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Variations on the Brazilian Orpheus Theme

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Abstract: In her paper, "Variations on the Brazilian Orpheus Theme," Marília Scaff Rocha Ribeiro discusses Vinícius de Moraes's play *Orfeu da Conceição* (1956) together with two of its filmic adaptations, namely Marcel Camus's *Black Orpheus* (1959) and Carlos Diegues's *Orfeu* (1999). Ribeiro's analysis is located in the context of the race debates of the second half of the twentieth century in Brazil. Ribeiro argues that the periodic resurfacing of a musician from the *favelas* as a special being who is able to chant and enchant speaks to the appeal both of popular music and of the thematic of race, issues that continue to be central to Brazilian culture today. The gap between the inception and the reception of these works illustrate the paradoxes and complexities of attempting to conciliate the classical myth of Orpheus and a more socially grounded representation of life in Brazilian *favelas*. Instead of going down to a mythical hell, the task of this Brazilian Orpheus would be to go up the hills, where the hell of contemporary life is -- transfigured from his Greek unified origins into a *mestizo* fragmentation -- a re-presentation of the spirit of tragedy in a contemporary context.

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Marília Scaff Rocha RIBEIRO

Variations on the Brazilian Orpheus Theme

The comparison of the play *Orfeu da Conceição* (1956) by the Brazilian poet-songwriter-diplomat Vinícius de Moraes and its two adaptations to film, Marcel Camus's *Black Orpheus* (1959) and Carlos Diegues's *Orfeu* (1999), has generated considerable critical attention. Following the international success of *Black Orpheus,* much has been written about the film in conjunction with the play, both in newspaper reviews and in more in-depth filmic and cultural analyses. *Orfeu*, while less successful commercially, revived yet again the *topos* of the Greek myth set against the hillside slums of Rio de Janeiro. There are many reasons for the popularity of the comparison of the play with the films. Not only does *Black Orpheus* continue to be an international reference for the representation of Brazil abroad, but the juxtaposition of the myth in an Afro-Brazilian setting also highlights issues of race that have been crucial in Brazil from the 1950s to today. Each new revival of the myth in the Brazilian context replays the debate about race relations and social disparities in a new light.

My analysis presupposes that this seemingly over-done comparison can still be relevant for the discussion of contemporary cinema in Brazil because it foregrounds the shifting representations about race and also about the role of music in Brazilian culture. The figure of a black Orpheus has become a myth in and of itself in the context of Brazilian cinema, one that departs from the specificities of the Greek myth and sketches a Brazil-specific *topos* whose relevance has only grown as urban violence and social tensions have intensified in the last decades and changed the landscape of the hillside slums, or *favelas*. The *favelas* have once again become a product for export, yet no longer as a tropical paradise in which the people are poor but happy, like in *Black Orpheus*, but as a contemporary no man's land that serves as setting -- sometimes exotic, sometimes painfully realistic -- for movies that substitute action and violence for mythical concerns. Hence the international success, for instance, of a production such as *Cidade de Deus* in 2002. More recently, *Favela Rising* (2005) and *Antônia* (2006) have showcased Afro-Brazilian musicians from the *favelas* as part of an intricate social network. These protagonists have important roles as advocates for the community through their ability to, like Orpheus, transform life through music.

Favela Rising is a documentary directed by Jeff Zimbalist and Matt Mochary, distributed widely on the North American market. The film tells the story of Anderson Sá, from his life in Vigário Geral to the creation of the group Afro-reggae. The film emphasizes the ability of musicians to descend into "hell" -- in this case, the drug wars that have plagued many of Rio's *favelas* in recent history -- and resurface with a socially viable alternative for youth integration in their communities. Although the theme of Black Orpheus is not mentioned (Sá self-identifies with another deity, Shiva), the documentary presents the singer with attributes that liken him to the gifted Greek musician. Interestingly, the latest DVD release from Afro-reggae includes a documentary entitled *Nenhum Motivo Explica a Guerra* (2006) by Carlos Diegues who has experimented with the Orphic theme. Further, *Antônia*, a feature film directed by Tata Amaral, recounts the dreams and misadventures of a female rap group from the outskirts of São Paulo. At a moment in the film when many turns of events lead to the dissipation of the group, the main character, Preta, and her small daughter have a conversation that evokes the Greek myth: the daughter wakes up from a nightmare in which her little body has been dismembered and cut up by a monster, prompting the mother to tell a story to soothe the child and put her back to sleep. Preta tells the story of a girl who liked to sing and who believed in the transformative powers of music. Not only does the name Preta ("black" in Portuguese) suggest the racial focus apparent in the title of Camus's film, but the theme of dismemberment also alludes to Orpheus's death at the hands of the Bacchants, who, according to one version of the myth, rip him into pieces. In *Antônia*, the girl's dream alludes to the need for the young women to stick together; maintaining the unity of their band provides them with a way to change their personal lives.

Whether or not the Greek myth or the film adaptations of it are an explicit reference for these recent filmmakers, the periodic resurfacing of a musician from the hills as a special being who is able to chant and enchant speaks to the appeal both of popular music and of the thematic of race in Brazilian cinema. The multiple reincarnations of a hillside Orpheus compose a historical narrative of the percep-

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tion of race relations in the country. Whereas the Carnival of the 1950s depicted in Camus's film is shaped by the nationalist guidelines set by the Vargas regime, the 1990s version by Diegues shows signs of a transformation that becomes more visible in recent productions such as *Favela Rising* and *Antônia*. The shift between a culturalist approach to race to a more political one reflects a radical change in perspective. Edward Telles describes the decade following the redemocratization of the 1980s as a transition period between racial democracy and the rebirth of the Black Movement in its more vocal phase: "Occurring mostly in the 1990s, this transition consisted of an acknowledgement of racism by the Brazilian government and society generally, the consolidation of black movement organizations, their limited incorporation into the democratic process, and, finally, the implementation of race-based affirmative action in many Brazilian institutions" (47). The difference between the two distinct moments in the history of Afro-Brazilians -- as they coincide with the two filmic adaptations of *Orfeu da Conceição* -- is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the reaction of Abdias do Nascimento, founder of the Experimental Black Theater (TEN) and one of the main militants of the Afro-Brazilian cause, towards Moraes's play. While TEN participated actively in the staging of *Orfeu da Conceição*, Abdias do Nascimento later criticized the theme of the play, perhaps because of the success of the film and the racial implications it entailed: "Blackfaced white actors, Black Christ, Black Orpheus: in the last analysis they all conspire in the historical rape of my people. African religious culture is rich and alive in our religious communities all over Brazil. We have no need to invoke Greece or the Bible in order to raise it to the status of mythology. On the other hand, Greece and Europe owe to Africa a great deal of what they call 'Western Civilization'" (46). Nascimento is a central figure in both historical moments: he was involved in the staging of the play in 1956, but later developed his own critique of its very inception. His own intellectual trajectory reflects the historical arch that comprises the different perceptions of race that informed the adaptations of *Orfeu da Conceição* into film. During the 50s, the view of a harmonic coexistence of races was the predominant perspective in the national imagination as it was represented in films (although movies such as *Rio 40 Graus* and *Rio Zona Norte* had already contested such beliefs). In the 1990s, when *Orfeu* was filmed, the emphasis started to shift from racial democracy to the conflict and racial tension in representations of Brazilian reality, often with a more strictly political awareness of racial relations. However, Diegues's film can still be seen in many ways as a celebration of miscegenation. In this sense, it differs from more recent productions such as *Favela Rising* or *Antônia*, in that they incorporate more organically a perspective derived at least in part by the Black movement. These two positions, represented, on one side, by the culturalism inspired by Gilberto Freyre and others -- Michael Hanchard notes that "Afro-Brazilian social movements after the 1940s sprang from the academy, as opposed to the suburbia or the *favela*" (100) -- and on the other, by the tenets of the "movimento negro", with its inspiration in the American model of affirmative action, serve as extremes between which the adaptations of the myth of Orpheus oscillate.

    Before venturing into the details of the filmic adaptations, I turn to the play that inspired them and to the socio-cultural context of its reception. When the Brazilian poet and playwright Moraes envisioned an adaptation of the Orpheus myth in an Afro-Brazilian setting, he was fully aware of the confrontation between two different cultural sources. The first is the ancient Greek tradition, which provided the basis for a universalist view of Western culture. The second is the urban space of the slums from Rio de Janeiro, populated mainly by afro-descendents living on the periphery of the city's industrial and economic center. The poet himself claimed that the idea for *Orfeu da Conceição* originated when he "began to reflect on the life of the blacks in Rio and tried to Hellenize their experience" (Stam 168). At the time when the play was written and staged, around 1953-1956, it was hardly possible to ignore the social inequalities faced by the population of the hillside slums. It is not surprising that Moraes had in mind the social condition of blacks when tailoring a play to fit this specific scenario. But in his efforts to foreground the issue of race in Brazil, he did so not by problematizing race relations in the play itself, but rather in its staging. Knowing that black actors did not have the same opportunities as whites when it came to casting, he stated in the preface that all characters in the tragedy should normally be played by black authors, although they could, eventually, be played by white ones (Moraes 15). Moreover, he considers his piece a homage to Afro-Brazilian culture, whose musical dexterity reminded him of the Thracian musician (Moraes 15).

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It would be naïve to read the preface as a racially conscious attack on social injustice. It is, rather, passionate proof of admiration towards the popular art from the hills. The previous decades -- especially the 1930s with its nationalist boom -- paved the way for the understanding of black culture as an integral and celebrated part of Brazilian identity, as a part of a *mestizo* way of life that was taken to be the symbol of Brazilianness. *Orfeu da Conceição* follows the standards of its time by embracing blackness on a cultural level while avoiding addressing racial conflicts openly. The use of a classical tragedy might serve well for such an approach -- keeping reality away from the drama while appropriating specific rhythms and local color from the *morros*. This criticism in no way suggests that the play did not contribute to making the Afro-Brazilian struggle visible. As mentioned above, an all-black cast at the Municipal Theater was enough to cause a stir in the artistic circles of Rio's predominantly white intelligentsia. A decade earlier, in 1944, Abdias do Nascimento had created the Teatro Experimental do Negro (Black Experimental Theater), a pioneer organization devoted to advocating the rights of blacks in Brazil, but a lot would still have to be done before black actors ceased being seen as marginal exceptions on the stage and on the screen. Concerning the black presence on Brazilian stages during the imperial period, Flora Süssekind raises the question of why the slave, who was the very foundation of the country's economy, had such a secondary role in Brazilian theater (18). Her analysis shows that, in the majority of plays from this time, the black character works almost as a prop, opening and closing doors or serving tea. Later on, in a post-abolition time, black roles would be limited to those of servants or childish people in need of guidance from a tutelary white superior (Süssekind 60). Although her analysis does not extend through the republican period, there was not a major change in this regard in the first half of the twentieth century. In this context, *Orfeu da Conceição* was an exception to the rule, for placing black experience on center stage.

Moraes was criticized for his use of a classical myth in lieu of an Afro-Brazilian one, but again, this choice could reiterate that the poet's idea was not to create a culturally specific piece of drama but rather one that would exhibit at its core the conflict between two frameworks of thought: a social environment that could foster a debate concerning race relations and a mythical *fabula* that would deal primarily with archetypes such as love, death, and envy. The choice of a mythical figure such as Orpheus is also explained by the fact that music is at the center of Moraes's play. He intended to place Brazilian popular music at the forefront of any discussion about Brazilian culture, and like many other artists at the time, he had a conscious project of linking the intellectual elite to the cultural production of the *favelas*. Yet, Moraes was neither the first nor the only one to relate the myth of Orpheus to blackness. When invited to write a preface to the famous anthology of Afro-Francophone poets edited by Leopold Senghor in 1944, Jean Paul Sartre named it *Black Orpheus*, in an attempt to relate the tragic hero's descent into hell to a black poet's process of self-awareness. He starts by saying that "the white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen" (Sartre 7), a statement that takes on additional meaning when transposed to the performative arts such as theater and cinema, in which the verb "see" can be read literally. Sartre's essay turns to the historical constraints of being black as opposed, for example, to the proletariat's experience. He relativizes the notion of a black essence when he places negritude in the context of racial confrontation: "it is from the shock of the white culture that his negritude has passed from immediate existence to the state of reflection" (Sartre 18). Thus, the descent into hell is analogous to a subjective process of self-discovery. But here the analogy could take on another meaning, one not mentioned explicitly by Sartre, if we consider that Orpheus misses the opportunity of reclaiming Eurydice from Pluto by looking back, and it is only after being disfigured by the Bacchants that he finally can be reunited with his love. Perhaps it is in these terms that Sartre considers negritude "no more a state, neither even an existential attitude," but a "becoming" (57). In other words, the notion of a unified identity or an essence, for Sartre, has to be torn apart before real awareness can happen.

Sartre's and Moraes's interpretation of the myth come together more explicitly through their shared vision of black culture as less corrupted by erudite formulations. We can of course refute the claim that such a culture would be closer to an "authentic" experience and argue that this kind of statement does nothing more than build up a hierarchy in which black culture can be easily seen as more primitive and, therefore, inferior. Moraes, in his celebration of blacks in the *favela*, does not seem to realize such hierarchization when he states: "as if the black men, the black men of Rio in this

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case, were Greeks in a gangue, a gangue still deprived [stripped] of culture and of the Apollonian cult of beauty but no less marked by the Dionysian feeling of life" (Perrone, "Don't Look Back" 158). This duality between a "higher" culture and a popular, "lower" one, clear in the poet's words, becomes more complex if we take into consideration Moraes's own trajectory as a poet: from an Oxford student who started his poetic career writing erudite sonnets to a reputable bohemian who became one of the most well-known lyricists of samba songs, he himself seems to have moved from an Apollonian to a Dionysian way of life. Paradoxically, the distinction between high and popular culture, expressed so clearly in his description of blacks as "Greeks in a gangue," was in fact a duality he consciously tried to overcome in his work, and especially in *Orfeu da Conceição*. His view of black popular culture had much of a Freyrean exaltation of miscegenation, both in racial and in cultural terms. His play attempts to conciliate these many differences. As Maria Claudete Oliveira points out, Moraes highlights not the opposition between the *favela* and the city, but the powerful artistic synthesis between them (Oliveira 40). His perspective presupposed a racially and culturally miscegenated environment, one in which the division between high and popular culture is effaced in favor of integration.

This two-fold conception of culture may have had concrete consequences for the play itself. Of course one of the reasons for Moraes to choose the tragedy of Orpheus was the musical component embedded in the image of the tragic hero who was such a great artist that he could change even the course of nature with his voice and lyre. Together with the colloquial language of the hillside, Moraes wanted to pay homage to the popular musicians and their ability to overcome any material deprivation and create the greatest artistic festival in the country during Carnaval. But while the intention seems clear, the choice of songs that comprise the play's musical score contradicts this principle. In the preface, he states that the play should be updated in its language, use of slang, but that the music should not be changed (Moraes 17). It is curious that the soundtrack, in many ways the central part of the play, is comprised of songs that would soon be known as *Bossa Nova*, the style of the middle class from the waterfront of Rio. As much as *Bossa Nova* was intricately related to the samba composed in the *favelas*, the music of the play does not come from any of the "divine musicians of Rio's slums" (Moraes, "Preface"). It comes, rather, from a more "Apollonian" line of samba, one that has been, up to a certain point, "civilized" or "whitened" by a more "rational" concept of music. These contradictions in *Orfeu da Conceição* reveal the state of the racial debate in Brazil at the time. By depicting the hillside as a distant Olympus in which all is paradise except for the tragic story of Orpheus and Eurydice, the play fails to locate racial conflict as part of this environment. As previously mentioned, Moraes privileged consciously myth over realism, believing that the scenario of a slum was enough to give the tragedy a socially specific flavor. If the casting and the staging of the play were significant in bringing black actors to the forefront of the Brazilian stage, the play itself remained a rather problematic representation of Brazilian reality. In short, it was not the poet's intention to write social criticism in the form of a play, and it is perhaps not fair to read it as such -- but since this work became the basis of other adaptations and continues to be debated in terms of national identity, the polemic around it remains worthwhile.

As exemplified by Sartre's preface, Orphism was a popular trend among intellectuals both in France and in Brazil in the 1940s and 1950s. Jean Cocteau directed *Orphée* and *The Testament of Orpheus*, which was released in the same year as Camus's film. In Brazilian poetry, the Orphic theme appeared most prominently in the epic poem *Invenção de Orfeu* (1952) by Jorge de Lima, an author who also wrote on Afro-Brazilian themes in his collection of poems *Poemas Negros* (1947). It is in this environment that, in 1959, Camus directed his cinematic adaptation of Moraes's play. The movie brought other complexities to the original theatrical script: being a French production, the idea of portraying the hillside from Rio in a mythical way was almost immediately understood in Brazil as a superficial understanding of national reality and as a means to export a picturesque and exotic image of the country abroad. João Carlos Rodrigues, in a book entitled *O Negro Brasileiro e o Cinema*, relates the characters of the film to the recurrent "type" of the *favelado*, or slum dweller, in Brazilian cinema, and argues that they live in an unrealistic happy world (30). It should be noted, however, in Camus's defense, that the mythical element was already present in the play. For Moraes, the mythical aspect was to be predominant; it was to overshadow social criticism. It may be this fine line that separates intention from result that caused many critics to see the movie as an inauthentic depiction of life in

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the slums, a criticism Vinicius did not face to the same degree. The modernist poet Manuel Bandeira, for instance, wrote in September 1959 of his reaction when seeing the much-anticipated film by Camus: "My disappointment was as great as my anticipation. I believe it was the same for all Brazilians. The film works outside Brazil, for foreigners that do not know Brazil or who only know it superficially. There is in it a *parti pris* of exoticism that, along with very marked French elements, make it very insipid to us, despite the intention of the director, and regardless the authentic presence of so many Black Brazilian folks" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("A decepção foi tão grande quanto a expectativa. Creio que igual para todos os brasileiros. O filme é para funcionar fora do Brasil, para estrangeiros que não conheçam o Brasil, ou que apenas o conheçam de passagem e superficialmente. Há nele um *parti pris* de exotismo, que, a par de outros elementos bem acusadamente franceses, o tornam para nós, ao contrário da intenção do diretor, bastante insípido, não obstante a presença autêntica de tanto negrinho bom do Brasil" [140]).

Bandeira's criticism of what he considered the lack of authenticity in the film was later shared by many in the *Cinema Novo* movement (of which Diegues was part). Fernão Pessoa Ramos summarizes the opinion of movie makers in the 1960s who advocated for a socially conscious cinema in Brazil: "Camus's film created a consensus among the *Cinema Novo* filmmakers of how not to depict popular culture, with its humble posture, folkloric slant, and mythical perspective typical of foreigners" (69). However, as Robert Stam points out, the film should be seen "in the context of attempts by non-Brazilians to film Carnaval, and Camus deserves credit mainly for avoiding some of the disastrous gaffes that plagued Hollywood films about Brazil -- *It's All True* being the clear exception to the rule – blunders ranging from minor topographical or linguistic errors to racialized slurs against the Brazilian character" (167). There are at least three reasons why the movie was more of a target for attack than was the play. First, a movie lends itself more to the representation of reality than does a play. The film presents images of an actual (albeit "prepared") hillside, which might have struck some viewers as aspiring to a documentary value that did not live up to the content of the plot. Secondly, the fact that the director was French enabled many viewers and critics to consider the movie as an objectification of Brazil, since the perspective was from an "outsider." A third reason is that while in the play the option to privilege the mythical over the documentary was conscious, it might be the case that when reading the play Camus saw that specific representation of Rio as a culturally valid one, and one that could be shown to the world as the image of a *real* Brazil. His version seems to have, unlike the play, the intention of showing a Brazilian reality. The result is that, although following guidelines that are already present in the play, Camus's film makes use of culturally specific elements, such as samba and *candomblé*, as a perfect scenario for the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but one in which the troubles of being black in Brazil are invisible. Such conflicts were not present in the original work, nor were they a concern of the playwright. The film, however, seems to have as part of its agenda the portrayal of a facet of Afro-Brazilian experience.

There seems to be a critical consensus in Brazil that *Black Orpheus* lacks a palpable reality when it comes to sociological documentation. It is true that there is no reason why a film -- or any other artistic manifestation for that matter -- should follow realist guidelines or be required to represent reality "as it is." There is a tendency to expect that all movies about underrepresented groups be documental, which ultimately restricts those groups' possibilities for self-expression. However, in the special case of this film, which was a sort of "product for export" in the sense that it was made primarily for an international audience who knew very little, if anything, about Brazilian culture, the images of Brazil put on the screen could very easily have been marketed as "the" Brazilian reality. Camus also aimed for a documentary element when filming an actual samba parade during Carnaval, as well as multiple other characters of Afro-Brazilian Rio. Because of this mix of document and myth, many critics in Brazil charged the film as "superficial" and "inauthentic" when dealing with Brazilian life. Again, Bandeira's review of the film offers what seemed to be a consensual opinion: "The film works as a documentary. Documentary of the landscape of Rio, of the life on our hillside slums (and here it is distorted, which may lead a foreigner to believe that life there is a paradise), documentary of the *macumba* (this being the highest point in this aspect). There is an excess of Carnaval, an excess of dance, within which Orpheus's story is lost, reduced to a frail string that is kept together only by the technique of Camus, who directs it with great ability." ("O filme vale afinal como documentário.

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Documentário da paisagem carioca, da vida nas favelas dos nossos morros (e aqui há deformação, que pode induzir o estrangeiro a crer que esta vida é um paraíso), documentário de macumba (esta o ponto mais alto a esse aspecto). Excesso de carnaval, excesso de dança, dentro do qual quase se perde a história de Orfeu, reduzida a um fio tênue, que, se não se parte, é porque a técnica de Camus o conduz com magistral habilidade" [140]).

Interestingly enough, these comments and others were mostly concerned with the representation of Brazil abroad. For a national audience, familiar with Carnaval and with other aspects of Afro-Brazilian life, the universalistic story of Orpheus and Eurydice could probably be enjoyed with less risk of furthering a distorted or exotic understanding of Brazil. This dilemma is, however, one that all films face, especially those dealing with groups that are underrepresented. The challenge for any film adaptation of Moraes's play, especially when aimed at a foreign audience, lies exactly in the complexities of conveying two points of view at once: the mythical representation of love and the realist scenario of a *morro*. The first scenes of the film are significant: some musicians, tambourine in hand, play and dance the samba in a lively way, and the festive spirit is later shown to be a norm in this hillside community. Yet as the camera slowly focus on these men, women, and children preparing for Carnival, the samba gives place to the smooth voice of Agostinho dos Santos singing "Felicidade," composed by Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes. The soundtrack, which brought international attention to Tom Jobim and Luís Bonfá, was as central in the movie as it was in the play, but an international audience would quickly associate this music with the images on the screen, unaware that the two -- Bossa Nova and the hillside community -- originated from two different sections of Brazil, divided by class and race. Thus, from the very start, the viewer faces the challenges of decoding a national reality through those images. The film includes subtle references to a division between the hillside and the center of Rio de Janeiro. In one of the first scenes, Eurydice leaves the boat and walks around the streets during Carnaval festivities before taking a streetcar to the slum. The camera shows her among the crowd and then, in an upward shot, follows her as she crosses a surprisingly empty avenue surrounded by tall glass buildings. These awkward symbols of modernity seem strangely detached from the frenzied dancing and singing of the people on the streets as well as from the colorful life in the hills. At first, these buildings might seem at odds with the rest of the movie and its otherwise "primitive" flavor. Yet they do show another side of Brazilian society, especially during the 1950s -- a time when modernization was the goal of all governmental policies and the national self-image of many Brazilians included not only the traditional signs of tropicalism, but also the ongoing burst of industrialization (for example, the modern capital, Brasília, was inaugurated in 1960). This touch of faraway modernity is also present in the scene where Orpheus and Eurydice are talking outside his house: as they gaze at each other, a plane passes by, perhaps pointing to the existence of a time outside the mythical story of the two lovers. In scenes like these, the film comments, albeit laterally, on Brazilian contemporary history.

The few signs of a beachside life in Rio, a life very different from that of the slums, further emphasize the characters' less modern reality. One scene that shows this "other side" is when Orpheus, after Eurydice's death, looks for her in an old office building, only to find piles of paper everywhere in a bureaucratic labyrinth. The custodian, an Afro-Brazilian who does not know how to read, advises Orpheus to look for his loved one somewhere else and makes a distinction between the oral and the written worlds, privileging the first. He tells Orpheus, "You won't find lost people in papers … That's where they get lost forever." And when Orpheus insists again on going through the papers for a hint about Eurydice, the custodian asks, "Do you think papers are sorry for a man?" There is in the scene a latent association of blackness and oral culture, tinted by a certain primitivism linking Afro-Brazilians to backwardness, situating them on the other side of the spectrum from the modern tall glass buildings on the beachfront. The suggestion here is that Orpheus has to go deeper, beyond the western culture, represented by the paperwork, in order to find his true self. While this passage might remind many viewers of Sartre's preface, it is in and of itself not enough to articulate a notion of blackness as a response to the Greek myth. The celebration of Afro-Brazilian culture is inextricably mixed with the racial democracy myth, leaving the tragic aspects of life only for its Greek inspiration, and conferring an idyllic quality to life on the hillside.

Charles A. Perrone sees the beginning and the end of the film as reinforcing such an ideology:

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The first spoken words of the film 'Olha que beleza!' ('Look how lovely!') seem to want to resound at a precipice where beauty wins out. Thus the film projects late-fifties Brazil (or Rio at least) as a place where myth, splendor, and blackness may coincide. Yet the scene of black children dancing happily towards the picturesque horizon is sentimental, mitigates the recently transpired tragedy in the *favela*, and seals an idealization of the site of African-Brazilian life, encouraging, in this way, the myth of racial democracy. Such a romanticized orientation began with the play by Vinícius de Moraes, which led to the film and necessarily resonates in any discussion of the cinematic version of Orpheus in Brazil. (8)

Perrone's criticism can only be accepted if one is to expect *Black Orpheus* to be a documentary of Carioca culture, thereby searching for a representation of reality that was not the focus of intention in the original play. But his statement also points to the fact that the film helped foster, both for Brazilian and international audiences, the belief in a racially harmonious society.

Carlos Diegues's more recent cinematic version, *Orfeu*, released in 1999, strives to show aspects of life on the hillside in an openly realistic manner. It follows Moraes's desire that the ambience be modernized by the director. The conflict between the police and the hillside community, as well as the market industry surrounding Carnaval, point to more palpable aspects of the struggles of the characters in a contemporary "real" world. Yet by following the guidelines to transpose the plot to an everyday environment, the film also falls into a documentary trap, in which the myth itself has no place. The film presents, in this way, an inconsistency that the play does not have, since the latter privileged the metaphysical aspect. Diegues deconstructs the binary opposition between a modern and a primitive world from the beginning: the plane, which was a distant symbol of modernity in Camus's film, is now foregrounded in the first scene as Eurydice lands in Rio, coming by air from the distant state of Pará. The following scene, in which Orpheus composes a new samba on his laptop in a home studio, also helps to show a more complex interaction between a hillside life that is not isolated in its own "backwardness" and the more "globalized" world of technology. The equivalent of a tragedy's chorus in embodied by a radio transmission from a station in the *favela*, mixing rap and more traditional sambas, a mixture that accurately reflects the diversity of musical styles produced in these communities today.

Carnaval itself is portrayed more realistically, with the space of the parade as an enclosed sphere from which the poor are in fact excluded. The film makes this exclusion explicit by contrasting the colorful costumes and the dance in the Sambódromo with the image of people watching from the outside, from the bridges and roads that surround the site of the festivity. The music was also carefully chosen, although the director did not follow the playwright's suggestion to use the same songs composed specifically for the play. Again, a composer from the intellectual elite in Brazil, this time Caetano Veloso, signs the soundtrack. Besides composing original songs for the movie, he also included sambas by composers from the morro, and tried to combine them with rap. Veloso follows the film's perspective of situating the *favela* in connection with the reality around it, and makes ample use of contemporary manifestations of cultural exchange to show the musical diversity of Orfeu's environment. Lúcia Nagib sees *Orfeu* as part of a reinsertion of black themes in Brazilian cinema in the 1990s after a hiatus in the two previous decades, a period in which movies became increasingly apolitical in their main themes (83). Even when the film seems to emphasize class rather than race, it offers a carefully conceived racial characterization of the *favela*. Diegues had already directed other films focusing on Afro-Brazilian experience, among them *Ganga Zumba* (1964), *Xica da Silva* (1976), and *Quilombo* (1984). Unlike *Black Orpheus*, in which all major characters are played by black actors, Carlos Diegues chose to portray Orpheus's community as a *mestizo* one. The "bad guy", played by a white actor, is joined by an Eurydice whose racial background includes black, white, and Indian heritage.

Some of his other previous movies also included Carnaval themes, as in the episodes he directed in both *Cinco Vezes Favela* (1961) and *Veja esta Canção* (1994). Also, as a preview for *Orfeu*, his *Um Trem para as Estrelas* (1987) features the story of a musician who wanders through the city in search of his girlfriend. *Orfeu* seems to bring many of Diegues's concerns as a director together: the importance of soundtrack and of music as theme, the desire to produce a socially conscious feature, and the importance given to Carnival as a signifying event in Brazilian society. His documentary on Afro-reggae, *Nenhum Motivo Explica a Guerra* (2007), may be considered another variation on the Black Orpheus theme. Although following the plot of the tragedy, Diegues's film conveys, through side sto-

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ries, the idea that life can be changed (a notion that is absent from Moraes's play and the 1959 film, both of which rely predominantly on a tragic frame of thought). By contemporizing the myth, *Orfeu* is able to show a situation embedded in historical circumstances. But if, from the sociological point of view, the film is more successful than its predecessors, the result is that the tragic love story of Orpheus and Eurydice loses its strength as a narrative. A.O. Scott, in a film review for the *New York Times* in 2000, summarizes the problems the film faces when trying to portray both a transcendent sphere and a social-specific environment: "*Orfeu* tries to do too much at once: to be both mythic and realistic, to celebrate Rio's rich culture while exposing the brutality and cynicism that dominate daily life in its slums. In part because of its simplistic, sentimental depiction of favela life, "Black Orpheus" was a simpler, more coherent film than this one, which struggles to balance disparate styles and clashing emotional registers" (2). The difficulty inherent in adapting *Orfeu do Carnaval* for the screen is exactly the challenge of converging these two registers. The question posed previously remains: what exactly happens when a Western myth with universalizing demands is transposed to a very specific social environment? The adaptation can privilege the universal aspect, using the particular as a caricature, or it can lean towards socio-historical representation, using the tragedy as a mere pretext. The challenge of balancing these two aspects has been taken on by Camus and Diegues, and there is still space for other cinematic versions capable of absorbing both the contradictions of Afro-Brazilian society and the coherence of a mythical narrative. The resurfacing of the Black Orpheus theme in recent films reveals that the importance of music as a means to express the country's tragic ethos remains, especially in Afro-Brazilian and *mestizo* spaces.

In conclusion, recalling Sartre, these cinematic adaptations advocate in diverse ways the need for the black conscience to "redescend into the bursting Hell of the black soul." Diegues's film, despite not living up to spectators' expectations, suggests an interesting solution for an Afro-Brazilian Orpheus: instead of going down to a mythical hell, his task would be to go up the hills, where the hell of contemporary life is, showing that a process of awareness will have to take place right there, in the midst of concrete social situations. Only then could a new Orpheus, transfigured from his Greek origin into a *mestizo* fragmentation, re-present the spirit of tragedy in a contemporary key.

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