

The Brazilian System of Television, or How to Get a President

Tauan F. Tinti

UFPB - Universidade Federal da Paraiba

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Tinti, Tauan F "The Brazilian System of Television, or How to Get a President." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23.2 (2021): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4178>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 7 times as of 03/10/22.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 23 Issue 2 (June 2021) Article 2

Tauan Tinti,

"The Brazilian System of Television, or How to Get a President"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/2>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 23.2 (2021)**

Special Issue: **A Return to the Bad Old Times**. Ed. Fabio Akcelrud Durão and Fernando Urueta

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol23/iss2/>>

Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to some perhaps unexpected affinities between a considerably expressive segment of the Brazilian culture industry that for several reasons seems to usually fly under most interpretive radars and a certain regressive frame of mind that is becoming increasingly manifest and now holds both considerable political power and a surprisingly firm grip over a portion of the population whose size is still unclear. The following remarks and associations gesture tentatively at what could be preliminarily defined as a constellation of cultural junk being outlined, its shape against the night sky sometimes resembling maybe a black shirt. The essay then explores the idea that, in the Brazilian context, a particularly bright star of such constellation is the SBT broadcast network, whose assumedly second-rate programming stands in contrast with what is known as the "Globo standard of quality" of its main rival network, which might in itself be revealing of relevant national contradictions.

Tauan TINTI

The Brazilian System of Television, or How to Get a President

"Uncontested Leader of Second Place"

Business as usual: it is Sunday lunch time and host Celso Portioli is on the TV screen, about to put another question to the guest family of contestants. The show he is hosting, which is part of *Domingo Legal* (something like *Sunday Funday*), takes its cue from the formula being milked at least since 1999 by the *Show do Milhão* – by its turn a not-quite-legal Brazilian version of the British game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, created in 1998 and a surefire hit at the time, but whose ratings have been dwindling through its intermittent iterations, even if apparently never being gone for good. Portioli's question is baffling for all kinds of reasons: wearing his best smile, he asks the contestants if they know who would be the father of singer, actress and influencer Preta Gil. Four options are presented: Caetano Veloso, Chico Buarque, Gilberto Gil and a fourth, out of left field name which I confess, my memory could not retain (let's then say it was something like Gilgamesh). The first three, as most Brazilians would know, form one of the many possible triumvirates of so-called Brazilian Popular Music, which was once fairly popular and is now more than ever a relatively niche phenomenon of the middle-to-upper classes and/or older generations. The nod to our national cultural tradition, even if in this case from a somewhat commercial angle (Preta Gil as part of, say, the [Gilberto] Gil family brand), is mostly just for show: the family, visibly tense, takes its time to answer, whispers confidentially, seems undecided; Portioli lightly insists on the question, his tone undemanding, just a preemptive break on any chance of continuous silence. Their indecision is of course forgivable: not only does the fourth name echo the same Gil of Gilberto (and Preta), suggesting the ever present possibility of there being a catch, but the typical cognitive shortcut for knowing the paternity of Preta Gil ("daughter of a famous MPB singer"), for those who would have reason to find it useful, ends up being useless when touched by rubbed by so many alternatives. But beyond all that, the tension is due to the figure always visible on the screen: scoring the right answer is one of the necessary steps for winning the "grand" prize of 50 thousand reais (we are now a long way past the maximum prize of one million reais awarded by the aptly titled *Show do Milhão*), distributed along a series of tests in a vaguely sadistic game format, and which even so elicits some sympathy for its participants. With the pressure of the grand prize always on the mind, everything stops seeming obvious, even Gilberto Gil as the right answer (the family gets it right, by the way, and all remains right with the world). Celso Portioli never loses the smile completely, and the questions and tests are perfunctory in most senses of the term, but what remains at stake is ultimately a question of survival, self-preservation turning everything on the screen into enigma. That this everything is somewhat degrading to all parties involved is not a minor issue – and one which will continuously haunt us during the course of these pages.

Portioli's question is baffling for all kinds of reasons, yes – but his concern about Preta Gil's ascendancy also does not stand out in any significant way from SBT's usual fare. On the contrary, ever since his first brushes with the entertainment industry, SBT's owner never did much in the way of hiding the fact that his early incursions on televised entertainment were just good business opportunities, turning everything else into afterthoughts at best. According to Mauricio Stycer's *Topa tudo por dinheiro* – the book from which much of what follows about the SBT was borrowed¹ – Silvio Santos, born Senor Abravanel, has always presented himself less as artist than as salesman, who deals among other products Silvio Santos the character (Stycer 30-31). Since his debut on television in the 1960s, renting an initially weekly timeslot in the now extinct TV Paulista for the show *Vamos brincar de forca* (or *Let's play Hangman*) – which had, incidentally, the channel's highest viewership ratings – and up to the present day, most of Santos' shows have followed the same basic blueprint: being since the 1950s the owner of *Baú da Felicidade* (or the Vault of Happiness), a monthly subscription service that provided both household appliances and the right to compete for regular prize draws (more household appliances), Silvio used the show mainly as a glorified ad for his company, which currently encompasses second or third-rate brands such as *Jequiti cosméticos*, among others less known. The show's competitors were always drawn from the pool of *Baú's* subscribers, and the games they played were seldom especially elaborate, as the Hangman game that gave the early show its namesake exemplifies;

¹ The title of Stycer's book could be translated to *Anything goes for money*, and it comes from one of the attractions in the channel's flagship show, the *Programa Silvio Santos*, a multi-hour Sunday variety extravaganza mostly (then partially, now residually) hosted by Santos himself since its inception in 1963 and up to the present day.

its prizes ranged from money to, well, more household appliances sold by *Baú* (and later cars, houses etc.). After swindling his way through a series of shady deals coming in all shapes and sizes, going as far as using stooges in order to acquire a share of the *Record* broadcasting network in the 1970s (which was later sold to Bishop Edir Macedo, the head of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), and of a lot of backroom negotiations involving State concessions of national broadcasting rights during the military dictatorship (1964-1985), Silvio Santos became the owner of the now officially named Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão (or SBT, the Brazilian System of Television), which came into existence in 1981. Filling up at the time unbelievable fourteen hours of Sunday television with variations on his formula of simple game shows played by participants drawn from *Baú's* subscribers, Silvio hired, in order to round up the remaining timeslots, a roster of hosts for other variety shows that never strayed too far from his own *Programa Silvio Santos*. And SBT also acquired the rights for transmission of several dubbed soap operas, some infamously coming from Mexico ("This feels like a Mexican soap" used to be a common idiom), children's cartoons and a good deal of slightly outdated movies and straight-to-video releases, as well as other foreign shows, such as the hugely popular *Chaves* (originally *El Chavo del Ocho*), which became one of the channel's mainstays. Taken as a whole, the programming gave a general feeling of being on the cheaper side, filled with supposedly great deals coming from a bargain bin in the retail store of culture.

Always his own indefatigable and most accomplished poster child, Silvio rarely made a case of hiding that his network angled for a market share that only partially overlapped with Rede Globo's. At least in this sense, then, Globo was not exactly a direct competitor of SBT – and also because it did not have its dominant position over viewership ratings seriously contested, barring a few timeslots and never for long. Having as his main advertisers the very brands that formed the Grupo Silvio Santos, the salesman-turned-businessman/entertainer displayed a certain pride in being able to brush aside the charges coming from every angle (from the press, from intellectuals, from government authorities) that his network had its brow too low, was in bad taste and intellectually hazardous and so on. Or actually, he was proud while it lasted – and then some: in spite of remarkable ratings (one of the curiously self-aware slogans that Washington Olivetto's marketing firm sold to SBT: "Liderança absoluta do segundo lugar", or "Uncontested leader of second place"), during the late 1980s the network faced serious hardship to find brands willing to give it a share of their marketing budgets. This reluctance was due to a general diffidence of being associated with a channel which, with its programming littered with variety shows, was seen as doing a disservice to Brazilian culture – not even for free did the companies want ads on SBT, challenging the idea that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Silvio eventually gave in to the pressure of the market, even if grudgingly so, acquiring rights to series and movies less offensive to his critics' tastes and revamping some of his programming (and especially SBT's news department) – but finding curious results (Stycer 149-175). In (my translation of) his own words in an interview with the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* in 1991: "In general, I get worried when reviewers like one of my products. When reviewers say a product is good, really, it is going to score 2 points in ratings. The movie *Sophie's Choice* won the Oscar. I put it on programming and got 8 points. Reviewers praised [the soap opera] *Brasileiros e brasileiras*. They said it was going to be amazing. It got 5 points. So, reviewers rarely work for television. I don't worry about it, I worry about popular taste" (qtd. in Stycer 194).²

But Silvio gave in only to a point, and not for long: shows that were more well received by reviewers (and, what is obviously crucial, by advertisers by proxy) coexisted with the "usual" programming (in this context, the adjective should sound a little disturbing) of 1990s' SBT, composed of attractions such as "Gata molhada" on Saturday nights – a contest between women wearing white shirts while taking showers onstage, decided by viewers' voting calls – the infamous "Banheira do Gugu" (or "Gugu's Bathtub") on Sunday afternoons (!) – with bikini-clad women using their bodies to playfully hamper famous men's attempts to grab a handful of soap bars scattered inside a tub (again, onstage) – not to mention Silvio Santos well-known habit of launching money paper planes, literally up for grabs, in the direction of a live audience always composed exclusively of women, generally addressed in a tone of light mockery that often leads them to becoming the butt of double entendres. But, if this reads like nothing more than a sample of some irrelevant bestiary of outdated Brazilian entertainment that shall be relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history: in 2017 SBT announced that SBT Online, its Youtube channel, overtook BBC in becoming "The world's largest TV network on the streaming platform" ("SBT passa BBC"), with four million subscribers³ and a total of, at the time, seventy billion minutes of watched

² All translations not mentioned in the references are my own.

³ In November 2019 the channel had 8.73 million subscribers, and it already had twenty million in 2017 when adding up the subscribers of each of the show's Youtube channels, which suggests a certain single-mindedness of taste, to

content (Forato). Or 1.2 billion hours, or 48 million days, or 133 thousand years. (I was ignorantly hopeful, before adding this up, that regressing these billions of minutes would take us back to the times of our dictatorship, or maybe to Colonial times. But I most definitely was not expecting such an imaginary throwback to the Paleolithic.)

"Bolsonaro System of Television"

José Roberto Maluf, then the vice-president of SBT, talks of a conversation he had in the early 2000s with Silvio Santos in occasion of a deal for acquiring the rights for the show *Big Brother*. With most of the paperwork for the deal with the Dutch company that owned the format already being signed, Silvio suddenly backs off, claiming it was too much money for a show that would not be adequate for his target audience. Maluf answers: "What do you mean it's not our audience, Silvio? Of course it's our audience, it's clearly a B2, C1, C2 show. It's clear!" (qtd. in Stycer 185). B2, C1, C2: the ratings come from the *Associação Brasileira de Empresas de Pesquisa* (or Brazilian Association of Research Companies), and are based on data gathered from the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (or IBGE, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) in order to, according to one of ABEP's documents, "define broad economic classes that serve most companies' segmentation needs (per purchasing power)" (*Crítério Brasil*). This segmentation is defined through criteria such as schooling, the amount of household appliances or cars in the household (one university degree amounts to two bathrooms or something between two and three cars), but ABEP also takes a stab at estimating the average monthly income of these households: according to the *Crítério Brasil 2019*, the strata that form SBT's targeted audience would have a monthly household income ranging from a little above 1,700 reais to a little more than 5,600 reais (and, still according to ABEP, amounting to 64.8% of the Brazilian population). Maluf's casual mentioning of the ratings non-surprisingly points to it being part of the jargon of the channel's higher-ups, and also of the awareness they could have of their content's likely social range.

But there is always room for outliers, even extreme ones: Jair Bolsonaro, who is as I write the President of Brazil (one can never be too sure these times), owned an estate of 2.28 million reais, according to what he declared to the TSE (the Superior Electoral Court) in 2018 around the time he was elected (Maré) – not to mention the dubious dealings of his son Flávio, who is currently a senator and also undergoing a key investigation for his father's political standings (Ramalho) –, and is now paid a total monthly salary of around 60 thousand reais (Sousa), while also seeming to really enjoy at least one of SBT's shows.⁴ Or at least Bolsonaro likes it enough to have walked on foot and without notice from his Palácio do Planalto to the Congress in order to honor comedian Carlos Alberto da Nóbrega, who was there to attend a session of the Lower Chamber in his honor, presided by former porn actor and current congressman Alexandre Frota, at the time still a member of the PSL, at the time still the president's party (Oyama 146) – "Brazil is not for the unseasoned," as composer Tom Jobim once famously said. Carlos Alberto has been since 1987 the host of *A praça é nossa* (or *It's our park*), a fossilized comedy show in which he plays a version of himself, a kind of Regular Joe who spends his Saturday nights sitting on a park bench and interacting with a gallery of conveniently rotating characters taken from a vault of poorly curated but probably deep-rooted national stereotypes; these are generally defined by a catchphrase or some allegedly funny trait, such as the half-deaf old lady who mishears everything as having to do with sex, the uncontrollably corrupt politician who likes to brag or the countless so-called blonde bimbos, who are practically inevitable in shows with such standards. And Carlos Alberto then reciprocated the presidential homage, showing off pictures of his meeting with Bolsonaro on the show. In fact, the whole of Bolsonaro's clan already became recurrent guests in Silvio Santos' channel – and even some of his goons, such as the hugely popular Sérgio Moro, then Brazil's Minister of Justice (and now former "Superminister"), or driver Fabrício Queiroz, stuck neck-deep in an investigation triggered by a remarkable sequence of monetary transactions that can hardly be explained away, and which happened when he was Flavio Bolsonaro's head of staff, then a state representative in Rio de Janeiro. Although it is also worth mentioning that SBT's owner makes a point of always adulating the powers that be, instructing the channel's news department to use the most positive tone possible with the current government authorities ("If it's for criticizing, it's better to keep quiet"), and going as far as defining himself, in another interview with *Folha de S. Paulo*, as "a provider, a sort of deluxe 'office boy' for the government" (Stycer 157-158).

say the least.

⁴ According to Bob Woodward's *Medo*, Steve Bannon stated that was not unusual for the current president of the US to watch from six to eight hours of TV on a single day (297). Some patterns emerge from the strangest places.

Silvio Santos had already received other key politicians before, renting both his shows and his own popularity in order to ease popular opinion into accepting some of the more contentious measures of several governments: Dilson Funaro, Sarney's Minister of Finance, explained the Plano Cruzado in 1986 under Silvio's wings; Zélia Cardoso, Fernando Collor's Minister of Finance, explained the government's hardly digestible confiscation of savings accounts next to Silvio in 1990; Fernando Henrique Cardoso, then Minister of Finance and soon-to-be President, was thoroughly helped by Silvio in his explanation of the Plano Real in 1994; in 2018, President Michel Temer did his best to explain his project for a Welfare Reform, but Silvio's smile was not enough this time; and even Lula had to defend himself from a volley of random questions thrown at him by people like Sérgio Mallandro, one of the judges of SBT's *Show de Calouros* (or *Talent Show*) in 1989, during his first presidential dispute ("Relembre encontros"). Yet the regularity of the Bolsonaros' presence on the channel remains impressive, suggestive of deeper affinities and unrestricted to the handling of hot potatoes. Jair, the President, besides countless (and expected) interviews of the more journalistic variety, also had his time to talk a little about his own Welfare Reform – or actually Paulo Guedes', his Minister of Economic Affairs⁵ (there was also a ministerial reform, so the Finance streak was somewhat broken) – and a lot about anything else, be it to Silvio, to would-be comedian Danilo Gentili on his talk show, or to Carlos Roberto Massa, better known as Ratinho, the hotheaded host of the *Programa do Ratinho* (a show with "popular content, music, information, interviews, practical jokes, humor and fun," according to its Wikipedia entry) and father of Ratinho Júnior, current governor of Paraná and another supporter of Bolsonaro's presidential run. Jair's son Flávio, now a senator from Rio de Janeiro, had a couple of chances of distancing himself from the aforementioned mess with his cabinet spending in interviews with unusually compliant journalists (in its turn Queiroz, currently the prime suspect in the affair, was also given a shot still in 2018, in an exclusive interview that had overtones of a love confession from network to president-elect). Jair's other son Eduardo, a federal representative in São Paulo, was part of the attraction "Pra quem você tira o chapéu?" (or "Who do you take your hat off to?") in the *Programa Raul Gil*, a variety show presented by titular Raul Gil and acquired from a rival network, but not unlike SBT's homegrown in any significant way (Eduardo took his hat off, of course, to Donald Trump). And Sérgio Moro, the former judge raised to fame during the course of the fateful "Lava Jato" operation and then Minister of Justice, also had the opportunity to be fawned by Ratinho in his show ("A hero without a cape" etc.) at the onset of the scandal around a leak of text messages that pointed to his illicit conduct in handling the "Lava Jato" (Stycer, "Sistema Bolsonaro"). But both his eldest sons, Eduardo and Flávio, were together part of a moment of purer entertainment, in the "Jogo das três pistas" (or "Game of the three clues"), one of the attractions that form the *Programa Silvio Santos'* current iteration. For the surprise of not many, they did poorly – especially Flávio, who insisted during the whole show on not knowing the answer to any of the questions, and also needed a hand from his brother in order to score something, besides having shown signs of not even understanding the rudimentary rules of the game (Goes). But for better or worse, in this case Flávio's cognitive abilities are not to blame: the game is in fact clumsily executed, since many of the clues are confusing due to poor phrasing. Two contrasting examples: if the clues "Was the president of Brazil," "Was born in Minas [Gerais, a Brazilian state]" and "His grandson was a senator" adequately point to "Tancredo Neves," the clues "gives plantation," "Is soft" and "kind of fabric" lead only strenuously to "Cotton" (in Portuguese, the clue "Tem plantação" is hardly grammatical as well, and a long way from the "[It] grows in plantations" it probably should have been). Considering this is currently one of the main Sunday attractions of a network that survives on the proliferation of variety shows centered around games in which members of the audience (or minor-to-medium celebrities) take part, the flagrant and reiterated amateurism in both conception and execution of these games seems significant.

Just a few days from the final round of Brazil's 2018 general elections, Fernando Haddad, PT's (the Workers' Party) presidential candidate, went through an interview with SBT that was a lot less amiable than the others mentioned here. Like many finding it hard to focus on anything else, I watched the interview on SBT's Youtube channel, probably hoping for some small rhetorical miracle that could swing a massive number of votes away from Bolsonaro; unsurprisingly, nothing of the sort happened. The interview being finished, the browser's tab lingered unclosed a little longer, enough for exhibiting a few minutes of the latest variation on the *Programa Silvio Santos*. And the man had finally gone full circle: just like in his television debut in 1962, there he was once again in 2018, in so-called prime time, hosting

⁵ In her book about the first year of Bolsonaro's presidency, journalist Thaís Oyama registers Guedes' habit of closing his team meetings with the battle cry "Never retreat, never surrender!" – which comes from the title of one of actor Jean-Claude van Damme's action flicks (165). Van Damme, by its turn, was one of the more illustrious guests in Gugu's share of *Domingo Legal* during his brief stay in Brazil in 2001.

an unbelievable game of hangman, teeming with ads for Jequití Cosméticos instead of the Baús of yore. "Ice cream flavors" was the clue, and with most of the letters already written, not even Silvio seemed to know that the missing one was pistachio. Instead of coming up with a new attraction or revamping an older one, the show's runner opted to rely on one of his seemingly tried and true formulas. The games' unpolished quality, together with the format's popularity, considerable if dwindling over the course of decades, point to a general disregard for unclear rules and rougher edges that is shared by both sides of supply and demand. Or rather, disregard to a point: if the games usually are not important in themselves, they also serve as a springboard for the host's playful jibes, mischievous tone and sexual insinuations, which seem to give the shows their true (if limited) appeal. After all, even when they do not make that much sense, sometimes the attractions work in unexpected ways. In a video that went viral and currently has over 4.5 million views, Silvio Santos comically struggles to deal with a contestant who just cannot understand the rules of an especially abstruse game: three women, each in front of their own canvas, must follow the instructions given by Moisés (the contestant) in order to draw an object that can't be named or referenced too directly ("O Rei da Paciência"). Throughout seven minutes, Moisés fails to get how the game works, fumbles his initial descriptions, unintentionally gives away that the object is a racket, doesn't understand the rules a second (and a third) time, repeats the instructions for a previous object, comes up with new ones that are almost as nonsensical as the background scenery, all the while provoking several fits of laughter on both audience and host; and, when things seemingly couldn't get more absurd, the new object to be described by him enters the stage: a bikini-clad woman now stands smiling between Silvio and Moisés, while the very fabric of reality threatens to collapse.

In an interview with the online journal of the Instituto Humanitas Unisinos in April 2018, Allan Kenji, who researches both the ways through which educational conglomerates tamper with school reforms and their relationship with finance capital, draws attention to a document presented by the Confederação Nacional da Indústria (CNI, or the National Confederation of Industry) in 2010 that already pointed to the so-called need for reform, which would be finally implemented by the Temer administration. According to Kenji, the document stated "what [CNI] wanted for the Brazilian work force: that students knew how to read and write, that they knew how to do the four basic arithmetic operations and that they understood basic logic, that is to say, that they knew things have causes and effects. And that this should be the centerpiece for every project for the reforms that should be sequentially implemented by the government from then on." And he is not overreacting: the document *A indústria e o Brasil – Uma agenda para crescer mais e melhor* (or *The Industry and Brazil – A Roadmap for Growth*) drones continuously that "quality" basic education should be chiefly concerned with the "understanding of informative texts with numbers and tables, as well as writing and arithmetical skills. Those without these basic and fundamental abilities are functionally illiterate" (154). Anything else – such as, say, providing the capacity to even roughly discern unpolished images full of chicanery from relatively reliable and factually accurate reports⁶ – would lie beyond the scope of school, at least for a very significant part of the Brazilian population. B2, C1, C2... it is clear, after all: to judge from Moisés' performance on the show, he probably would not be up to even CNI's meager standards – but something similar could be said of those who conceived the game whose half-baked rules he's unable to grasp.

All of this is not simply to imply that Silvio Santos and SBT are to blame for our predicament: such an explanation would be as misguided as it is reductive, since whatever it was that now came to the fore of current Brazilian society needs to be considered from a multitude of standpoints in order to be adequately grasped – and at least in this sense we are still not that far from Moisés' aforementioned struggles. My purpose here has been to draw attention to some perhaps unexpected affinities between a considerably expressive segment of the Brazilian culture industry that seems to fly under our usual interpretive radars and a certain regressive frame of mind that is becoming clearer than ever and now holds both considerable political power and a surprisingly firm grip over a portion of the population, its size still unclear. These initial remarks gesture tentatively at a constellation of cultural junk being outlined, its shape against the night sky sometimes resembling a black shirt; its brightest star could very well be SBT, something of an aptly named metonymy for the Brazilian System of Television itself (save for Rede Globo, about which more to follow). With characteristic verve, Adorno and Horkheimer

⁶ This distinction might sound too sharp to be true – and, at an epistemological level, it in fact is. But from the standpoint of the degree of overall polish, from color scheme to the choice of font and to the number of exclamation points and image resolution, the difference between the typical fake news and an average news piece coming from some established newspaper could hardly be starker. But it should also be noted that the former had a reach and influence that could not be matched in any way by the latter, as the general lack of effect of the many fact-checking initiatives that came into existence during the course of the elections made clear.

wrote in their famous chapter on the Culture Industry that "[t]he active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects – that they should, from the first, relate sensuous multiplicity to fundamental concepts – is denied to the subject by industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer. [...] For the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been preempted by the schematism of production" (98). In a world in which even Kantian schematism can be unwillingly outsourced, the puzzling idea of an entertainment illiteracy may not come off as too shocking, especially when taking into account how this side of the Brazilian Culture Industry seems to be both stuck in time and here to stay. Or to put it another way: back to the bad old times? Maybe the writing has been on the wall (or screen) for the whole time, just waiting to be deciphered.

Addendum: The Globo Standard of Quality

In his final documentary film, left unfinished due to a literally tragic death by the hand of his own son, Eduardo Coutinho presents himself to one the teenagers he is about to interview for his *Last Conversations*: "I'm going to ask you several banal questions about life, and you can answer the truth or lie, it doesn't matter. [...] You kids are complicated, because you're living, but you don't have recollections. [...] So I am going to ask only stupid things, as if I'm a Martian or a four year old." It was also with the mindset of a Martian that Coutinho "created" *A Day in the Life*, a truly disturbing documentary film that purely consists of a collage of unedited snippets taken from broadcast TV shows and ads, all coming from the same day (in this case, October 1, 2009), with no voiceover nor any kind of commentary. The result is fascinating for all kinds of reasons, starting from a general feeling of unsurmountable historical distance, despite its relative chronological proximity to 2020, with several news shows highlighting president Lula's remarkable popularity at the end of his mandate, and a palpable sense of pride felt by a country that this time, finally, for real, was actually going to make it; several off-key ads fall flat or do not make much sense, possibly attesting to their reliance on very immediate cultural surroundings; there is some incidence of flagrantly exploitive shows, with for example two bikini-clad women being thrown in the mud for no discernible reason (and not on a SBT show), that would at least have to be toned down for current standards – what might serve as a small consolation. Director João Moreira Salles, who finished *Last Conversations* and was close to Coutinho, during an interview given in 2016 after an exhibition of *A Day in the Life* in a Festival, distanced himself from the interviewer's statement that through his editing Coutinho had undone the often mentioned "differentiation between the channels," levelling "Globo's programming with the Mexican soap, the televangelists' shows" etc. To that, João Salles replies that "Coutinho would disagree with you about that, for he told me many times that one of the things he found out when making the film was that Globo is just better, it produces better. News shows are more professional, less openly manipulative than the ones from the bishop's channel, which have a clear ideological agenda" (Garrett and Salles).

This difference on a technical level, that also leads to a subtler handling of their own agenda through what information is made available on the news, as Salles acknowledges, goes back to the deals made in the early 1960s with the Time-Life corporation, that provided both the funding and the necessary know-how to establish the network's image, and which was later turned into the slogan "Padrão Globo de Qualidade" (or the "Globo Standard of Quality"). Having a mostly complete dominance over viewers' ratings in Brazil since its inception, with a diversified programming that leaves room for the eventual mini-series of some artistic pretension (results may vary) and occasionally elaborate prime-time soap operas, in addition to a news department that every so often does its job admirably (but only when aligned with the network's own agenda, or if the latter does not get in its way), the Marinho family's network stands apart from all the others through the degree of technical polish applied to all of its attractions. Even the games in the variety shows, such as the *Domingão do Faustão* (which was created to compete with SBT's then very successful *Programa Silvio Santos*), make some semblance of sense as games, and there is room for some subtlety even during the network's more tabloid-like moments, usually less brazen than its competitors'. To sum up, it could be said that the technical polish and general tone amount to a civilizing gain, modest but real, and without overlooking its undertones of hypocrisy – which is, as La Rochefoucauld famously wrote, "a tribute that vice pays to virtue." And this gain, if it is real, also reaches the way the channel deals with changing mores (what is known in Brazil as the "pauta dos costumes"), with Globo increasingly assuming more or less timidly progressive postures with regards to, for example, how members of the LGBT community are depicted, even if these are obviously tampered by the visible concern with ratings and the audience's acceptance. A single example should suffice: prime-time soap opera *Torre de Babel*, which was aired in 1998, featured a lesbian couple who had some relevance to the plot, but a mix of audience rejection and thinly veiled criticism from the specialized press sentenced both characters to dying in the explosion of a fictional mall that gathered several narrative strands – such an outcome sounds vaguely allegorical, although its meaning remains

undeciphered. And Globo's distance from other channels also has the air of performance, or of imperial haughtiness: except for exceedingly rare occasions (such as when Gugu Liberato passed away in late 2019 – yes, the same Gugu from the aforementioned "Gugu's Bathtub"), the broadcaster goes above and beyond in order to pretend that other channels simply do not exist, banning artists under contract with other networks from its shows and even having kept a veto on exhibiting ads starred by artists from its rivals (Styker 133). Nothing could be farther from SBT's tongue-in-cheek posture, that had "Uncontested vice-leader" as another of its slogans and came as far as announcing the upcoming airing of *The Thorn Birds* with "Don't worry if Globo is taking its time to end today's episode of its soap opera. We are going on air only after it's over" (Styker 181).

In part to emulate Donald Trump's winning strategy, in part as preemptive self-defense against the growing journalistic scrutiny he was going to suffer, in part possibly for personal tendencies, in part for still other less obvious reasons, Bolsonaro singled out from the start his two main enemies among the so-called traditional media: daily newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, referred to, in his rudimentary idiom (Flávio did not come from nowhere), as "the biggest fake news in Brazil" (Marques), and Rede Globo, threatened at every opportunity with losing the state's marketing funding and with the cessation of its national broadcasting rights. And it cannot be denied that both Globo and *Folha* have been doing an intermittently implacably critical coverage of the president and his clan, first scooping and then giving wide coverage to major scandals such as the one concerning Fabrício Queiroz (*Folha*), the severe irregularities with the financing of several campaigns around the Minister of Tourism Marcelo Álvaro Antônio (*Folha*), or the possible link between the assassins of *carioca* city councilor Marielle Franco and the Bolsonaros (Globo). In retaliation, the federal government both cancelled in October 2019 all of its *Folha* subscriptions ("Bolsonaro cancela") and drastically redistributed its marketing budget among the three largest networks in Brazil: Globo received a 39.1% share of the federal government's budget for television marketing in 2018, roughly equivalent to its viewership ratings, but this share fell over to 16.3%, while Bishop Macedo's Record went from 31.1% in 2018 to 42.6% in 2019, and SBT (no longer the uncontested vice-leader) went from 29.9% to 41% (Fabrini). But if the mutual antipathy between Bolsonaro (and *bolsonarismo*) on one side and *Folha* and Globo on the other seems heartfelt, with regards to Paulo Guedes, Bolsonaro's "bondsman" with the market, it is another story (Gaspar). The "wedding," to use the president's favorite metaphor, between former Army captain and controversial banker was one of convenience, with the market hitchhiking Bolsonaro's popularity at the same time it gave him legitimacy... for the very market that was building him up. Guedes' plans for massive neoliberal reforms, that Bolsonaro probably cannot quite understand – he frequently blundered when trying to explain any of it, until he finally dropped the whole matter (Oyama 149) – go against the latter's vague tendencies towards statization, but have been diligently commended by the whole of mainstream media, with varying degrees of subtlety and in spite of the president's attacks. After the announcement of a recent round of reforms that restrict yet again the long-term possibilities of state investment in healthcare and education, while also providing institutional tools to lead Brazil to the group of countries in a perpetual state of emergency, *Folha* published an editorial piece singing its praises and complimenting the "correct direction" of the federal government's economic policies ("Na direção correta") in the middle of open gunfire between president and newspaper, sparked by the latter's coverage of the aforementioned evidences of a possible involvement between the Bolsonaros and the *carioca* armed militias; by its turn, cable channel *Globonews* never dropped its constant endorsement of Guedes' neoliberal agenda, keeping it up with overflowing gusto.

The picture formed by this bizarre love triangle between Bolsonaro, Paulo Guedes and *Folha*/Globo corresponds to the sharp limits of mainstream media's criticisms aimed at the government: these are almost exclusively centered around the president and his more immediate surroundings, and could be framed as concerning his general lack of civilizing polish. And it could have been a different president, if it was not for, among other reasons, the media's inability to duly guide popular unrest according to its plan: such unrest was in no small measure induced by this very media over the course of decades of relentless attacks on the PT, and the failed plan probably went through reinstating the PSDB of Fernando Henrique Cardoso on the presidency – and is in this sense worth noting that future analogies linking our current situation to the always contentious relationship between mainstream media and the *petista* governments, which were not exempt of neoliberal measures well to the liking of the media, may become possible. But perhaps the future brings the promise of better days⁷ – for some: after a long period of incubation, another political outsider is slowly emerging on the horizon, one that was schooled in the television branch of pseudo-welfare of which Silvio Santos was always the uncontested master, and that

⁷ It goes without saying that, with the current pandemic outbreak, most of what follows probably no longer applies.

finally unites popular appeal, a taste for demagoguery and earnest sympathy for the neoliberal way of life. To conclude: Luciano Huck, who began his career hosting a variety show in one of SBT's rival networks and then migrated in a sanitized version to less insalubrious regions of national television, could very well be a Silvio Santos adjusted to the Globo standard, giving civilizing polish and the accompanying shimmer of hypocrisy to much of what we have of most regressive as a nation. It seems that 2022's final round of general elections might be even worse than the last one – if it actually takes place.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford UP, 2002.
- "Relembra encontros de Silvio Santos com presidentes da República" ("Silvio Santos' meetings with Brazilian Presidents"). *Correio Braziliense*, 25 May 2019, correio braziliense.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2019/05/05/interna_politica,753224/relembre-encontros-de-silvio-santos-com-presidentes-da-republica.shtml. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.
- Associação Brasileira de Empresas de Pesquisa. *Critério Brasil* (Brazilian Criterion), abep.org/criterio-brasil. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- "Bolsonaro cancela assinaturas da Folha no governo federal e ameaça anunciantes do jornal" ("Bolsonaro cancels the Federal Government's subscriptions of Folha and threatens advertisers"). *Folha de S. Paulo*, 31 Oct. 2019, folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/10/bolsonaro-determina-cancelamento-de-assinaturas-da-fohla-no-governo-federal.shtml. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- Confederação Nacional da Indústria. *A indústria e o Brasil – Uma agenda para crescer mais e melhor* (The Industry and Brazil – A Roadmap for Growth). Brasília, Confederação Nacional da Indústria, 2010.
- Fabrini, Fabio. "Globo perde participação em verba oficial de publicidade sob Bolsonaro" ("Globo loses part of its share of the Government's marketing budget under Bolsonaro"). *Folha de S. Paulo*, 12 Nov. 2019, folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/11/globo-perde-participacao-em-verba-oficial-de-publicidade-sob-bolsonaro.shtml. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- Fernandes, Talita. "Bolsonaro deixa Planalto a pé para ir a homenagem a humorista no Congresso" ("Bolsonaro leaves the [Palácio do] Planalto to attend a Congress session in honor of comedian"). *Folha de S. Paulo*, 29 May 2019, folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/05/bolsonaro-deixa-planalto-a-pe-para-ir-a-homenagem-a-humorista-no-congresso.shtml. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.
- Forato, Tiago. "SBT crava marca de 20 milhões de inscritos no Youtube" ("SBT has over 20 million subscribers on Youtube"). *natelinha*, 27 Apr. 2017, natelinha.uol.com.br/noticias/2017/04/27/sbt-crava-marca-de-20-milhoes-de-inscritos-no-youtube--107229.php. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.
- Garrett, Adriano and João Moreira Salles. "João Moreira Salles fala sobre Um Dia na Vida e critica falta de estudos sobre TV" (João Moreira Salles talks about A Day in the Life and criticizes a lack of studies about television). *Cinefestivals*, 29 Jun. 2016, cinefestivals.com.br/joao-moreira-salles-fala-sobre-um-dia-na-vida-e-critica-falta-de-estudos-sobre-tv/. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- Gaspar, Malu. "O fiador" ("The Bondsman"). *piauí*, Rio de Janeiro, no. 144, Sep 2018, piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/o-fiador/. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- Goes, Tony. "Filhos de Bolsonaro passam vexame no Jogo das Três Pistas de Silvio Santos" ("Bolsonaro's sons perform poorly in Silvio Santos' Game of the Three Clues"). *F5 – O site de entretenimento da Folha*, 15 Jul. 2019, f5.folha.uol.com.br/colunistas/tonygoes/2019/07/filhos-de-bolsonaro-passam-vexame-no-jogo-das-tres-pistas-de-silvio-santos.shtml. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.
- Kenji, Allan, et al. "Entrevista: Kroton Educacional: 'Em termos de educação pública nunca experimentamos um inimigo com uma força social tão concentrada como esse'" ("Interview: Kroton Educacional: 'Concerning public education, we never faced an enemy with such an aggregate of social forces'). *Revista IHU On-line*, 30 Apr. 2018, ihu.unisinos.br/78-noticias/578444-kroton-educacional-em-termos-de-educacao-publica-nunca-experimentamos-um-inimigo-com-uma-forca-social-tao-concentrada-como-esse. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.
- Maré, Chico. "#Verificamos: É falso que, em 10 anos, patrimônio de Bolsonaro cresceu R\$ 18 milhões" ("#Verified: It is fake that, in 10 years, Bolsonaro's estate had a growth of R\$ 18 Million"). *Agência Lupa*, 21 Jan. 2019, piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2019/01/21/verificamos-10-anos-bolsonaro-patrimonio/. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.
- Marques, José. "Folha é a maior fake news do Brasil, diz Bolsonaro a manifestantes" ("Folha is the biggest fake news in Brazil, says Bolsonaro to demonstrators"). *Folha de S. Paulo*, 21 Oct. 2018, folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/10/fohla-e-a-maior-fake-news-do-brasil-diz-bolsonaro-a-manifestantes.shtml. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- "Na direção correta" ("In the Correct Direction"). *Folha de S. Paulo*, 5 Nov. 2019, folha.uol.com.br/opinia0/2019/11/na-direcao-correta.shtml. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- Oyama, Thaís. *Tormenta – O governo Bolsonaro: crises, intrigas e segredos* (Torment – The Bolsonaro Administration: Crisis, Intrigue and Secrets). Companhia das Letras, 2020.
- "Programa do Ratinho." Wikipédia, [pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programa do Ratinho](http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programa_do_Ratinho), 1 Jun. 2020. Accessed 2 Jun. 2020.
- Ramalho, Sérgio. "Pica do tamanho de um cometa" ("A cock the size of a comet"). *The Intercept Brasil*, 25 Apr. 2020, theintercept.com/2020/04/25/flavio-bolsonaro-rachadinha-financiou-milicia/. Accessed 10 May 2020.
- "SBT passa BBC e é maior canal de TV no Youtube" ("SBT overtakes BBC and becomes the biggest TV network on Youtube"). *Portal Imprensa*, 26 Sep. 2017,

portalimprensa.com.br/noticias/brasil/79647/sbt+passa+bbc+e+e+maior+canal+de+tv+no+youtube.

Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.

"Silvio Santos – O Rei da Paciência no Topa Tudo por Dinheiro" ("Silvio Santos – The King of Patience on Anything Goes for Money"). *YouTube*, uploaded by Página do Silvio Santos, 2 Apr. 2009, [youtube.com/watch?v=mpXShHdQGcQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpXShHdQGcQ). Accessed 14 Nov. 2019.

Sousa, Miguel. "Quanto ganha um Presidente da República?" ("How much does a President earn?"). *Escola educação*, escolaeducacao.com.br/quanto-ganha-um-presidente-da-republica/. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.

Stycer, Mauricio. *Topa tudo por dinheiro – As muitas faces do empresário Silvio Santos*. (Anything goes for money – The many faces of Businessman Silvio Santos). *Todavia*, 2018.

---. "Sistema Bolsonaro de Televisão" ("Bolsonaro System of Television"). *Folha de S. Paulo*, 21 Jul. 2019, folha.uol.com.br/colunas/mauriciostycer/2019/07/sistema-bolsonaro-de-televisao.shtml. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.

Woodward, Bob. *Medo – Trump na Casa Branca*. Translated by André Czarnobai, Paulo Geiger et al, *Todavia*, 2018.

Author Profile: Tauan Fernandes Tinti holds a doctorate in Literary Theory and History from the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and has written essays and articles on late modernist and contemporary English language literature, as well as Marxist literary and cultural criticism. He is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), with funding from Capes (grant n. 88887.363097/2019-00) >>>. Email: <tauantinti@gmail.com>