast over the Northeast of Brazil.

Historically the Southeast has represented the richest and most developed part of Brazil, while the Northeast has been stereotyped as "a region of persistent poverty and resistance to change", usually depicted as "an older, less-developed, and more traditional Brazil" (Greenfield 1999: 100). According to Ariano Suassuna, one of the most important contemporary Brazilian writers, since at least the publication of Euclides da Cunha's masterly historical narrative *Os Sertões* (*Rebellion in the backlands*, 1902), Brazil has been cut along "what has become now the North-South divide: the [modern] South [that receives] its culture from outside through the ships coming into its ports in the Atlantic, and the [underdeveloped] North represented by the Northeast backlands"⁷. The work of historian Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. maps these traditional perceptions in novels, paintings, and popular songs as well as in the work of several sociologists and filmmakers, including the Northeasterners Gilberto Freyre and Glauber Rocha respectively (Albuquerque Jr. 1999: 94-95).

Albuquerque Jr. argues that these works have contributed, although not intentionally, to perpetuate depictions of the Northeast concerned with the idea of a primitive, indigenous and exotic other. For example, in Rocha's films these ideas were used to pursue a political agenda of preserving a 'true' and 'authentic' Brazil – represented by the Northeast – against the 'compromised' and 'developed' Brazil – chiefly represented by the big metropolis of the Southeast (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro). At least in Rocha's early films, the Northeast is a place where people are still strongly bonded to nature and religious myths. The films have a brute and violent look in opposition to the civilized appearance of the studio-film aesthetics and the carnivalesque style of the *Chanchadas* (the established forms of the then mainstream industry). Rocha's cinematic landscapes, as in the opening of *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, reduce the Northeast to the imagery of droughts, dead cattle on the dry soil, the saint followed by poor and miserable pilgrims asking desperately for a miracle in the form of rains to release their suffering. As Albuquerque Jr. argues, although Rocha's films intended to 'awaken' audiences to the necessity of resistance against imperialist forces and the affirmation of a genuine Brazilian identity, they employed a stereotypical view of the Northeast to foster a nationalist project, thus reinforcing the myths and images historically associated with the region. (*op. cit.*: 280-285). This is not to say that in the actual region droughts and poverty are not a major concern, but as Albuquerque Jr. clearly demonstrates, the tendency in different artistic expressions, not only in Rocha's films, to focus more on the archetypical elements of Northeastern culture, usually reinforces the North-South divide by presenting the Northeast as the antagonist of the wealthy and modern Southeast.

The references to the wonders of Rio de Janeiro in *Lisbela e o Prisioneiro* thus can be interpreted as a reproduction of the old spectre of underdevelopment

⁷ As stated in K.A. MACIEL, *No sertão eu vi / I saw in the Backlands* [video documentary], Brazil: Auçuba Comunicação, 1998.

haunting the Northeast, as suggested by Suassuna and Albuquerque Jr. Nevertheless the mocking clash of regional accents in the opening sequence, and the way they are assigned to particular performers, can be seen to invite a Brazilian audience to expect from the film a challenge to traditional conceptions of the poor and underdeveloped Northeast. The dialectic between these two possible interpretations thus introduces the film's reflexive structure.

Issues of Reflexivity in *Lisbela e o Prisioneiro*

As the film's opening sequence progresses, Douglas and Lisbela talk while watching the credits of a presumed Hollywood serial that is about to start. However, the credits on screen in fact announce the rest of the cast that is going to be performing with actors Garcia and Falabella, as shown on the table below.

Tabl. I. – DIALOGUE FROM THE OPENING SCENE

| | <i>Dialogue</i> | <i>Credits on screen</i> | <i>Role</i> |
|----------|--|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Douglas: | What kind of story is it? | Natasha | [Production company] |
| Lisbela: | A mix of romantic comedy and adventure. There's a hero who is a Don Juan . . . | Selton Mello | Leléu |
| | Who's never fallen in love with anyone until he meets the girl. The girl will suffer a lot because the hero's love for her causes a lot of problems. | Débora Falabella | Lisbela |
| | There's a villain who wants to kill the hero or get the girl, or both. | Marco Nanini | Frederico |
| | There's another woman who wants the hero but he doesn't want her at all. | Virgínia Cavendish | Inaura |
| | And then there's a bunch of other characters that keep doing funny things to liven up the story. Some of them will wind up as happy as the hero and the girl. Others will end up as bad as the villain . . . depending on whether they help or hinder the romance. | Bruno Garcia André Mattos | Douglas Chief Guedes |
| | | Tadeu Mello Lívia Falcão | Citonho Francisquinha |
| Douglas: | Have you already seen it? | | |
| Lisbela: | No, but it's always like that. | | |
| Douglas: | So, why watch? | | |
| Lisbela: | What's interesting isn't just finding out what happens . . . but how and when it happens. | | |
| | We are going to meet a lot of new people who have a lot of problems that we can't solve, only they can. We're going to see how and when. It's starting . . . | | |

The film cuts from an extreme close-up of Lisbela's face when she says "It's starting . . ." to a colourful street market in a country town, where Leléu arrives in his *carro de som* (sound-truck), selling potions to cure sexual weakness. The actor playing Leléu (Selton Mello) is also a Southeastern who established his reputation on television, theatre and cinema through his comic performances, particularly in Arraes's productions. He addresses the town inhabitants, using the traditional Northeastern vernacular. He yells to the crowd gathered around his truck: "[. . .] where there's life, there's hope!" – quoting an old proverb⁸. Leléu goes on to describe the poor sexual performance of a husband suffering from 'the malady of love' (impotence):

"His batteries are corroded . . . and the hand of that old clock is stuck rusted at sixty-three . . . and there's no way it will ever point to twelve noon. But if you take the remedy I have here, you'll be just like a prize rooster."⁹

The comparison of a man to a 'prize rooster' (*galo de raça*) in terms of sexual performance is a traditional Northeastern joke. The elements that I have outlined here as being significant in the opening minutes of *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* – the star personae of Garcia, Falabella and Mello, the function of regional accents within the wider context of a long-standing socio-cultural and economic divide between the South and the North, dialogues using Northeastern vernacular and jokes, and the film-within-the-film structure (as seen in Table I) – all contribute to displace regional stereotypes by associating them with trendy audiovisual artifices. From the beginning *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* clearly states that its narrative and style draw on associations and interactions on different levels to invite reflection on the instability of cultural forms, traditions and identities.

Arraes has argued that he tried to look for the 'best of bad taste' in *Lisbela*, presenting a Northeast 'filled with influences that can be found here, as well as in India, Pakistan or in the suburbs of São Paulo'¹⁰. This implies that although the film's cultural references might be considered 'bad taste', there is a cultural value in them because the interaction of these diverse references characterizes contemporary culture in Brazil as elsewhere. It is through these interactions that the film reconstructs the Northeast as 'pop' in opposition to the 'traditional' one.

Dick Hebdige has argued that the term 'pop' originally referred to advertisements, comics, packages, photographs and posters that served as raw materials for collages, prints and paintings produced by young British and North-American artists in the 1950s (Hebdige, 2002). Later, the term became associated with 'a visual idiom *outside* fine art' (author's emphasis) that critically analysed 'the fabric of everyday life and mass-produced imagery' (Hebdige, 2002: 124-125). Although controversial, this definition of 'pop' enables me to relate the 'raw materials' that compose the aural and visual settings of *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* to the film's strategy

⁸ Extracted from the English subtitles on the film's DVD. In Portuguese: 'Onde há vida, há esperança'.

⁹ In Portuguese: "A bateria colou as placas uma na outra e o ponteiro 'vêio' do relógio enferrujou às seis e meia e não dá meio-dia de jeito nenhum! Mas se tomar o remédio que eu apresento a vocês vai ficar igualmente um galo de raça."

¹⁰ Quoted by Angela Lacerda in "Guel Arraes lança olhar kitsch sobre o nordeste", in *O Estado de São Paulo*, <www.estadao.com.br/divirtase/noticias/2002/dez/01/87.htm> [13 August 2005].

of exposing the arbitrariness of stereotypes, which consequently invites reflection on political and economic interests behind these stereotypes. The strategy, of course, also recalls postmodernist practices of reworking different traditions and references to react against what 'is felt to be the establishment', in the case of the film – the already mentioned North-South divide in Brazil (Jameson, 1985). These are therefore the ideas that inform my analysis of the strategic functions of elements of the film's *mise-en-scène*¹¹.

From Traditional to Pop: The Northeast's 'Metamorphosis'

The presumed Hollywood serial that Lisbela and Douglas watch at the opening sequence of *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* is called 'Metamorphosis of the Soul' and is a pastiche of the type of romantic Hollywood horror film produced by Universal in the 1930s – the obvious example being James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931). It tells the story of Dr. Steve, a scientist who turns into a monster while self-experimenting with a new drug. This narrative corresponds to a later scene in *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* in which Douglas takes Lisbela to an amusement park. There, Lelêu is staging the 'metamorphosis of a woman into a gorilla', a spectacle that reminds Lisbela of the serial she has watched previously. The scene at the amusement park juxtaposes images of Lelêu dressed in a gorilla suit and Dr. Steve as a monster with images of Lisbela smiling in admiration. Towards the end of the scene, she asks Lelêu to show her how the transformation is performed. Still dressed in the gorilla suit, Lelêu explains: 'as I turn down the light on your side, and turn up the light on my side, my image gradually reflects on top of yours . . . It's as if you are transformed into a gorilla'. He continues to describe the transformation device as a 'love machine' as well, because this 'machine' as Lelêu explains can get lovers: 'so close, so close . . . as the poet says: by imagining his beloved so much/ the lover turns into the one he loves/ I no longer have to feel desire/ For the one I desire is already inside me'¹². The idea of metamorphosis that informs both the Hollywood serial and the popular spectacle staged by Lelêu, and which is further realized in the course of the film's development in the transformation of Lelêu, the Don Juan, into a surrendering lover, suggests that interactions and transformations on different levels provide one of the film's overall leitmotifs.

These processes of metamorphosis can also be noted in most of the exterior scenes in *Lisbela e o prisioneiro*. They were shot in the cities of Igarassu, Paudalho and Recife. In all of them, but especially in the latter, historical sites were 'dressed up' for the film, for example, the decayed square Pátio de Santa Cruz in the historical centre of Recife. Old colonial houses were painted in vibrant colours and props were added to turn the place into a lively, 'modern' spot. In different

¹¹ I refer here to the concept of *mise-en-scène* not so much in terms of its relation to authorship, but in terms of the 'determining influence of style upon meaning' (Gibbs, 2002: 66). I am therefore focusing on the visual elements represented on screen and the possible meanings they suggest.

¹² Dialogue extracted from the film. In Portuguese: "Como diz o poeta: transforma-se o amador na coisa amada, por virtude do muito imaginar, não tenho logo o que deseja, pois já tenho em mim a parte desejada."

scenes in the film colourful plastic flowers, metal pans and gadgets, a neon-lighted movie theatre, and images of people eating popcorn and ice cream on paved streets filled with automobiles mediate the idea of a 'modern' Northeast, where all these symbols of development and progress have been integrated in people's daily lives.

This 'pop' depiction of the Northeast can also be interpreted in two ways. It can imply a repetition of the stereotyped Northeast that unsuccessfully struggles to find its place in the modern world or it can assert a profound level of self-reflexivity about a 'metamorphosed' Northeast. There are several references in the film that suggest the former perspective, based on the traditional stereotypes of the Northeast referred to earlier. In one scene, Leléu travels from town to town selling "the newest invention of pharmaceutical, therapeutical and 'laboratorial' science" to 'cure the weakness of men' (sexual impotence). By using the word 'laboratory' in a wrong way even in Portuguese (he says 'laboratória' which is a word that actually does not exist in the language), and by emphasizing notions of 'scientific' and 'advanced' which supposedly can be found only in distant developed centres, Leléu exposes the supposed lack of development in the region and consequently, the view that the Northeast seems to have been left behind in time. In fact, later in the film Leléu remembers the day when he, still a child, runs after a Zeppelin that surprisingly crosses the sky of his small hometown. The computer-generated Zeppelin contrasts with the simplicity of the colonial houses and narrow streets through which Leléu runs fascinated by the magical flying machine. The passage of the Zeppelin could be interpreted as the allegorical passage of progress. A state of development that Leléu will never reach, for, no matter how much he runs, Leléu ends up (at the end of scene) by the sea incapable of advancing further – an ocean placed between him and his dream¹³.

The 'pop' Northeast in *Lisbela e o Prisioneiro* can alternatively be interpreted as a self-reflexive and humorous critique of the old stereotypes commonly associated with the region. After all, the aspiring *carioca* Douglas is the one who is abandoned by his future wife, Lisbela, when they are just about to get married. When he tries to shrug it off by saying that he is going to live in Rio, the police chief Guedes, Lisbela's father, just laughs at him: "Who knows, you might find a wife there, eh?"¹⁴. As for Leléu's 'remedies', the film reveals that his customers (chiefly women) are more interested in his sexual services than in the miracles of modern science. In other words, the film seems to be suggesting that being stylish or 'modern' does not necessarily guarantee success.

Another example of how the film evokes reflection through laughter and apparent superficiality is the sequence of the first encounter between Leléu and the film's villain, Frederico Evandro (played by Marco Nanini), with whose wife Inaura (Virginia Cavendish) Leléu has been having an affair. Caught in the act, Leléu hides in a cupboard and pretends to be a radio. Frederico discovers and tries to

¹³ Curiously, instead of the usual utopic image of the sea connoting hope as opposed to the oppression of the arid *sertão*, the sea in this passage conveys limitation and isolation. For a detailed discussion of the symbolic depictions of the sea in Brazilian cinema see (NAGIB, 2007: 3-30).

¹⁴ Dialogue extracted from the film. In Portuguese: "*Quem sabe o senhor não encontra uma esposa por lá, hein?!*"

shoot him. The chase sequence is intercut with images from the Hollywood serial that Lisbela is watching where the hero is also being chased. The comic effect of Lelê's magical escape is emphasized by the counterpoint it provides to the black-and-white, old-fashioned images of the serial. The serials recreated in *Lisbela* thus make explicit fun of the fact that old Hollywood productions are completely overcome both technologically and in terms of narrative not only by Hollywood itself but by Brazilian films as well. On the other hand, Lisbela loves these serials. They are part of her life as much as the popular street-theatre spectacles, such as the transformation of a woman into a gorilla, suggesting that different cultural traditions and expressions have existed for a long time in this supposedly 'pure' national territory.

Apart from the laughter provoked by the pastiche, the film is reflecting on the fact that Northeasterners (and by extension Brazilians more generally) have incorporated and resignified symbols, and reworked local and non-local traditions, creating a cultural expression of their own (Dyer 1985). In this sense, the image of the Northeast proposed by the film is the image of a 'metamorphosed' region, where industrialised and globalised products and cultural forms circulate and interact with old handcrafts and cultural traditions, without necessarily one prevailing over the other (Canclini 1995). This 'pop Northeast' envisioned by Arraes and his collaborators thus has paved streets where automobiles circulate, but where a running bull still can be captured by hand in the traditional rancher's style. It is a Northeast where cinema co-exists with the staging of traditional street performances, such as the Passion of Christ, a popular cultural tradition that dates back to the early 19th Century.

The importance of this depiction is that it mediates a less utopic view of the Northeast intended to challenge regional differences – a trend also observed in other films that have recently depicted the region. In 1997, for example, the independent film *Baile Perfumado* (*Perfumed Ball*) directed by Lício Ferreira and Paulo Caldas contributed to demystify the iconicity and cultural legacy of the Northeastern backlands known as the *sertão*. The film departed from clichéd depictions of the region by depicting the thorny deciduous vegetation adapted to the semi-arid (*caatinga*) after a period of rain, when the *sertão* looks as green as the *mangues* (mangroves) that inspired the popular songs on the film's soundtrack (*Mangue Beat* music)¹⁵. In doing so, *Perfumed Ball* blurred established distinctions between these landscapes and by analogy suggested that both the 'traditional' and the 'modern' Brazil have long relied on cultural interactions.

These ideas have been further realised on recent films that present a *sertão* 'made of flesh and blood', as director Karim Ainouz has defined on the behind-the-scenes documentary about his film *O céu de Suely* (*Suely in the Sky*, 2006)¹⁶. People with actual and current aspirations inhabit this contemporary *sertão*. They fall in love, cry, buy things, dream of a better life, and work. These people do not ignore

¹⁵ Throughout the 1990s, *Mangue beat* songs mixed a variety of local rhythms, including *maracatu*, *côco*, *farró* and *embolada*, with funk, rap, reggae, rock and jazz, creating top hits in the country. The ideas behind *Mangue beat* were reproduced far beyond music, reaching the visual arts and fashion (DUNN, 2002).

¹⁶ As stated on the extra features of the films DVD.

their history, legends or local culture, but also identify themselves with a number of transnational symbols of modernity such as plastic flowers, electric home appliances, trucks, motorcycles and aspirins. This is not to eulogise a globalised *sertão*, or Northeast, where old conflicts of interest have ceased to exist and where goods circulate freely. It is necessary to emphasise at this point that enduring problems that afflict the region, such as issues of land distribution, political favouritism and frequent droughts continue to exist on both the real places and on their fictional depictions. However, recent films such as Ainouz's *O céu de Suely*, Ferreira's *Árido Movie* (2004) and Gomes's *Cinema, Aspirinas e Urubus* have presented less naïve characters and more realistic narratives that counterbalance the epic and exotic depictions of the Northeast seen in numerous Brazilian films set on the region, at least since the 1950s when Lima Barreto's *O Cangaceiro* was released.

These films however have reached a limited distribution in the domestic market, while Arraes's work has contributed to a more concrete and humanized view of the Northeast on the mainstream realm. Prior to shooting *Lisbela e o prisioneiro*, Arraes fostered his less biased view of the region, by successfully adapting Suassuna's masterpiece *O Auto da Compadecida* (*The Dog's Will*, 1999-2000) for television and film. In the adaptation, Arraes counterbalances Suassuna's poetic and mythical literary *sertão* by focusing on the human frailties of the ordinary people that inspired the characters depicted, as well as adopting trendy cinematic and televisual artifices (Pereira do Vale 2005). *O Auto da Compadecida* attracted more than 2 million cinema spectators after its exhibition on mainstream television, and it remains as one of the best box office results of recent Brazilian cinema¹⁷. Arraes's work in both *O Auto da Compadecida* and *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* thus has moved across and brought into contact the traditional and the 'pop' Brazil, challenging relational patterns between different regions of the country while raising complex aesthetic, cultural and political questions. Some of these can be examined through an analysis of the interplay of generic intertexts within the film.

Moving Across Genres, Mixing Art and Popular Forms

Throughout *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* it is not easy to determine the exact period in which the story is set. Some of the clothes that Douglas and Frederico wear could be from the 1970s, while Lisbela dresses in a 1950s style. The cars are models from the 1940s and 1950s, but scenes, such as the staging of the Passion of Christ in a small country town, feel more like the 1990s. This uncertainty fosters the idea of different temporalities being juxtaposed and interacting in the film to construct a new spatial-temporal depiction of the Northeast, where past and present, new and old, local and non-local, art and popular forms interact.

The spatial-temporal overlaps and collages in the film point to complex interactions between various cultural forms that have informed and shaped contemporary Brazilian culture. The process can be further discussed and illustrated by an analysis of the influence of popular music in the film. Apart from complementing the action as in classical films, the musical cues on the soundtrack of *Lisbela e o*

¹⁷ According to the National Cinema Agency (ANCINE), retrieved from: www.ancine.gov.br/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?sid=203 [04 January 2005].

prisioneiro add layers of meaning to the film's narrative through the songs lyrics and references to performers' personae (Donnelly 2003).

For example, when the Northeastern minstrel Zé Ramalho, known for his performances of regional rhythms and ballads, sings a hard rock song accompanied by the heavy metal band Sepultura in the film, the sound of his voice combined with electric guitars over the images pastiching Hollywood serials form an inter-textual composition which reproduces on sound and image the interaction of national and transnational cultural forms that characterizes contemporary culture¹⁸. The passage evidences that globalised trends have been incorporated into current Brazilian cultural practices. The association of Zé Ramalho's persona with the Northeast however is strong enough to also convey a clear sense of localism in the passage that counterbalances non-local influences.

Another example of how the persona of a singer adds reflexive layers to *Lisbela e o prisioneiro* is represented through the overlapping of samba and soul singer Elza Soares's persona and Inaura's character. Soares performs a *forró* (popular Northeastern rhythm) song remixed as a love ballad to emphasize a dramatic moment in Inaura's life. As a former samba diva and widow of the famous footballer Garrincha, Soares is as well known in Brazil for her musical career as for the disappointments she faced during her marriage to Garrincha, who was an alcoholic. Her domestic problems almost ended her artistic aspirations, but, after a few years of depression and ostracism, she made a triumphant return becoming a pop symbol¹⁹.

In *Lisbela*, Soares's persona plays a structural role in setting the emotional tone for the moment in which Leléu breaks up his affair with Inaura. He tells her about his love for Lisbela and that he cannot give to Inaura the love she really deserves. Inaura is left crying by a road. The wide shot of Leléu running back to Lisbela is cut to a close-up of Inaura wiping her tears and the black marks of melting make-up under her eyes, while the non-diegetic music features the voice of Soares singing: 'love leaves marks that we can not rub out'²⁰. The song's lyrics draw a clear association between the figure of Elza Soares and all that she has been through in her love life and the emotional state of Inaura at that particular moment in the film. It is a moment of catharsis in which Soares's voice emphasizes the failure of Inaura's love dream.

In *Lisbela's* closing sequence, the same strategy of adding meaning, popular appeal and reflexivity to the images through intertextual references is applied. As shown in table 2, the closure begins with the staging of two versions of the villain's death. The first version provides the viewer with the scenario that Lisbela killed the villain to save her lover, Leléu. In the second version, we find out that the person who actually fired the gun was Inaura, who also wanted to save Leléu.

¹⁸ In the same way the juxtaposition of *Mangue Beat* songs and images of the *sertão* in *Perfumed Ball* contributed to rediscover the country's traditional landscape in the context of the 1990s (NAGIB 2007).

¹⁹ In fact, her life has been told in the biographical film *Garrincha, estrela solitária* (2004).

²⁰ Extract from the original song *Espumas ao Vento* by Flávio José, in Portuguese: 'o amor deixa marcas, que não dá pra apagar'.

Tabl. II. – THE VILLAIN’S DEATH

| Scene | Dialogue | Action |
|---------------|---|---|
| First version | Frederico: “Soon, we will see each other up above.” Narrator: But before the killer pulls the trigger . . . Lisbela suddenly appears and shoots Frederico . . . who falls mortally wounded. Leléu: “Wow! I must be superman! Did the bullet bounce off me?” Chief Guedes: (talking to Lisbela in the background) “My child, you killed a man!” Leléu: (turning to her) “Miss Lisbela, my flag of Brazil!” | Frederico is about to shoot Leléu. The camera moves to reveal Lisbela hidden in the background and pointing a gun at him. Both Leléu and Frederico fall by the sound of the gunshot. Leléu is surprised to find out he is still alive and Lisbela appears holding the gun. |
| Final version | Narrator: In the previous episode . . . The notorious Frederico Evandro was about to Shoot Leléu. Leléu: (in close up) “Again?” Frederico: “Soon, we will see each other up above.” Narrator: at this exact moment Lisbela suddenly appears . . . ready to defend her beloved, but before she can pull the trigger . . . Inaura appears and shoots Frederico . . . who falls mortally wounded. | The film title <i>Lisbela and the Prisoner</i> on screen with the words ‘Final Episode’ juxtaposed to the image. Cut to a quick close of Leléu and then to the same scene with Frederico about to shoot him. The camera moves according to the narration to reveal Lisbela and then Inaura both pointing guns at Frederico. |

The versions of the villain’s death are constructed visually and narratively pastiching the Hollywood serials that Lisbela is fond of watching, therefore, by referring to these serials which were very popular in Brazil during the 1940s and 1950s, the film addresses the nostalgic pleasure of that moment of Brazil’s cultural history. At the same time, the different versions of the villain’s death also draws on the popularity in Brazil of ‘crime-watch’ television programmes, such as *Linha Direta* broadcasted nationally by the *Globo* television network. As it happens on TV, the sequence in the film is structured over reconstructions of an unsolved crime, with the narration in the background gradually revealing the mystery. Other generic references that shape the film’s intertextual narrative are observed later in the closure sequence.

After the villain’s death, Leléu and Lisbela drive away in Leléu’s colourful *carro de som* that recalls the *teatro mambembe* (popular street theatre) from which he made his living. The scene echoes a perfect melodrama happy ending until Lisbela’s interruption: ‘Wait a minute!’ she yells, at which the non-diegetic music comes to a halt. Leléu looks puzzled and she explains: ‘the best part of a movie is how it ends’²¹. She implies the final kiss between the lovers but, unexpectedly, she turns to the audience:

²¹ In Portuguese: “Espera um pouquinho! É que o melhor do cinema é o jeito que termina”.

"Maybe in this [movie] theatre there is at least one couple in love who will watch to the very end. And even after the movie is over, they'll still sit there for a long time until the theatre is completely empty. And then they'll slowly start moving, as if they're waking up after dreaming about our story."²²

Both Lisbela and Leléu look straight at the camera while she talks about the experience of the film. 'I hope they liked it', Leléu concludes finally kissing her. The music restarts. The letters '*fim*' appear over the image. The characters directly addressing the audience is clearly a reference to Arraes's popular comic programmes on television²³, while the word '*fim*' over the image evokes old Hollywood movies that are usually screened in the afternoons on Brazilian TV.

Next follows a wide-angle shot of a cinema auditorium with a blank screen. It is the same movie theatre where the film began, but now the credits are rolling and people are leaving. The sequence thus refers overtly to classical genres such as romantic comedy and features such as the classical characters (the villain, the hero, the innocent girl), while at the same time resorting to the stylistic devices of art cinema (for example, distanciation techniques as in the various versions of the villain's death), as well as the self-reflexive film-within-a-film structure. The references to various cinematic traditions reveal the film's strategy as being that of re-working different cultural traditions and forms, as well as playing with the pleasures of cinema itself; that is, playing with cinema experienced as a fantasy, as a dream in which love is the final reward evoked through the pleasure of the delayed, hence desired, final kiss.

However, the film still does not end with the wide-angle shot of the cinema auditorium. There is a final moment in the sequence when the audience is explicitly invited to engage with and in reconciliation. As Lisbela suggested when she addressed the audience, a couple stays until the very end. It is Leléu and Lisbela themselves who move slowly as if awaking from a dream. This sequence implies the overlapping of dream [the film], and reality [the experience of watching the film]. The credits rolling suggests that people can leave if they want, but the final image of Leléu and Lisbela walking towards the camera and out of frame invites those who have chosen to stay to share the pleasure of reconciliation with a cinema that can be both fantastic and to some extent realistic. A cinema that shapes and is shaped by the idea that supposedly opposing forces such as fiction and reality, tradition and modernity, art and popular, local and non-local forms coexist and transverse the cinematic landscape to insist that the Brazilian cultural fabric, be it from the North or the South, must be considered in relation to ever-changing contexts, rather than in relation to prescriptive ideologies of regional and national identities (Dunn 2002). From this perspective, it seems that the film

²² In Portuguese: "mas talvez nessa sala tenha pelo menos um casal apaixonado que vai assistir até o finalzinho. E mesmo depois do filme acabar, eles vão ficar parados um tempão, até o cinema esvaziar todinho. Aí vão se mexendo devagar, como se estivessem acordando depois de sonhar com a estória da gente."

²³ Since the 1980s, Furtado and Arraes have collaborated on a number of projects, for example, the TV series *Armação Ilimitada* – a Brazilian sitcom for teenagers – that familiarized the Brazilian public with features such as characters talking straight to the camera, action being played backwards, references to slapstick comedy, all edited with a range of national and international popular songs (PEREIRA DO VALE 2005).

embraces the ‘pop’ impulse to exploit and subvert the logic of Brazil’s historical North-South divide, but instead of proposing a solution, the film invites spectators to make their own judgements as the image of Léleu and Lisbela walking out of frame and into our minds suggests.

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