

## Cinematic Visions of Opera in the Tropics<sup>1</sup>

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss two specific visions of opera in the tropics, here understood as a distant, relatively mysterious and, most often, problematic place. It is certainly a view built from abroad, in centers that see the tropics as periphery. Cinema, while creating a powerful combination of images, sounds and sensations, will be taken here as one of the most meaningful ways to approach the subject, since it helps to crystallize and circulate certain notions, almost making them “natural” and giving them the allure of permanent truth. In order to do that, I will examine two highly distinct films, very different in their purposes, which somehow present various paradigms when one thinks of opera “in the tropics”: *Orphée Noir* by Marcel Camus (1959) and *Fitzcarraldo*, by Werner Herzog (1982). The latter is a narrative where opera is present as an essential part of the film and maybe the main cause of action; the former can be seen as a transposition of a possible “tropical opera” into a movie. Despite their differences, we are able to recognize in both films an emphasis on the opposition between nature and civilization, between the countryside (the forest, the mountains) and the city, and between local and foreign elements (in music, ethnic groups, etc.). Films surely bring a combination of sounds and images that is very different from a staged opera. Taking into account such elements, it is possible to examine how cinema constructed, through these two examples, two distinct visions about the migration of opera from Europe to other parts of the world.

When one thinks of the period when the Portuguese court came to Brazil (1808), there are some interesting indications for the present discussion. Inside the world

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<sup>2</sup> Studies of opera and cinema have been growing in past decades, but in this paper the approach is different from the one used by authors like Citron (2000 e 2010), Grover-Friedlander (2005) and the essays edited by Joe e R. Theresa (2002).

of opera, there is a relevant quote from a French newspaper in Rio, developing the opposition between nature and civilization:

While Rossini's music at the Imperial Theatre charms a brilliant group of spectators gathered in a beautifully decorated room with all the ornaments of the richest architecture, Indians, gathered in a forest at the same latitude, some leagues away from the civilized capital of the empire, carve up the body parts of a lost traveler, with the discordant sound of a bull horn that is their trumpet.<sup>3</sup>

Here one clearly sees a conception of the most primitive (cannibalism accompanied by barbaric music) that is in opposition to European opera, represented by its champion at the time, Rossini. It is an amplified contrast, aiming to show the many contradictions perceived by a foreign traveler in Rio de Janeiro. To another traveler, Ludwig von Rango, the vision is even more radical, since he states that "all that nature has done for this country is perfectly beautiful, and because of this anything created by man seems so much more pitiful"<sup>4</sup>. Against the splendor of nature, every human achievement will necessarily seem small, and no alternative is left for those who intend to create art.

If we remember the project for the installation of the Academy of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro from 1816 onwards, we understand that some people really believed in the possibility of transferring European cultural models to Brazil. This specific project was created by Joachim Le Breton (Barata, 1959), the former perpetual secretary of the Classe des Beaux-Arts of the Institut de France, clearly indebted to *Idéologie* and its ideas for the reorganization of French society after the Revolution. It was not a naïf project, but rather, the fruit of a long experience in the organization of artistic teaching and in art institutions, with the firm belief that societies could find the means to solve their problems through the rationalization of their institutions. Le Breton did not have a specific project for the themes used in the arts; on the other hand, another Frenchman, Ferdinand Denis, wrote a recommendation for Brazilian writers, widely known for the attention given to it by Antonio Cândido in his *Formação da Literatura Brasileira* (1959):

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<sup>3</sup> "Tandis que la musique de Rossini enchante au Théâtre Impérial une brillante société de spectateurs rassemblés dans une salle décorée avec tous les ornements de la plus riche architecture, des Indiens, réunis dans une forêt placée sous la même latitude, à quelques vingtaines de lieues de la capitale civilisée de l'empire, dépècent les membres du voyageur égaré, au son discordant d'une corne de bœuf qui leur sert de trompette". *L'Echo de L'Amérique du Sud*, October 3 1827.

<sup>4</sup> "Alles, was die Natur für dies Land gethan hat, ist vollendet schön, aber desto erbärmlicher erscheint jedes von Menschen Erschaffene". Letter, 21/12/1819 (Rango, 1832, p. 131).

If this part of America has adopted a language perfected by our old Europe, it must reject mythological ideas related to Greek fables. Corroded by our long civilization, they were brought to seashores where nations could not well understand them, where they should have always remained unknown. They are not in harmony, they agree neither with climate, nor with nature, nor with the traditions. America, sparkling in its youth, must have new and energetic thoughts [...]<sup>5</sup>

Here the separation between an imported language – understood as universal and something that can be perfected and adapted – and local themes is clearly stated. So we recognize an oscillation in how foreigners saw the possibilities of cultural relations between the New World and Europe: on the one hand, the complete unfeasibility of a cultural project in Brazil; on the other, the possibility of some adaptation, as long as local themes were used. Between these extremities, there would be other ways of solving tensions between local and foreign traditions. The so called “indianist movement,” Romanticism, and Modernism, along with the Anthropophagical movement, would constitute different answers to these questions that have been posed since the beginning of an internationalization process. By analyzing the two films mentioned above, I believe it is possible to distinguish some recurrent paradigms related to the cultural transference between Europe and Brazil, and, more specifically, to the production of operas and its possible histories.

### ***Fitzcarraldo.***

Werner Herzog’s film here is adopted to explicitly show an important and more traditional way of imagining cultural transference: opera is represented as an almost impossible dream and demands a herculean and maybe inglorious effort<sup>6</sup>. Transferring here means erecting a theater with proper acoustics and the usual features of an opera house in the beginning of the 20th century (majestic building, a good foyer, different rooms, orchestra pit, etc.), and, of course, importing soloists and a choir, instruments and musicians and so on. If, in the one hand, we see, at the be-

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<sup>5</sup> “Si cette partie de l’Amérique a adopté un langage qu’a perfectionné notre vieille Europe, elle doit rejeter les idées mythologiques dues aux fables de la Grèce: usées par notre longue civilisation, elles ont été portées sur des rivages où les nations ne pouvaient bien les comprendre, où elles auraient dû toujours être méconnues; elles ne sont en harmonie; elles ne sont d’accord ni avec le climat, ni avec la nature, ni avec les traditions. L’Amérique, brillante de jeunesse, doit avoir des pensées neuves et énergiques comme elle [...]”. Denis (1826, p. 515-516).

<sup>6</sup> I do not mean that Herzog is an adept of this kind of thought, but he critically incorporates it, leading us to reflect upon the subject.

ginning of the film, Caruso's and Sarah Bernhardt's performance at the Opera House in Manaus, as a concrete example of this transference, at the same time, the film emphasizes a series of contradictions: local audience, i.e., native Brazilians, is kept outside the opera house; the usher (Milton Nascimento) is black and is also excluded from the performance<sup>7</sup>; it is only the money generated by rubber, the source of the local barons' fortune, that makes possible the insertion of European culture in the jungle, and this whole process is depicted as unmeasured and inadequate.

Fitzcarraldo's dream is to build an opera house in Iquitos, in Peru, and take Caruso there for the premiere. Without the support of local barons, the strange hero obtains some land in the jungle to harvest the latex from rubber trees and make the necessary money to build his theater. As we know, in order to accomplish this, he has to take a boat over a hill between two rivers, confront hostile indigenous people and solve numerous problems. The forest is represented as insurmountable, even indifferent to the violent civilizing process. In the film, various small elements emphasize the multiple contradictions involved in the project: rich people are just rich - they waste money, they do not appreciate good music, they go to brothels and they do not have any purpose. Natives, almost always shirtless (and therefore excluded from one of the essential elements of culture - clothing), do not seem to have their own initiative and only perform tasks with some languor. Don Aquilino, José Lewgoy's character, insists that "it is not easy to civilize Indians", which could be extended to everything that is presented to him: it is not easy to civilize the tropics. When the expedition in the jungle starts, the indigenous people are not shown and we only hear their dreadful drums, which are an alert to an imminent but invisible threat. According to the Dutch captain, the jungle deceives the senses, is full of lies, demons and illusions. Any kind of "progress", like the railroad (where Grande Otello appears in a very minor role), is shown in ruins, consumed by the jungle. Actually, we see only a small part of the railroad, as a way of entering the dense forest, but we realize immediately it is an impossible task. The black smoke that is seen over the boat indicates a very concrete violation of nature, which in turn is always depicted as hostile. It is then an unceasing clash and any attempt at

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<sup>7</sup> It is tempting to interpret the presence of Milton Nascimento as a "local" reaction to Caruso. Leaving behind any chronological verisimilitude, it is as if it would be possible to respond to the Italian Caruso with a Brazilian Caruso. In the film, the usher tells Molly (Claudia Cardinale) and Fitzcarraldo (Klaus Kinsky): "I would like to be in there, myself".

improvement will fail. If we look at Herzog's work, both *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Cobra Verde* (1987, based on Bruce Chatwin's *The Viceroy of Ouidah*) place their leading characters in an impossible relationship between the European and the tropical worlds (African or South American). In both cases, the encounter with the other leads to the hero's complete destruction. As Lutz Koepnick (1993) reminds us, when commenting on *Fitzcarraldo* and *Aguirre*, the two films bring the representation of a Western hero incapable of leaving behind his European imagery when confronting the unknown, resulting in his ultimate and unavoidable downfall.

On many levels, music has an essential role in *Fitzcarraldo*<sup>8</sup>. When the drums seem to threaten the boat, the reaction of Fitzcarraldo is to take the gramophone to the top and respond with Caruso's voice. Because of the way this scene was conceived, the image has become an unforgettable reference: facing the unsubmissive grandness of nature, Caruso's voice is the only possible way of competing with it. He had used the same trick, with the rubber barons (without success), and with children. Thus, civilization triumphs only in the confrontation between the barbarians' music and European music. A little later in the film, after the crew has deserted, Fitzcarraldo once again appeals to music, saying that "what we really need now is Italian opera". Here, as in the relatively happy ending (with the suggestive aria *A te, o cara, amor talora* from Bellini's *I Puritani*, act 1), music has a restorative and, most of all, redemptive role. In opposition to a series of impossibilities, to the whole miscomprehension of both sides (natives and Europeans), European music, presenting itself as universal, is capable of conquering the barbarians' ears and the souls. Of course Fitzcarraldo's interest in opera is personal: his passion for music is so limitless that it is both the cause of all his misfortune and the only remedy to it. Within his madness, neither the landscape nor nature nor even people have any importance to him; the only thing that matters is music, which can also redeem him.

However, in this specific case, music is more a *deus ex machina* than a plain conviction of the characters or the director himself. In Les Blank's documentary *Fitzcarraldo, Burden of Dreams*, we notice a curious and perverse similarity between Fitzcarraldo's and Herzog's projects – it is as if the film *Fitzcarraldo* were Herzog's autobiography. The director faced a series of financial, political, strategic difficulties and had to wait almost four years to see his movie completed. At the end of

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of the music in the film, see Lepert (2007).

the documentary, precisely at the moment when many problems were about to make his project impossible, Herzog confessed:

It's an unfinished country. It's still pre-historical. The only thing that is lacking is the dinosaurs here. It's like a curse weighing on an entire landscape. And whoever goes too deep into this has his share of that curse. So we are cursed with what we are doing here. It's a land that God, if he exists, has created in anger. It's the only land where creation is unfinished yet. Taking a close look at what's around us there is some sort of a harmony. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. And we in comparison to the articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle; uh, we in comparison to that enormous articulation we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban novel – a cheap novel<sup>9</sup>.

Somehow Herzog himself falls into the colonialist trap, trying to domesticate the forest during the film production and he seems to be incapable of finding other ways of relating to nature, which is only hostile to him ("pre-historical", "unfinished", "obscene"). So there is a discontinuity – insuperable again – between Western culture (opera, film) and the jungle which has become the absolute other. And it is only through an act of violence that European culture can impose itself in a foreign land, with indeed doubtful results. If we think of expressions like "the conquest of the useless"<sup>10</sup> and "the spectacle of the forest", or even "the burden of dreams", we understand the great civilizing process as a pointless chimera.

Examples that reinforce the idea of conflict between civilization and nature are numerous and recurrent. We can, for instance, recall Aldous Huxley's 1929 essay "Woodsworth in the Tropics", in which the author criticizes a romantic view of nature, emphasizing the great contradictions in the experience of what is perceived as hostile. Some passages are explicit in the combat against Woodsworth and his followers: while stating that the poet's visions are valid only for the latitude fifty north, Huxley says that, in the tropics, it would not be possible to experience the same feelings:

The jungle is marvelous, fantastic, beautiful; but it is also terrifying, it is also profoundly sinister. There is something in what, for lack of a better word, we must call the character of great forests [...] which is foreign, appalling, fundamentally and utterly inimical to intruding man. The life of those vast masses of swarming vegetation is alien to the human spirit and hostile to it (Huxley, 1929, p.114).

<sup>9</sup> Herzog to Les Blank (1982, 1:20:07 – 1:24:06).

<sup>10</sup> *The Conquest of the Useless* is the title on Herzog's own reflections about the movie (Herzog, 2010).

It is clear that Huxley's vision of nature and the role of man in it is much more complex than the passage may suggest; the author insists mostly on strangeness as a fundamental experience of nature, as Schmithausen (2001) reminds us, and in later texts he broadens his views of mankind's role in nature attacked by civilization. We could remember the concrete experience of Fordlandia, the infamous project implanted by Henry Ford in the Amazon region, with a series of contradictions and imbued with the purpose of domesticating untamable nature (Grandin, 2009). But it is always important to remember that the opposition here is between civilization (European or North-American) and nature, and not between European/North-American culture and, in this case, Amazonian culture. Once again, it is relevant to state that Herzog is not a European colonialist who reproduces old patterns. On the contrary, his film makes the various difficulties relating to contact between two such different worlds explicit; and Les Blank's documentary brings even more elements to the discussion. However, in *Fitzcarraldo*, one sees one of the paradigms constantly associated with colonization, something that had already been enunciated by Humboldt, but also visible in other travelers' accounts and present in many other examples, consolidating a sort of clear vision of the difficulty of knowing and controlling what is presented as the tropics.

### ***Orphée Noir (Black Orpheus)***

Another possible model, adopted by Brazilian romantic writers, is the use of local themes as an alternative to European ones. There is still one question left: is language (language itself, music, painting, sculpture, movies, etc.) universal and therefore independent of what is being discussed? Sartre (1948), in the preface to an anthology of black poetry, tried to demonstrate how the language of the French colonizer is transformed into a possible instrument of local expression and also of resistance. The "indianist" wave in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be read in this context, but we can also think of another development, the one of adapting and updating European myths, which can be seen in *Black Orpheus* by Marcel Camus. Orpheus' eternal love for Eurydice is a central myth in the Western cultural tradition and also in the history of opera itself since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. For his connection to music and poetry and to their combined powers, Orpheus is in the foundation of opera and also of the various attempts to reform this kind of spectacle. The presence of Orpheus, indicating an intimate relation with music and poetry and their redemption powers, has been used through the ages to create, adapt and renovate spectacles.

Creating a Brazilian Orpheus (black, living in the slums of Rio) was certainly an ambitious project. There is a previous adaptation of the myth for the theater in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is called *Orfeu na roça* (Orpheus on the Farm), libretto by Correa Vasques<sup>11</sup>, and is a parody of *Orphée aux enfers* (1858) by J. Offenbach, with the libretto by Halévy and Crémiaux. It is somehow a farce of a farce, since Offenbach's opera was already distant from the original myth. *Orfeu na roça* is a tropical version, with a strange list of characters that include *Zeferino Rabeca* (Zepherin Fiddle - Orpheus), *Joaquim Preguiça* (Joakim Sloth - Morpheus), *Dona Deolinda* (Miss Beautiful - Venus) etc.<sup>12</sup>.

In this case, the adaptation attempt happens through satirical criticism, which already existed in the French version, but this time with the insistence on local elements that emphasize the contradictions between the original myth and its counterpart in tropical lands. Somehow, the attempt looks ridiculous, since while assuming new configurations the myth is completely transformed, losing its original gravity. Would this be the only possible way? Procópio Ferreira wrote an essay on Vasques trying to defend comedy, which is no longer necessary today, and when dealing with the difficulties of the theater in Brazil stated: "Let us remember that art is an effect and not the cause. It is born spontaneously and develops according to certain environmental conditions. It is absolutely a fruit of the earth – it does not impose itself, it cannot be transplanted" (Ferreira, 1979, p. 13). In the natural metaphor, associate to a deterministic vision, it becomes clear that the idea of transference, with or without violence, would not be possible.

But coming back to Marcel Camus's film, there are many other references: from the aforementioned Sartre preface to *Orphée Noire* of *Présence Africaine* (1948) to, in a more specific way, *Orfeu da Conceição*, by Vinicius de Moraes, partially adapted with music by Tom Jobim, which premiered in the Opera House in Rio de Janeiro in 1956<sup>13</sup>. The play oscillates between the "hellenization" of the slums, inspired in Calzabigi's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, and the updating of the myth. This is an-

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<sup>11</sup> The play can be read in Ferreira (1979, p. 166-210). Vasques also wrote a sequel, *Orpheus in the City*, published in 1870.

<sup>12</sup> This is not the place to discuss the play and its sources. For details, see the introduction of Procópio Ferreira's book; Souza (2006); Yon (2014); Levin (2014) and Fléchet (2014).

<sup>13</sup> The story of the making of Moraes' *Orfeu* and its film adaptation is long and tortuous. See Stam (1997, p. 166-178).

other possibility of adaptation: this time, European models, seen as universal, are taken to a very different context and can be recognized even in the slums. In the notes to the play (Moraes, 1986, p. 400), the author indicates that “all characters must be normally performed by black actors” and also insists on the use of slang, which, since it changes all the time, must be always updated. Through this he could make sure that two universes, distant in time and place – mythical Greece and Rio de Janeiro – could be brought together. The transformation of the play into a film came with a series of changes, and only a few original ideas were used, which were not approved by Moraes. Still, the movie managed to create a powerful combination of images and music and seduced a gigantic audience outside Brazil, winning the Palme d’Or at Cannes and the Oscar for Best Foreign Film. Despite several contradictions and the intense polemics that followed the production, the film helped to create an important and almost perennial image of Brazil, its people, its morals and its music, albeit inauthentic.

Every single element in the movie is related to a certain exoticism that was very appealing to international audiences: people are dancing almost all the time; it is carnival, but the presence of music, especially percussion, during the whole movie creates the sensation of constant trepidation. Almost all the characters are black, dressed in a very colorful manner, and lead what seems to be a happy life in poverty. The major part of the drama is set in the hills, with the spectacular landscape of Rio as its background. In some moments, there is an important contrast between the hills and the European city -- the Capanema building (a landmark of modern architecture in Brazil), some of the belle-époque buildings in Cinelândia (Opera House, National Library) and the National Parliament. It is particularly in the non-European, and, consequently, in the non-white space that an almost naturally musical people appear: everyone dances and sings all the time<sup>14</sup>, melodies are almost spontaneous, and it is there that the love story, with its tragic ending, will take place. Pastoral drama, which is in the genesis of opera, is transmuted into a black drama in the slums. As an opposition to the declining white civilized world that has lost its roots, it is as if a more authentic and sensual black world was rising – the only possible place for the existence of a new tragedy with music. The success of the film is probably related to this exotic ambience, which reinforces

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that among the animals that live in Orpheus’ home there is a cock named Caruso.

stereotypes that have been criticized in Brazil and abroad, by Jean-Luc Godard and Barack Obama, among others<sup>15</sup>.

Music, in the movie, brings a combination of a more traditional samba (*samba-canção*, *samba-enredo*), carnival tunes (including *frevo*), umbanda rhythms and the then brand new bossa nova<sup>16</sup>. Some authors note that, from a more rigorous point of view, bossa nova had not yet reached the hills in 1959, and, therefore, it would not have been the main musical form there. It is curious to note that some kind of accuracy is expected from movies that portray Brazil, even though they are clearly an artistic creation – the same accuracy is never expected from opera, for instance. So we find a generic Brazilian music, with a vaguely seductive carnival flavor, which is presented as a tropical and black alternative to the more traditional model of *dramma per musica*. Even those who try to have a critical view of cultural transference repeat a certain idealization of Brazil and its music. Robert Stam (1997, p. 176-177), who pointed out numerous contradictions in the film, states:

But ultimately, the charm of *Black Orpheus* derives from pulsating energy of carnival itself, with its combination of incomparable percussive force with intensely lyric beauty. The beauty of the film thus lies in what Metz would call the “pro-filmic” elements: the carnival that virtually staged itself before Marcel Camus’s cameras. As one of the most gigantic expressions of popular creativity in the world, carnival is a veritable folk opera, mingling various arts such as music, narrative, dance, poetry and costumes. Camus’s image of Brazil is of the tropical carnival, where the pulse of life is expressed in the drums, with the rhythm taking over the soundtrack again and again, driving the actors into a dance forever forming and dissolving and forming again.

We should note, one more time, the association of the drums and a typical aspect of the tropics. Besides that, carnival is compared to opera, as other “folk” performances like the *feita do boi*, or the *Círio de Nazaré* procession could be. We keep repeating a vision that takes European opera as the model; thus, carnival or other popular festivities can be as artistic as opera and therefore have their quality guaranteed. The measure continues to be opera (probably Italian) and everything that comes closer to it will be seen as “good art”.

It took some time for opera, as a hybrid spectacle, to be analyzed in a way that took into account its complex character. Between the music, the libretto and the spectacle as a whole, there were many possible approaches, but, at first, a more

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<sup>15</sup> For details of the film’s reception, see Fléchet (2009).

<sup>16</sup> For the use of music in the film, with its many contradictions, including political ones, see Grasse (2004).

traditional musicology devoted itself mostly to the musical composition. On top of that, opera studies in Brazil were imbued with nationalistic concerns, and there was consequently a substantial discomfort regarding a genre that was largely viewed as Italian and that could hardly be seen as Brazilian. Even though it sounds like a wordplay, there are still echoes of the problem: is it about Brazilian opera or Italian opera in Brazil? Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of opera, its theaters, its repertoire, and of the people involved in its production was seen in an ambiguous way: either as a civilization mark or as the importation of a genre too expensive and strange in relation to the real needs of the country. Nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the movement to create national operas in Brazil in the 1850's always underlined the dichotomy of a foreign spectacle in search of its autochthonous roots. The equation is never easily solved and there is a constant appeal to the nationality of the creators, or the subject of the libretti, or to specific features in musical composition in order to unravel the issue, which is not exclusive to music or opera, but is part of a major conflict that involves the various spheres of cultural, social, political and economic life. There seems to be a permanent feeling of inviability regarding the plain installation of a national operatic project, as if there were an intrinsic incompatibility between the traditions of Italian (or French) opera and the country's cultural and social conditions. At the same time, "national" answers to the question seem to fall in the trap of a seductive exoticism, without taking into account the audience at which they were aiming. Roberto Schwarz opens his essay "Brazilian Culture: Nationalism by Elimination" reminding us that "we Brazilians and other Latin Americans constantly experience the artificial [*postiço*], inauthentic and imitative nature of our cultural life" (Schwarz, 1988, p. 77). In the essay, the discussion takes several paths, but the author insists in the misguided aspect of certain problems caused by the model-copy paradigm.

This paradigm is somehow also present in foreign narratives about opera in Brazil, at least in the older ones. The interest in what happened in the country was more related to the verification of the spread of a specific repertoire than to the understanding of the various aspects and meanings of the presence of opera in Brazilian cities, reproducing the center-periphery vision. It was only in the past 20 or 30 years that there was a rupture of this model, with a broader interest in musical life; and it is certain that the proposals of a global history of music, or of

a transnational approach, amplified opera studies. However, it seems to me that the explicit paradigms in the two discussed movies are still present, either in the difficulty of transposing opera/civilization into the tropics, or in the desire to find an indigenous answer to the European model.

### **Final considerations.**

When we look at these two movies that somehow work as emblems of how one deals with the problems related to cultural transference, we do not intend to solve the difficulties related to it. In the specific case of opera, I am not searching for an alternative to opera composition in Brazil, but rather, I wanted to examine some paradigms, so well expressed in both movies, still present in the way we understand and study the history of opera around the world. Even after all the "turns", there are some prejudices that are taken as true conceptions and not as the product of a specific approach and they must be reconsidered in order to expand the possibilities for the study of opera.

The first one, maybe the most deeply rooted and persistent, is related to music as a universal language. If Haydn was able to say that his music could be understood in the whole world<sup>17</sup> - which was used to turn Viennese classicism into a universal model - we know nowadays, after so many studies in Anthropology and Ethnomusicology, that we cannot think like that anymore. And if music is indeed universal, we should listen to what other people have to tell us about "Western music". This is actually what Sally Price (2002) suggests in the case of the visual arts. If we have the instruments to look at the art of all mankind, since art should be a universal language, we should at the same time know what other ethnic groups think about "Western" art in the museums. The same with music; if we do believe that music is universal, everyone has something to say about its varied manifestations in time and space. However, the discourses on music (or on the arts in general) are organized according to specific traditions, with historical, aesthetic-philosophical, and anthropological approaches that belong to the tradition of disciplines. Is it desirable, or even possible, to include other discourses? Going back to Price's book, the author shows that even in cases where there seems to be little information, it is possible to identify authors, to trace genealogies, and to build relations. The same is valid for opera and music studies, using other criteria: for instance, when

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<sup>17</sup> According to Dies (1810, p. 75).

studying the diffusion of a specific repertoire, it is possible to envision the new mediations that rebuild it, giving it new and unsuspected meanings. An exemplary case would be the *modinhas* and *lundus* using opera excerpts (Ulhoa; Costa-Lima Neto, 2013).

In the specific case of opera studies, but not only there, we notice a substantial difference, for instance, between the theoretical reactions to opera in Europe and in Brazil. For several reasons, if we look at what happened in Brazil in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the first operas arrived, we notice a certain silence (either because no newspapers were allowed in the country or because there was no specific interest in the performances). And we could launch two complementary hypothesis: the world of theory was not interested in opera; or rather, opera was seen as something that fulfilled its role in society and there was no need to question it. This has been labeled as “underage criticism” by some authors, and the same idea permeates studies of artistic life in the country: in a “pre-historical” land, impermeable to culture, only distorted fruits can grow. Besides that, there is a disproportion in the quantity of available documents for the study of opera in Brazil, if compared to Italy or France, for instance. Should the same research methods be used all over world? Maybe an opera historian in Brazil is closer to an archaeologist, who relies on fragments to elaborate his or her subjects.

Another important issue is the “carnivalization” of the artistic production in Brazil. In the absence of a more appropriate and more rigorous conceptual approach, “carnival,” “baroque,” “sensual,” “tropical,” and “syncretic,” among other terms, become concepts with a real essence and are widely used in studies of artistic creation. By doing that, we often give a marginal locus to that production and also to the studies that deal with it. There are, of course, important exceptions, but in general the study of Italian opera in Brazil is conceived as a very distant chapter of central opera studies. Usually, it is exoticism that draws attention: Italian opera in the middle of the rain forest – what could this mean? Maybe it is opera on the outskirts of the civilized world – just another item for a Wunderkammer, or for a movie with a quixotic character.

Finally, another rather difficult subject. There is, or there used to be, some expectation regarding what comes or should come from the remote tropics: people want some kind of authenticity, or at least some coherence associated to some resis-

tance against European culture. It is as if primitives should remain primitive and follow some kind of independent history. It is a myth of purity, against all the destruction promoted by Western culture. Again, there is a much more complex and asymmetrical cultural exchange. I would like to show a painting, *Immortality*, by Branco e Silva, with the representation of the *Teatro Amazonas* in Manaus, where many contradictions are exposed: we can see the theater itself, wrapped in a cloud with ascending muses; to the left, a waterfall, probably a reference to the force of the Amazon waters (strangely similar to Iguazu Falls; in the foreground, the Amazon warriors, some of them on horses, naked, armed, looking at the theater. There three main forces here: nature, European tradition and indigenous women. The Amazons are mythical figures described by Herodotus, Strabo and Apollonius of Rhodes, among others. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the word was used to describe women warriors in South America. It is curious to think that mythical beings, that came from Europe and that were somehow adapted to Brazil, look with awe at the theater, which came from another part of Europe. This gives us the dimension, even if taken out of a minor painting, of the several layers that have been deposited, certainly through the use of force or violence, in the images that we have of different cultures – and this builds a constant paradox for those who are interested in the arts and their history in the country.



Branco e Silva, *Immortality*

1940, oil on canvas, 2,60X1,70 m, Manaus, Palácio Rio Negro

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