Building Cool: How Brazil Became (Tropical) Modern[1]

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Resumo

This article investigates representations of Brazil in the US media, focusing particularly on the period beginning in the late 1930s, with the participation of Brazil in the NY Worlds Fair, and ending with the inauguration of Brasilia and the rise of Bossa Nova in the early 1960s. I argue that in those years, Brazil's representations became more complex adding to the focus on nature, traditions and exotic primitivism, images of Brazil as a modern nation, a country of the future, albeit a beacon of a *tropical* modernity. My objective is not only to document this process of image fashioning and refashioning but also to demonstrate how the project of representing the Other is necessarily layered and intertextual, creating complex cultural memories that are often in dialogue and sometimes in conflict with each other.

Palavras-chave: Representations; Brazil; Brazilian architecture; cultural memory; Carmen Miranda; Brasilia

Introduction

This article investigates representations of Brazil in the US media, focusing particularly on the period beginning in the late 1930s with the participation of Brazil in the NY Worlds Fair and ending with the inauguration of Brasilia and the rise of Bossa Nova in the early 1960s. I argue that in those years, Brazil's representations became more complex adding to the focus on nature, traditions and exotic primitivism, images of Brazil as a modern nation, a country of the future, albeit a beacon of a *tropical* modernity. Tropical here, as I hope to demonstrate, was used to signify more than a geographic condition, but a state of being. And this state of being, and the Brasilia's and Brazil's tropical modernism came with an evolving sound track. It was born with Carmen Miranda's convoluted samba rhythms and tongue twisting lyrics and matured with the arrival of *Bossa Nova*, a musical style that came to represent, in the U.S., the ultimate in early1960s 'cool.'

My objective here is not only to document this process of image fashioning and refashioning but also to demonstrate how the project of representing the Other is necessarily layered and intertextual, creating complex cultural memories that are in dialogue and often in conflict with each other. As well as to investigate how these representations sometimes

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ebgan with the blessings of the Brazilian government, in attempts to build what we now have come to call soft power, or nation branding, and other times as a result of policies sponsored by the U.S. government.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s a subtle shift in the way Brazil was represented in the US media began to take place. Modernity, in the early years of the Good Neighbor policy (1933-1946)[i], was the province of the United States and Europe, where art, architecture and music were continuously been transformed and challenged, revolutionized, in the metastasizing vanguard movements of the first decades of the 20th century. Brazil, and most of the vast colonial and post-colonial lands, was imagined as an exotic, and troubled, paradise, with catchy rhythms and racy costumes, or lack of them, if you subscribed to the National Geographic Magazine. National Geographic Magazine, has been widely studied as a central force in the construction of many of the U.S. views of the world (sources here). Starting in 189X, the magazine published by the National Geographic Society published srticels narrating many of the anthropological and geographical expeditions in remote areas of the world. Their coverage of Brazil was exemplar of the way they portrayed most of the world, but also of the overall coverage of Brazil received in that period. From March 1891 when the magazine first mentioned Brazil in its pages until 1939 the 21 mentions of Brazil were mostly in small notes regarding coffee production, small political events and discoveries of minerals, natures boutny and indigenous people. During those years only XX full-length articles on Brazil were published.

In 1942 an article was published on Rio de Janeiro, beginning, what I am arguing here, was a transition to a more complex layered representation that juxtaposed the tribal/natural excesses and the sensual/exotic carnivalesque with a modern future exemplified by architecture, urban growth, and design. These shifts did not emerged from a political vacuum, but rather as a result of an increasing concern with hemispheric unity in opposition to war in Europe and the growing Axis powers' attempts to gain favors with South American leaders. The Office of the Coordinator of Interamerican Affairs, in charge of implementing the Good Neighbor Policies was spearheaded by Nelson Rockfeller and established in 193X. It is main objective was to [PP explaining the function fo the office and its mains operations as well as forms of distribution of information (newsreels; movies in partnership with Hollywood; music; etc..).

Arriving in 193X on Browdway and in 1940 in Hollywood, Carmen Miranda, *the Brazilian Bombshell*, with her outrageous costumes and pounds of jewelry, platform shoes, exposed midriff and extravagantly decorated turbans, became the highest paid female artist

in Hollywood (source), while embodying the notion of excessive exoticism, and codifying the exotic Other for movie goers. Carmen Miranda first appearance in the US was partly sponsored by the Getulio Vargas' government who saw in her performances in the U.S. a chance to promote Brazilian coffee. But soon, this controlled effort of "nation branding" was subverted by her Hollywood stardom that fixed her image. The Brazilian élites came to abhor her representations of the country, while the radio audiences that had built her popularity in Brazil savored her success**.** Her response to the critiques in Brazil to her Hollywood performances was a fantastic parodic/self-reflexive song, released in 1940. "They said I returned Americanized" was one of her last songs recorded in Brazil but it is a useful counterpoint to the discussion of the representations of Brazil that began to circulate in 1939 with the inauguration of the Brazilian pavilion in the Worlds Fair in New York. In the song she talks about how Brazilians see her returning Americanized, with lots of money and no taste for Brazilian delicacies; that the sounds of traditional samba instruments horrify her. But she ends debunking those claims by expressing her love of Brazil and her roots in tradition.

The images of the exotic, voluptuous, uncontrollable sexuality that Carmen Miranda portrayed become a hallmark of the Brazilian woman. Eros Volusia, 'Brazil's top dancer" portrayed on the cover of Life Magazine on September 22, 1941, exemplify these representations. The photo spread of a sensual, scantily clad dancer was explained in the following text:

> "Brazil's Eros Volusia does Negro Witch Dance - The blood of Brazil's three dominant racial strains --Portuguese, Indian and Negro-flow in the veins of supple young Eros Volusia. But the dances that have made her Rio de Janeiro's outstanding dance artist come straight from African Jungles. […] Heretofore unreceptive to US offers she now contemplates a good neighbor tour north."

But the images of Eros Volusia and Carmen Miranda, that circulated in Hollywood movies in the late 1930s and early 1940s, shared space, in what Appadurai (199X) termed the mediascape, with a few articles, in National Geographic Magazine, The New York Times, Time magazine and other venues that started to point to a shift, a shift that would be solidified with the opening, in 1943 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, of "Brazil Builds: Architecture new and old 1652-1942." This exhibition followed the 1939 New York Worlds Fair, where the Brazilian Pavilion was praised for its innovative architecture. But these two architectural successes, and the many stories about the exhibit and building circulated side by side with images of Carmen Miranda, and coffee exporting, as part of the Good Neighbor policy initiatives to build good will with the US neighbors south of border.

Building cultural memories

Foreign nations, and Brazil in the case of this study, are represented overtime in the U.S. media, here broadly construed to more than just mass media to be consumed by U.S. residents. But these representations are produced in a complex process of layering knowledge, producing material traces (Nora, 1989) of an idea of a nation, mostly through productions of visual and aural texts. New representations build upon previous constructions never totally supplanting the ones that existed before. Rather, these texts enter a dialogue with previous representations of that nation refocusing the idea and the memory of that country. These layers of textual representations work through an intertextual process to built upon the remembering and recreating of ideas about a nation.

According to Wartella and Nerone (1989 cited in Zelizer 1995) media offers sites for the "creation of social memory". Zelizer (1995) argues further that media helps "organize information at a point contemporaneous to the event, so too have they helped organize information at a point somewhat distant from the event" (232). "Collective memory comprises recollections of the past that are determined and shaped by the group. By definition collective memories thereby presume activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation and often contestation" (Zelizer 1995). But this process of remembering is "constantly unfolding, changing and transforming."

For Assmann (2011) "memory is what allow us to construe an image or narrative of the past and, by the same process, to develop an image and narrative of ourselves" (15). This process of narrating the past allows for the present to be framed. So when we 'think' of Brazil, the contemporary ideas of what Brazil is, is co-constructed with the traces of previous memories of Brazil that circulate in media texts. Assmann continues by arguing that memories are embodied and embedded, and this embedness "requires social and cultural frames for it embedness" (17).

I am using intertextuality here to Barthes and Kristeva's use of the term to refer to audiences intertextual readings. I am building a case here to understand these textual constructions of Brazil as part of an intertextual play that allows the consumers of these images to understand that nation, in different historical times, as the result of these complex interrelationships between movies, magazines, radio, live concerts, museum exhibitions and other sources of information and the possible pleasure derived from the consumption of these texts.

These images/representations of modernity permeate the representation of Brazil until the present with repeated coverage of Brazilian design in architecture and art magazines and by media experts both in academia and public press that repeatedly argue that Brazil is one of the leading media producers in the world. These strands of representations, the tropical and the modern, I argue maintain an intertextual relationship that builds upon each other to generate an argument for Brazil as a tropical modern nation. But these representations do not grow alone, they build on images of Carmen Miranda, native Brazilians in the pages of National Geographic, Ze Carioca and other characters in Disney's movies and many other images that already existed and worked together in this intertextual narrative. These representations maintain a dialogue and remain active in the collective memory of a culture and are accessed periodically to be used for the interpretation of new information. When The Simpsons travelled to Brazil in an episode aired in March 2014, in which Homer plays an incorruptible umpire, the exoticism of the 1930s and the modernism of the 1960s is embedded in the violent representations of the last few decades, which have circulated in news media and movies set in urban slums in Rio de Janeiro.

The first glimpse of tropical modernism

A headline in May 1938, in the NYT read, "Tropical Pavilion planned by Brazil" for the New York World's Fair of 1939. This architectural style that began gaining international visibility that moment would still be referred in the mid-1940, after the MOMA exhibit Brazil Builds had toured the US as a tropical architecture that was based on stylistic choices and solutions that were the result of environmental constraints. But "according to most contemporary interpretations, the 'Brazilian style" expressed a stage forward in the maturity of the modern movement." (p.161 Deckker, Zilah Quezado, Brazil Built: the architecture of the modern movement in Brazil, New York: Spon Press).

On October 9, 1940, the Museum of Modern Art in New York inaugurated a solo exhibit of Brazilian painter Candido Portinari. The museum had already acquired in 1939 a painting by the artist, "Morro" showing a hillside slum in Rio de Janeiro. The painting had been exhibit in the Brazilian Pavilion of the worlds fair. The exhibit catalogue stresses the lack of success that Portinari have experience in Brazil because "a good many Brazilians have felt that these pictures libel Brazil." In 1935, Portinari sent his first picture to the Carnegie International in Pittsburg. The catalogue of the MOMA retrospective explains that prior to packing the painting his wife "fastened to its back a figa. A good luck charm

respected all over Brazil." The painting won the second honorable mention and Meyric Rogers wrote: "Brazil is being rescued from obscurity by Portinari's Coffee, which is a satisfactory effort to say something with distinct flavor not based in Paris models." Portinari also painted a series of frescoes on the Ministry of Education building in Rio. A building that would become iconic of the "tropical" modernist architecture of Brazil. His painting's presence in the Brazilian pavilion of the worlds fair settled his fate in the United States as the artist representing Brazil during the Good Neighbor years. The complaints about Portinari's paintings by Brazilians voiced in the MOMA catalogue refer to his imagery: "He paints negroes and mulatos". The catalogue goes own to explain the emphasis of touristic brochures from Brazil on whiteness, explaining however that "negroes and mullatos are treated with far greater justice an understanding [in Brazil] than they are in New York City." The catalogue presents Portinari as an uncompromising artist "the more he is thwarted and obstructed, the deeper his loyalty to the mulatto and Negro has become." In their analysis of Portinari's paintings the catalogue emphasizes possible interpretations of how he reads race in the Brazilian environment.

Portinari's show in New York was an important part of the U.S. commitment to the Good neighbor policy. It was also a way to firm the exotic and tropical nature of the Brazilian modernist project. His work was intrinsically associated with two of the most important landmarks of the new Brazilian architecture: the Ministry of Education building in Rio and the Brazilian Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's fair. By presenting a painter that was both part of the establishment in Brazil but shunned by part of the Brazilian elite because of the racial construction he was painting, the neighbor of the south remained exotic. An exotic mixture of cultures that firmly planted Brazil in the terrain that would allow Carmen Miranda to dance in her platform shoes and Donald Duck to learn how to samba.

The bahiana and her balangandans

"That Night in Rio", premiered in March 1941. Carmen Miranda and Rio de Janeiro are central to the narrative, although neither 'gets the girl' (or the man for that matter). It was her second film in Hollywood, and it solidified her, and Brazil's, tropical exoticism. Freire-Medeiros (2005), in her work on how Hollywood invented Rio de Janeiro, discusses the ways in which "That Night in Rio", presents Rio de Janeiro, the city, and by extension Brazil and Brazilians as tropical Others. She writes about the settings and the excessive use of palm trees and ferns through the city reinforcing the natural, primitive and exuberant

aspect of the city and the Brazilian character. She argues that in the movie, the painted sets of the Sugar Loaf and the excessive foliage are a visual counterpoint to the games with unpronounceable words and rhythms that Carmen Miranda performs. Freire-Medeiros (2005) continues with a convincing argument that films like "That Night in Rio" and many of the subsequent films with Carmen Miranda, used her body and vocal expressiveness to construct the Brazilian space, a hybrid space where racial diversity is experienced harmoniously.

A few years later, in 1943, "Brazil Builds", inaugurated at the Museum of Modern Art in New York later touring (xxx number of) U.S. cities leading to a broad range of coverage, mostly portraying a budding nation on the cusp of greatness. 'Brazil Builds for the Future' (Pan American, Feb 1943); 'Brazil Blazes modern trail in Architecture' (Virginia Pilot, Norfolk, 25 June 1944); 'Brazil has much to offer US' (Plain Dealer, Cleveland OH 25, June 1944); 'Brazil leads US in Modern architecture' (Philadelphia Bulletin, 9 February 1943); 'Brazil Goes Ultramodern' (Inquirer, Owensboro, NY, 25 June 1944); Brazil Builds for Peace' (Citizen Columbus, OH, 23 November 1945); were all headlines that circulated in the United States in the years after the inauguration of Brail Builds in New York, as the show travelled through the United States hinterland. These headlines build a narrative about a country that was in ascension, as the story in National geographic termed Brazil the country of the future.

But the country of the future was not seen at the movies, except in the newsreels that were showed ahead of the feature length Miranda's movies. Those newsreels reproduced the narratives of a budding Brazil. But those images were in dialogue with images of Donald Duck dancing awkwardly in Bahia state in the Disney live action animation hybrid and "los three caballeros" while women and men danced to samba rhythms.

Home and Food magazine, on its issue in 1943, had a feature on trendy fashionable straw hats, not too far removed from summery hats to be used on an outdoor exploration. The models, fashionable, glamorous, white, women pose reading in front of images of Brazilian Buildings in the MOMA exhibit. Their relaxed stance, their laisse-faire, enjoying the outdoors in front of the gorgeous tropical architecture, posed them as women to whom leisure and pleasure was available. A clear contrast to the realities of most working class women of the period, but an already indication of the ways women would be seen and presented in the post war years already expected to come in some of the headlines. While Wear Daily proclaims that the "Exhibition of Architecture of Brilliant South American City is Reminder of Growing Appreciation of Good Clothes that will Provide Postwar

Opportunities for New York Style Leadership", *Mademoiselle* (April 1943) presented "The New After-Dark Look", with a strolling white women, tall and well dressed photographed from below to show the might of the architectural structure of the Ministry of Education in the exhibit "Brazil Builds, behind her, but also to emphasize her height and demure body. Her relaxed gaiety, carrying her light jacket onver her shoulder, on a relaxed stance, combines the promise of tropical modernism emphasized on the news stories wth the liberatory ideals of a post war society.

These opportunistic fashion shoots tried to build intertextual relationships between the growing awareness of Brazilian tropical exotic modernism allowing for the American consumers to distance themselves from the European conflict. Brazil became a way to think about the post war as well as an alternative to European pre war modernity. But these images while dissociated from the tropical exoticism of Carmen Miranda maintain a subtle connection with that narrative. Although clumsy and voluptuous, Miranda was also pushing the boundaries of the acceptable on the screen, exposing her midriff and exploding on the screen with laughter and pleasure.

But on the same year that Brazil Builds inaugurated and began touring the US, The Gang is All here was released. The tropical modernism of Brazilian architecture seems to be in synchronic with the excesses of Bugsbe berkley's romp in musicals like The Gang is All here were Carmen Miranda dances with giant bananas and strawberries in kaleidoscopic formations that are much more inspired in Mondrian and other modernist painters as well as the grid like patterns of many contemporary architecture than stained glass windows in gothic church's. But this tropical modernism ends where the tropical exoticism begins. Carmen Miranda is still the butt of the joke, and even in her gloriously proficient performances she is representing and re-emphasizing an Other for the US and the aligned nations fighting for freedom.

Brasilia and the Bossa Nova

By mid 1950s Brazil had slowly faded from the news, with sporadic stories. The decision by the Brazilian government to move its capital to the Geographical center of Brazil in the mid-1950s sparked the imagination of many in the U.S. Several US media outlets, such as Time Magazine, National Geographic, Business Week, Holidays and The New York Times among others, followed the development of the new capital with several articles in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the February 12, 1956, cover of *Time Magazine*, Juscelino Kubitschek, the elected Brazilian president is seen in profile with an idealized

representation of the futuristic capital he promised to build. Kubitschek's torso is seen at the lower left corner. The sun shines modernist rays from the top of the page. Central and south America are seen as dark purple fertile soil. The borders of Brazil are filled by intense green foliage and from its center a stylized figure emerges. The same color as the dark soil, with African/indigenous features the figure stretches his arms towards the sky, escaping, freeing himself form the land, but bringing the land, the soil, in his color with him. The dark figure is set as a background to the intensely white skyline concentration on Southern Brazil. The architecture you see in this compact image is more New York Skyline, with a Chrysleresque building in the foreground, than the modernist 'tropical' architecture of Brazil discussed in the pages of Time magazine. The image is one of otherness, dark, tropical, foreign but also mimetic of the centrality of New York in the representations of modernity.

Several stories appeared between 1956 and 1960, from announcement to inauguration that tracked the progress of the building of the new capital on the New York Times:

- Sep 20, 1959 – Beauty in Brazil's wild
- Oct 18, 1959 – Brasilia rises: The first capital of the 20th Century nears completion
- Feb 21, 1960 – Brasilia takes shape as tourist attraction

Followed by the National geographic spread.

Conclusion

I hoped to have demonstrated in this essay the complexities of representations of foreign nations, Brazil in this case, in the U.S. media when analyzed from a historical perspective. Media representations, as cultural memory theorists have demonstrated is a process of image fashioning and refashioning, a process that evolves in layers and in a continuous intertextual dialogue with different types of textual, visual and aural expressions. Newcomb and Hirsch in their early say on television talked about the importance to understand the media flow and how images dialogued with other images the came before and after. My hope here is that this process has become clear on our understanding of a nation representation. In the period investigated here, Brazil evolved form a tropical paradise to a tropical paradise with really cool architecture and music. It moved from a sexualized exotic jungle-nation to a budding powerhouse on the cusp of greatness, a country struggling to find its own voice and ways to move forward, challenging the frontier, an ideal dear to the United States psych. But this process of reframing Brazil was the result of very clear

political and economic tensions. The Second World War forced the United States to see Latin American as a necessary ally and economic partner. But this evolving representation of Brazil came to a halt with the hardening of the cold war and the fall of Brazil to an U.S. sponsored Military Coup. By 1965, just a year after the military coup, Brazil was seem as a country in need of order and control, and the progressive contemporary ideals of Brazil were challenged by those of a military state, a communist insurgence. It would take another few decades to Brazilian art and design to reclaim a central place in the Global imaginary. Coverage now found in art, design, architecture and advertising publications represent Brazil as a force in the global market.

Appendix 1
Timeline of events:

1939 – Brazilian pavilion at worlds Fair
1940 – Down Argentina Way
1940 – Portinari exhibit at MOMA
1941 – That Night in Rio
1941 – weekend in Havana
1942 – Springtime in the Rockies
1943 – The Gang is All here
1943 – Brazil Builds exhibit At MOMA NY
1944 – Los Threes Caballeros
1944 – Greenwich Village
1944 – Something for the Boys
1947 – Copacabana
1956 – Announcement of plans for Brasilia
1960 – Inauguration of Brasilia
1962 – Bossa Nova artists play at Carnegie Hall
1964 – military coup

[i] Brief explanation of what the policy was and how it was implemented…etc will come later on final draft.

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