

EMISFÉRICA

Afro-Cinema in Latin America: A new cultural renaissance

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A Negação Do Brasil /Denying Brazil. Dir. Joel Zito Araujo. Portuguese with English subtitles. 92 minutes. Brazil, 2000.

Raíces de Mi Corazón/ Roots of my Heart. Dir. Gloria Rolando. Spanish with English subtitles. 51 minutes. Cuba, 2001.

¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?/Where is Sara Gómez? Dir. Alessandra Muller. Spanish with English subtitles. 76 minutes. Switzerland, 2005.

A Dios Momo/Goodbye Momo. Dir. Leonardo Ricagni. Spanish with English subtitles. 100 minutes. Uruguay, 2005.

Across the Americas, recent films are portraying the history, the struggles, and the lives of black Latin Americans from a fresh angle. These films reclaim lost or forgotten histories as well as presenting strong counter narratives to old forms of representation. Through a diasporic lens, this essay will examine issues of race, gender, and national identity in two fiction films and two documentaries about the black cultural productions in the Americas.

A Negação Do Brasil/ Denying Brazil

Despite the high proportion of black and mulatto citizens in Brazil, Afro-Brazilians did not figure prominently in the symbolically white cinema of the first decades of the 20th century, although they did appear in Brazilian films as early as the silent era (Stam 1997:59). It was not until the early 1960s, with the boom in television technology, that black actors and actresses would be featured in a series of soap operas and other TV shows. With archival footage, narration by João Acaiaba, and interviews with actors and actresses such as Ruth de Souza, Zezé Mota, and Milton Gonçalves, the fascinating documentary *A Negação Do Brasil (Denying Brazil)* analyzes roughly 40 years of Brazilian soap operas and chronicles the early representations of blacks on television.

Brazilian soap operas are renowned for their calculated drama and tension, as well as the multiple ways in which they depict the lives of Brazilians, rich, poor, black or white. *Negação Do Brasil* examines classic soaps such as “*O Direito de Nascer*,” “*Beto Rockfeller*,” “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” “*Antonio Maria*,” “*Como Salvar meu Casamento*,” “*Escrava Isavra*” and “*Sinhà Moça*” and probes the social importance of these mini-fairy tales. How were *telenovelas* first presented and received, what role did they play in seducing the masses? How did such images frame and reinforce the idea of racial democracy, i.e. the long held belief that Brazilian society was free of racial discrimination and antagonisms?

The documentary demonstrates how blacks were present and not present simultaneously within Brazilian soap operas. The narrator, speaking from his personal point of reflection, recalls that it was not until recently that he realized so many blacks were even part of the cast because many were socially invisible: the majority played maids or butlers. Blacks were clearly on the screen; however, their presence was texturally submerged, just as it has been historically in Brazilian cinema (Stam, 1997: 63). Zezé Mota, who interpreted many soap opera roles and is interviewed throughout the documentary relates a conversation she had with a neighbor. Mota was explaining her drama class when her neighbor asked, “Why do you need to study drama to play a maid and serve coffee?”

A Negação Do Brasil posits that the narrative presence of blacks in soap operas were constructed around four main categories: the black maid (1960’s and 70s); the loyal bodyguard (1980s); the super-obedient slave or non-thinking slave (1980s and 90s); and the one-dimensional middle-class black professional (1980s and 90s). The documentary opens by considering the role of Mamãe Dolores in *O Direito de Nascer*, the first modern day soap opera to reach millions of Brazilians in the early 1960’s. Mamãe Dolores was short, stocky, dark-skinned, and worked as a maid. The film argues that this character was the fusion of two classical stereotypes: the mammy from the US south and a caricature of the black woman from traditional Brazilian literature.

The 1969 production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a super-production by soap opera standards, featured a first-rate line-up of Afro-Brazilian actors and actresses including Ruth de Souza, who in the 1940s formed part of the famed Black Experimental Theater, and played key roles in many of the Vera Cruz Film company productions. Before the first episode had reached viewers’ television sets, the soap had already stirred up the first full-scale racial controversy of Brazilian TV. The sponsors and producers chose Sergio Cardoso, a white Brazilian, for the lead role. Cardoso’s skin was blackened, corks were placed in his nose to widen it, and his mouth was filled with cotton balls, so he would not speak properly. Even by Brazilian standards this was a bit much: black actors and actresses protested; the show was deemed a disaster and cancelled.

In the 1970s the winds of social change swept across Brazil as a new level of black consciousness emerged. This period would be characterized by new levels of organization culminating in 1978 with the creation of the Unified Black Movement against Racial Discrimination (MNU), a progressive social justice advocacy group. Preceding MNU by a few years was the Black Rio or Soul movement which emerged among lower middle class youths; its signature trade marks – the donning of afros, soul or funk music, the soul hand-shake, and black only dances – soon spread to other urban centers. Moreover, this movement brought racial issues to the attention of college educated, middle class Afro-Brazilians. Despite the hegemonic construction of blackness by the national media, black Brazilians during this period created new form self-representation and counter – hegemonic images of their identities.

Ironically, during this period a new genre of soap operas focused on the Afro-Brazilian middle class without incorporating any of the sociopolitical consciousness emerging in the broader Afro-Brazilian community. In *Sétimo Sentido*, Jacyra Silva interpreted the

role of Pérola, a black woman who directs a conservatory and is married to a white man. In this soap as in others that emerged at this time, the main character had no family or real relationship with the black community, and her interaction was primarily with whites. Many of the characters were one-dimensional, limited, bland and bereft of substance.

Negação Do Brasil functions on two levels: first, as an effectively told story; and second, as a historical reconstruction of how racialized images of blacks in Brazil came to television. It shows how some programs softened the image of racial slavery in Brazil, promoting the myth of racial democracy and *branqueamento* (social whitening) while reinforcing negative images of blacks as culturally inferior. Ultimately, the documentary offers a sharp sociological examination of how race and class functioned in soap operas to promote hegemonic domination and social subordination.

Women and Film in Modern Cuban Film: Gloria Rolando and Sara Gomez

While *Negação Do Brasil* deals with social erasure, *Raíces de Mi Corazón* and *¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?* serve to more firmly place Afro-Cubans within the national identity of Cuba by reclaiming important historical events and personalities. Gloria Rolando, director of *Raíces de Mi Corazón*, is a contemporary filmmaker inspired by the seminal work of Sara Gomez, subject of the documentary *¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?*, directed by Swiss filmmaker Alexandra Muller. As Afro-Cuban women, Rolando and Gomez explore historical memory, resistance, and black identity.

Raíces de Mi Corazón

Rolando has directed six documentaries and has written and served as assistant director on scores of other films. *Raíces de Mi Corazón* is a short but powerful fiction film and possibly the first historical film to deal with a largely forgotten part of Cuban history: the 1912 massacre of over 6,000 members of Independents of Color, a political party organized after independence mostly by Afro-Cubans. As historian Aline Helg (1995) and others have argued, Afro-Cubans remained marginalized in all aspects of Cuban society despite the abolition of slavery in 1886. After fighting en masse in the wars that led to independence in 1902, Afro-Cubans demanded the full extension of citizenship and democracy by forming the hemisphere's first black political party outside of Haiti. Helg argues that the massacre effectively ended Afro-Cubans' political organization along racial lines, resulting in their social erasure from modern Cuban history.

The film's plot revolves around Mercedes, an Afro-Cuban woman living in modern-day Havana. Mercedes is deeply intrigued by her family history; while she explores her family roots by reviewing old photos and newspaper clippings jealously guarded by her grandmother, her mother's stories reveal a family secret about her great-grandparents' history. Alternating between dreams and the reality of the fictional pro-filmic world, and incorporating archival materials such as actual photographs from the period to shape the

narrative, the film follows Mercedes as she learns of her two great-grandparents – María Victoria and José Julián – and their relationship to the Independents of Color.

Reality and fantasy as well as fiction and documentary are fused as Rolando explores the untold or forgotten fragments of Cuban history. By critically reconstructing this historical event via film, she reconnects the struggles of Afro-Cubans to Cuban national history. *Raíces de Mi Corazón* is dedicated to Sara Gomez.

¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?

This documentary focuses on the brief life of Afro-Cuban filmmaker Sara Gomez (1943-1974), Cuba's first female director. As a woman and intellectual, Gomez is considered a pioneering filmmaker for her focus on Afro-Cuban cultural and gender issues. Relying heavily on interviews from Gomez's husband, children, and colleagues, documentary director Alessandra Muller brings together scattered fragments of her life. Family and friends tell compassionate stories about Gomez the mother, wife, and director.

Shot in color, with footage from Gomez's black and white films interspersed, the documentary flows with a roving camera through the barrios of Havana. Rare archival footage from two of Gomez's films gives the viewer a sense of her aesthetic depth and vision. Gomez's black and white images have a soft grainy texture; the shots are well framed, the angles and lighting perfect. Her subjects appear authentic and natural, fully cognizant of their difficult circumstances. Gomez's powerful cinematic language articulates the ways in which centuries of profound exploitation have affected the social conditions of everyday people. Through her eyes, common experiences have layers of meaning and texture, and she speaks through the camera as her lens is able to frame the accumulated affects of slavery and colonial relations.

For many, *¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?* will provide a valuable introduction to her works. In Gomez's first documentary, *Iré a Santiago/I'll go to Santiago* (1963), the camera pans from colonial monuments into urban spaces intimately inhabited by a local Afro-Cuban population. By emphasizing the economic, political and architectural legacy of Santiago, Gomez makes a claim for this city as a vibrant point of origin where all Cubans (particularly Afro-Cubans) can reclaim their national heritage. *Y Tenemos Sabor/ We've got Rhythm* (1967) is a compelling examination of Afro-Cuban instruments and musical forms. Gomez situates herself as a black woman participant-observer as she records Afro-Cuban cultural formations. Her physical presence as narrator helps convey a tone of informality, which elicits a casual response on the part of the film subjects (Benamou, 1994: 57).

Gomez's critically acclaimed *De Cierta Manera /One Way or Another* (1974) is a feature length film, the first to be directed by a woman in Cuba. She locates the ideological roots of machismo in Cuban colonial and patriarchal past (Benamou, 1994: 58). She does not focalize gender at the expense of race and cultural identity but instead demonstrates their historical interconnections. Her work thus problematizes the complex drama of race, class, gender and colonial relations as the contradictions a new society like Cuba had to

address. As a filmmaker and storyteller, Gomez is able to construct an airtight narrative and plot as she skillfully confronts Cuba's patriarchal and racialized history.

Gomez's artistic methodology, captured by *¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?*, is best appreciated within the context of Cuban society's attempt to struggle with and resolve razor sharp contradictions. In the aftermath of 1959, Cuba would build a new society to counter the affects of centuries of inequality as well as produce a new class of artist and intellectuals in order to reconstruct a new national identity. This new identity would be forged based on old fragments of the horrific colonial experience and new ideas of the revolution. Gomez's work is representative of these new trends, and as a revolutionary filmmaker, she would capture the hangover of the past: slavery, colonialism and the promise of the future – a new Cuban reality in her documentaries and films.

¿Dónde está Sara Gomez? is an extremely important documentary because it not only brings the story of Sara Gomez back to life, but we are reminded that filmmakers have crucial roles as organic intellectuals and storytellers in all societies. The documentary functions on two levels: first, like *Raíces de Mi Corazón*, it restores important parts of Afro-Cuban history; second, it pays homage to and reconstructs the life of a pioneering young woman whose life ended way too early. Given the relative lack of films on black issues from Latin America, this documentary makes a significant contribution to cinema history, as well as Africana and Latin American studies.

A Dios Momo/ Good-Bye Momo

A Dios Momo revolves around Obdulio, an 11 year-old Afro-Uruguayan boy who sells newspapers in order to support his family. Every morning at dawn Obdulio awakes to soft-gospel inflected hymns sung by his beloved grandmother, a deeply spiritual woman who read fortunes, as candles burn in the background. Throughout the house are images of Jesus Christ and Patron Saints. Obdulio cannot read or write, nor is he interested in school; his dream is to become a professional football player.

This film's magic realist aesthetic is set against the backdrop of 40 days of carnival. It focuses on the supreme importance of family, community, tradition, and education. Through a series of cinematic sketches, the viewer follows Odulio through the streets of Montevideo selling newspapers as he encounters several fascinating and charming characters, some real and others not. The main protagonists are his grandmother; Canario, the owner of a local bar; Rusito, his best friend; the members of the carnival troupe; and the night-watchman who, next to his grandmother, has the most influence upon him.

Obdulio enters into a series of enduring and loving relationships with members of this extended community; however, it is the special relationship with the night-watchman that begins his process of social transformation. The watchman, who is also a magician, invents a series of clever games that serve as a pretext for learning. Obdulio, for example, is fascinated by the simple clicks of an old type-writer because it sounds like the polyrhythmic beats of drums during carnival. Obdulio is asked to type his name and spell other words and later is given books. Slowly but surely, he becomes more and more

critically engaged. In one scene, after finishing his cold drink and snack in his favorite bar, Obdulio asks for the bill, but Canario the owner of the bar replies, “pay me when you finish your education and are a real champion.” It is through such encounters, which serve as vehicles for grassroots education that Obdulio not only learns to read and write, but is transformed.

Some scenes are shot at night on the beach against the soft glow of a bright moon. In these scenes Obdulio’s dark silhouette and childlike profile is shown as he talks to his friend Rusito. In other scenes, the light illuminates his soft brown skin as the camera captures the radiance of his almond shaped eyes. The mystical yet realist carnival scenes are also shot in the moonlight, illustrating the bright colors of the costumes and underscoring the clown-like faces of the musicians. The deep beat of the carnival drums and dancing are heard throughout the movie. As spirituality, magic, soul and faith set the stage for community reflection and collective education, Obdulio learns the value of community, friendship, grassroots education and family.

Conclusion

Collectively, these films examine identity, agency, and representation by engaging Afro-Latin cultural productions from acting, to film making, to carnival. Some challenge hegemonic notions of black inferiority (*A Negação Do Brasil*), while others (*Raíces de Mi Corazón*, *¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?* and *A Dios Momo*) embed the cultural history of blacks within the national identities of Latin America. Moreover, they serve to help Afro-groups reclaim forgotten histories, destabilize old narrative structures and provide new forms of counter representation. Equally important, these films provide a new critical cinematic space focusing on Afro-diasporic histories, traditions and artistic forms by bringing the lived experience of Afro-communities across the continent to the screen.

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