



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture
by Robert Stam

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

Tropical Multiculturalism is “a history of Brazilian cinema from the standpoint of race, a history of Brazil itself through its cinematic representations, a reciprocally comparative study of the racial formations in Brazil and the United States, and a theorized essay on the analysis of racialized representations” (22). The book indeed delivers that and much more. Stam’s extensive exploration of race throughout 100 years of Brazilian cinema is prefaced by an illuminating comparative analysis of racism in Brazil and the US which manages to be both ruthless in its critique of Brazilian “racial democracy” and attentive enough to discern the intimate, malleable, and “inferential” nature of Brazilian racism, as well as its “lateral” circulation among the very people of color who are its direct victims. The chapter is also highly valuable for exploring the resistance to multiculturalism in Brazil, both on the right (for racist chauvinism) and on the left (for a comprehensible anti-Americanism that confuses US popular culture with US foreign policy).

Tropical Multiculturalism offers a historical and analytical account of the representation—or absence thereof—of Afro-Brazilians in film. Stam’s trajectory includes the largely white-dominated silent period, the populatesque *chanchadas* of the 1930s and 1940s, Orson Welles’s unfinished Brazilian project *It’s All True*, the Hollywoodian Vera Cruz productions of the 1950s, the realist, socially conscious cinema of the early Néelson Pereira dos Santos, and the Cinema Novo in its initial, messianic-populist moment, its subsequent self-reflexive turn, and its tropicalist phase. The last chapters deal extensively with the past three decades, documenting not only the image of blacks in white-directed films but also the emergence, for the first time in Brazil, of a generation of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous filmmakers. Stam’s conclusion offers a reflection on ethico-political and methodological principles guiding his analysis of race, strongly informed by the Oswaldian concept of anthropophagy.

The merits of Stam’s tour de force are manifold: first, the book exudes a true passion for its object. Stam is not only extremely well-informed about Brazilian cinema. He truly loves it, and that comes through on every page. Second, his commitment to an anti-racist and socially progressive agenda is genuine and emphatic, and this agenda never informs his analysis in dogmatic or sectarian fashion. Third, the book never loses sight of its audience: it includes extensive background information on the films analyzed as well as a comparative dimension which will facilitate reading by those more familiar with US cinema and culture (not only analogies with US artists, but also illuminating contrasts, e.g. the speculation that a parodic kiss like the one between the white Oscarito and the black Grande Otelo, which closes the 1954 *Matar ou Correr*, “would have provoked paroxysms of racialized homophobia in the Hollywood of the same period”).

Besides thoroughly analyzing the exclusions and progressive emergence of black themes, Stam also uncovers the ways in which Afro-Brazilian religious, musical, visual, and kinetic cultures have informed Brazilian cinema, from Carmen Miranda to the contemporary documentary of protest. Stam thus combines affirmation and critique, ideological unveiling and advocacy of recognition. Another unifying thread is the attention to the career of the greatest Afro-Brazilian film star, Grande Otelo. In one of his most poignant and compelling chapters, Stam offers a view “from Brazil” of Orson Welles’s aborted *It’s All True*, showing Welles’s anti-racist commitment as well as his informed, sympathetic, and non-hierarchical collaboration with Brazilians during his stay. The chapter is most valuable for exposing the ethnocentric and racist judgments underlying the condemnations of Welles’s Brazilian project by his biographers. The bulk of *Tropical Multiculturalism* is, however, dedicated to an analysis of *representation* and it is around this issue that will revolve most of the polemic which the book will certainly generate.

Stam must be lauded for his attention to the specificity of Brazilian racial categories (where skin color, not ancestry, is the ultimate criterion) as well as the specificity of the films analyzed. Stam does a wonderful job of showing, for example, how certain US misreadings of *Macunaima* as racist betray ignorance not only of its cultural-historical soil, but also its genre, the carnivalized grotesque. Another strand of the book's critical energies is directed at a number of films where the depiction of black struggles for justice is marred by a paternalist "white-rescue" fantasy in which the predicament of Afro-Brazilians is ultimately only a foil for the emergence of a white benevolent hero (as in *Sinhá Moça*). All in all, Stam's approach effectively combines progressive political agenda and methodological flexibility.

In spite of Stam's careful attention to the specificity of race in Brazil, his comparisons between African-Americans and Afro-Brazilians often slip into a syntactical pattern whereby the latter *still* lack what the former have *already* achieved, in an evolutionist, teleological paradigm complicit with the very colonialism so ably dismantled by Stam. Furthermore, there are a number of instances where the problem of representation is treated in a purely mimetic, "verist" manner not far from what Stam himself criticizes as a "mere positive image vs. negative image approach." In fusing his ideological analysis with mimetic reality-checking, Stam critiques, for example, filmic allegories where blacks are made to stand for "the oppressed" for reproducing "the class-over-race discourse typical of a certain Brazilian sociology" (331). But by the same token, couldn't they be said to highlight the disproportionate presence of certain races in certain classes, a phenomenon which the "class-over-race discourse" has traditionally papered over? If *Assalto ao Trem Pagador* depicts a band of thieves made up of three whites and three blacks, Stam complains that "the presence of poor whites helps obscure the structural aspects of Brazilian racism. If whites are also poor, the reasoning goes, then blacks are not poor simply because they are black" (195). To be noted, first, is the mutually exclusive nature of the two complaints. In the latter, note the immense logical leap from the mere observation of the presence of poor whites in the film to the next sentence's pearl of simplism. Needless to say, these complaints are plagued by a principle of reversibility whereby the images can often be shown, without a significant change in the analytical framework, to be saying exactly the opposite of the politically incorrect meaning Stam attributes to them.

Stam's compelling racialization of social problems (whose racial dimension is often obscured by the ideology of racial democracy) often gives way to a racialization of social agents which does not do justice to the undecidability of racial paradigms in Brazil. The 1960s left-populist project certainly lends itself to Stam's charge that it ignored racial issues, but insistent references to "the white left" misleadingly obscure the multicultural component of the left-populist movement, further ostracizing blacks in a way not unlike the (implicitly white) discourse of the (multiracial) populist left had done. In fact, Stam often presupposes an unbroken continuity between race and class which, if meritorious for forcefully establishing a connection often obscured by Brazilian racism, does not fully contemplate the mutual imbrication of the two categories. In Stam's analysis of *Tenda dos Milagres*, for example, the film's defense of black culture is presumably marred by an advocacy of the miscegenation-as-panacea ideology (Stam's strongest evidence for which is a quote from Jorge Amado, author of the source novel). Such advocacy would imply that the film supports "a theory that would lead to the disappearance of the people who actually 'carry' the culture: black people themselves" (306). The critique of miscegenation-as-whitening and miscegenation-as-social ascension has obviously been a key element in Afro-Brazilian discourse, but by linking miscegenation with the fantasy of the "disappearance of blacks," the politically correct scholar has given way to the panicked puritan, evoking a fear completely unknown and irrelevant as far as the Afro-Brazilian community is concerned.

Throughout the book, dogmatic political correctness leads Stam to the brink of telling his object of study how reality should be represented.

In spite of Stam's methodological statement that the study of representations is not an issue of "fidelity to a preexisting truth or reality" (330), one does get the sense that he often approaches his material with a prescriptive notion of what those representations should look like, even when that notion comes through only negatively. If there is one criticism that can be flung at *Tropical Multiculturalism*, then, it is that the socio-historical insights of the first chapter—on Brazilian race relations—and the theoretical sophistication of the last chapter—on representation (of race) in cinema—only occasionally translate into the analytical chapters, which often forget the fluidity and malleability of Brazilian racial patterns pointed out at the beginning (fluidity which, and Stam is correct here, does not imply any less discrimination and racial violence against blacks). His analyses often end up, then, incurring in many of the verist, essentialist, ahistoricist, and moralist deadlocks of the positive image vs. negative image approach critiqued in the last chapter.

However, I should now resort to a move of which Stam makes abundant use in the book, namely the calculated retreat through which the condemnation of negative images or stereotypes gives way to an appreciation of the film's accomplishments. *Tropical Multiculturalism* is one of the best books ever written on Brazilian cinema. In the current climate of enthusiasm for the rebirth of filmmaking in Brazil, the presence of sophisticated scholars such as Robert Stam can only be positive for this still understudied field. The several polemical points raised here—and many others—testify to the book's passionate stance on crucial issues. If you are interested in film studies, Brazil, race relations, the African diaspora, multiculturalism, the relation between history and cultural production, political oppression and cultural images, or any combination thereof, do not miss this book. It is indispensable.

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Correa, Mariza. *As ilusões da liberdade: A Escola Nina Rodrigues e a antropologia no Brasil*. São Paulo: Bragança Paulista/Universidade São Francisco, 1998. 487 pp.

This welcome study of the Nina Rodrigues School of scholarship on Brazilian social behavior and race relations demonstrates that after decades of neglect, the contributions of Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1862–1906), the Bahian professor of forensic medicine who more than any other Brazilian scholar probed the psychology of race and social pathology, are recognized by academics today. Correa names as "disciples" the scholars who followed in Nina Rodrigues's footsteps—notably Afrânio Peixoto and Artur Ramos, although cases could be made equally for others, including Ulisses Pernambucano, Roberto DaMatta, Thales de Azevedo, Luis Camara Cascudo, Darcy Ribeiro, and even Gilberto Freyre. He was also a contemporary of Manuel Querino (1851–1923), another largely unstudied Brazilian pioneer in what today would be called Afro-Brazilian history. Technically, the Nina Rodrigues School applied to physicians trained in legal medicine at the turn of the century in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia who were influenced by Nina Rodrigues's work, although his work probably had greater influence among social scientists, especially anthropologists.

Nina Rodrigues pioneered scientific interest in socially deviant behavior, examining messianic movements and ordinary Brazilians who flocked to charismatic