

(RE)DISCOVERIES OF BRAZIL

José Gatti

Who invented Brazil?
Mr. Cabral, Mr. Cabral
On April, the 22nd
Two months
After Mardi Gras

— from a song for Carnival
by Lamartine Babo

As we all learn at the Brazilian schools, Portuguese navigators arrived in Brazil in the year 1500. The event became known as *Descobrimento do Brasil* (Discovery of Brazil) and has been subject to controversies (did they plan it? did it happen by chance?) and disputes (who would have preceded them? the Spanish? the French? the Africans?). What is still being taught, anyway, is that the fleet commanded by Pedro Álvares Cabral made the first official contact between Portugal and the new land at 16° South (presently Porto Seguro, Bahia), marked it as King's possession and named it Terra de Santa Cruz.

The present text is an attempt to identify, in the discursive process which led to the invention of Brazil as we know it today, some representations of its foundation: a letter, a painting and two films. I will be tracking, here, the aesthetic strategies and political positionalities

that informed these representations, as well as some of the resonances that they leave us today.

The Letter

The first official document recording the arrival of the Portuguese was the Letter to King dom Manuel, written by the fleet's scribe, Pero Vaz de Caminha. He strives to inform the Portuguese court of the assets of the new possession, and it does not come as a surprise that the Letter has already been defined as the first piece of advertisement produced in this country. Moreover, the detailed quality of his report qualifies the Letter as the first ethnographic document on the natives, describing ways of life, physiognomies and arts. The author is generous about the bountiful nature of the region of Porto Seguro and resorts to the usual arguments of that period—which included not only economic possibilities but also the opportunity to expand the Christian crusade around the world. We should not forget that the expulsion of the Muslims from the Iberian peninsula was then a recent fact, and that the Catholic expansion was a most important element concerning the process of colonization. In Caminha's discourse the juxtaposition of the colonial enterprise and the religious crusade becomes obvious. Hence, the frequent references to the possibility of conversion of the natives, who would not have any religion and would thus be ready for the Christian faith:

And according to what seemed to me and to all, these people do not lack anything else to be all Christian, besides understanding us (...) since to all of us it appeared that no idolatry nor adoration they possess. And I do believe that, if Your Highness here sent anyone who would walk slower among them, that all of them would be converted at Your Highness's will.¹

Within this context, the building and the placing of the cross constitute central events in the report, as well as the description of the first Catholic masses that were held here. I write masses in the plural because two are the ceremonies described by Caminha in the Letter. The “first” one happened on Easter Sunday right after the arrival of the navigators; the “second” one was held on Friday, May 1st. According to Caminha, the local people reacted in rather different ways at each service.

During this first mass, right after the sermon by Brother Henrique, the Amerindians got excited and “played the horn ... and began to jump and dance a piece,”² thus surprising the Portuguese. We are far, here, from those faithful and well-behaved Indians who appear in the traditional representations of the First Mass in school textbooks. However, even if the natives shocked some Portuguese, Caminha does not blame them and records their partying with the same compassion with which he refers to their nudity.

The second mass, according to the description by Caminha, is probably the one usually taken to be the First. During the second mass, according to Caminha, respect was greater:

There they stayed with us, (watching) it, about fifty or sixty [Indians], on their knees like all of us. And when it was time for the Gospel, and we all stood up, with our hands up, they rose along with us, and held their hands up, thus staying till it got to an end; and then they sat again, according to us ... we knelt, they made as we did, hands up, and in such a peaceful way that I testify to Your Highness that it touched our deepest devotion.³

Caminha also focuses on the first testimony of the effect of the Christian faith in the new possession, something that would have confirmed to the Europeans the importance of their crusade:

And some of them, for the Sun was high, rose to their feet [and left] while we were taking communion, and others stayed. One of them, a man about fifty or fifty five, stayed there, with those who stayed. That one, while thus we were, gathered the ones who had stayed and also called for the others. And thus he walked among them, talking to them, pointed his finger toward the altar, and then pointed with it to the sky, as if he were telling them something of good; and so we took it!⁴

Caminha's description attributes a mystical aura to that testimony, building up a solemn scene in a dramatic tone. The fifty-year-old man seems to have been taken by a cosmic experience. On the other hand, his gestures might very well be the result of an effort of catechization during those few days between one mass and the other.

The Painting

I stated above that the Letter was the first report on the Discovery, but that should not be taken literally. There were other accounts that were published long before Caminha's letter to the king. There was, for instance, the report by the Anonymous Pilot of Cabral's fleet, which was widely read throughout Europe at the time. Caminha's Letter itself was kept for almost three centuries shut in the archives of the Torre do Tombo, till it was discovered in 1773 by José de Seabra da Silva, principal guardian of the archives. It was published only in 1817, as a part of the book *Corografia Brasílica*, by Aires de Casal. From then on, the Letter was established as the main documentary evidence substantiating the Discovery. And it was that text that inspired the best known icon of the event: the painting entitled *The First Mass*, painted 350 years after the Discovery, by the catarinense artist Victor Meirelles. That image—ordered by emperor Pedro II—would come to be acclaimed as the official pictorial representation of the event.

In Meirelles' vision, an intense light flows from the background

and reaches the figure of Brother Henrique at the moment of the Holy Communion. The Portuguese appear close to the center, with stern faces. The Indians encircle the scene of the mass and fill the somber foreground (where the figures of a woman and a baby stand out). Except for a few children, all the Indians are depicted as fascinated by the ceremony, and more than a few point to the enlightened center of the scene. This leads us, of course, to the detailed description Caminha makes of the "second" mass. Instead of the open, sun-beaten sandfield that, according to Caminha, would have made many Indians leave, Meirelles' painting shows a place full of great trees and pleasant shade.

In his work, Meirelles applied the elaborate techniques of *pittura di fantasia*, a style of landscape painting in which elements from different locales are assembled in order to compose a collage standing for one determinate site. The landscape is, thus, the result of the articulation of elements collected from distinct places. Part of *The First Mass*, for instance, was painted during Meirelles' stay in Paris, where he lived for many years, always sponsored by Pedro II. Other details, however, were produced in the environs of his hometown on Santa Catarina Island (situated at 27° South), and since Meirelles' *The First Mass* was shown to the public, many communities of that region have debated on the painting, claiming that such tree is there represented, or that the light of such beach furnished its tone. In fact, the luxurious vegetation shown in the painting transcribes the temperate landscape of Santa Catarina, though it should stand for the hydrophile forest of Southern Bahia, the only region of South America outside the Amazon region where the same tropical, Amazonian flora abounds. That substitution of one landscape for another is, in any case, in accordance with the very idea of *The First Mass* which is, in its turn, the result of an articulation of events that combines the precedence of one ceremony with the effects of the other.

The Film

Meirelles' work became an omnipresent icon in the cult of national values. The scene has appeared in a number of textbooks, prints, calendars, stamps and even on the cans of the Piraquê cookies, which were very popular in 1930's and 1940's. The First Mass by Meirelles also served as a guide for the script of the film *Descobrimento do Brasil*, directed by Humberto Mauro in 1937. *Descobrimento do Brasil* was sponsored by the Instituto do Cacau da Bahia (Cocoa Institute of Bahia), which gathered landowners who had an interest in promoting the historical importance of the State of Bahia. It is also significant that this work was produced by the INCE—National Institute of Educational Cinema—then created as part of the newly formed Ministry of Education and Culture. All these institutional initiatives had come under the aegis of the modernization program of the regime led by dictator Getúlio Vargas. A strong trend of nationalism permeated his government, which coopted intellectuals of different tendencies who based their (sometimes reluctant) alignment with the government on patriotic premises.

O *Descobrimento do Brasil* marks important developments in the Brazilian cinema. First of all, it indicates the role of the state in the production of features aimed at the ideological education of the general public. From that moment on, the participation of the state in Brazilian cinema (either as censor or as producer) would be constant and intimate, until at least the late 1980's. Second, the participation of filmmakers themselves in the state apparatus became commonplace; Mauro himself held the position of technical director of the INCE. He seized the opportunity and promoted the making of several films, specially documentaries for didactic purposes.

O *Descobrimento do Brasil*, far from questioning the "historical events" themselves, takes at face value the official records prevailing in 1937. It is presented as a didactic piece: each new step in the crossing of the Atlantic is punctuated by the image of a map in which Cabral's fleet is represented as a small sphere sliding in the direction of the

Brazilian coast. The film depicts details of the everyday on board. The sailors work on the deck and fill their quarters with songs in a homesick and melancholic mood; the officers sit at desks and carefully plan their itinerary. The narrative follows some of the notions that helped consolidate the sad and cordial figure of the Portuguese colonizer, who came to mingle with the Indians and the Africans in order to build up our national character. In addition to its coincidence with the climax of nationalism of the Getúlio era, *Descobrimento do Brasil* was shown to the public at the same time that books like *Raízes do Brasil* (Roots of Brazil, by Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda) and *Casa Grande e Senzala* (Masters and Slaves, by Gilberto Freyre) were beginning to strongly influence Brazilian academia.

Even though the film was conceived as a fictional piece, the use of Caminha's Letter in the script provides it with the necessary authenticity. In the film, Caminha is the character-narrator of the events. He is often shown while writing (as it is proper to a scribe), and a facsimile of the letter often fills up the screen. His words are transcribed into audiovisual language in their literality—in certain sequences the words are inscribed on the screen only to describe what already appears visually: it is as if the graphically quoted words were necessary in order to corroborate the true character of the scene composed on the screen. His scrutinizing face is frequently framed in a close up, and his look towards the Indians is always pious and compassionate.

Mauro chose a clearly realistic style for the *mise-en-scène*. The narrative follows the conventions already established by historical films. The result, even if it does not compare to the Hollywood standards of that time, suggests a great effort in that direction.⁵ Despite its not being filmed in Bahia but in the state of Rio de Janeiro (22° South), the setting used for the Portuguese *caravelle*, costumes and props exhibits a careful historical reconstruction, making obvious the extensive research carried out by Mauro's team. Authenticity was further reaffirmed by the participation of the expert ethnographer Roquette Pinto and composer Villa-Lobos in the choreography of the Indian characters and in the music, making references to European and Amerindian traditions.

Villa-Lobos was, at the time, an especially active collaborator of the regime and created pieces of patriotic themes for large choirs and symphonic orchestras.

Each detail in *Descobrimento do Brasil* fuels the version of history which legitimates the power of eurotechnology. After the first encounters of the Portuguese with the Amerindians (emphasizing, of course, the awe of the latter with the technology and the wine of the former), the film reaches its climax with the emblematic First Mass. And, as a model for the *mise-en-scène*, Mauro selected the safest option: the acclaimed painting by Victor Meirelles, of course. Mauro's narrative carefully composes a portentous tableau, in an effort to give "life and movement" to the scene conceived by Meirelles. The trees seem to be in the same places chosen by Meirelles. And even if the Brother Henrique painted by Meirelles seems to be much younger than the one cast by Mauro, in the long shots the Indians and the Portuguese solemnly move till they reach almost the same positions portrayed in the painting. The ecstatic climax, punctuated by the grandiose choir music by Villa-Lobos, takes place when the priest lifts the Eucharist towards the cross: Mauro cuts from the long shot indicated by Meirelles and frames in detail the dramatic core of the painter's composition.

In Meirelles' painting the Portuguese founders occupy the center of the scene; in Mauro's film, besides that, they hold the status of privileged narrators, and most of the action is shown under their point of view, the sound of their voices and the trace of their writing. The civilizing act of the Portuguese in the painting as well as in the film irradiates light towards the surrounding nature and, of course, towards the Indians, who appear awestruck by the spectacle. In addition, the conspicuous presence of women and children in the foreground among the natives stresses the "paternal \ active \ phallic" character attributed to the Portuguese. Not surprisingly, one of the details shown in the First Mass scene is that of a naked native woman being given a shiny piece of cloth in order to cover her naked body. As in other accounts of the colonization, "America" is allegorized as a native woman; the

characters composing Cabral's fleet are all male and, despite their pious intentions, are ready to penetrate the land that was taken to be virgin.⁶

There is, in this sense, an intertextual continuum of representations that begins with Caminha's Letter, flows from the painting by Meirelles, and moves through Mauro's film, which reasserts the figurative concept of the event and produces an aura of authenticity, already intensified by the longevity and omnipresence of the icon. However, this apparently univocal discourse is punctuated by variations: the characters "themselves" (or whatever can be considered their referent) from Vaz de Caminha's scripted version are (re)composed by Meirelles, himself a composer of collage landscapes. Meirelles' collage is, in its turn, (re)translated by Mauro's filmmaking. In the process of naturalistic representation, a meshing of different geographies and aesthetic strategies—rather distant from naturalistic presuppositions—are thus mobilized for the sake of a representation of nationality, paradoxically at the expense of naturalism itself. The ruptures of this chain of signifiers allow for different readings of an otherwise stable discourse and foreground its fictional character. What is at first taken to be an attempt at figurative representation can be exposed, instead, as allusive reinterpretation, one in which the "impression of reality" and the ideas about the event prevail over the "authenticity" that the ideology of naturalism purports to reclaim. In such a process of representation, based on verisimilitude, geographies and aesthetic strategies are mobilized aiming at the same goal: in a process of mimetic transfiguration, to signify the founding act of nationality.

Parentheses: the Independence

The aesthetic choices of *O Descobrimento do Brasil* were to be followed by other filmmakers in Brazil. In 1970, at the height of the repression promoted by the military regime, Carlos Coimbra directed the overmarketed *Independência ou Morte* (Independence or Death), a production that numbered some of the most popular telenovela

stars of the time in its cast. The government was then encouraging and financing the production of films that dealt with Brazilian history, and *Independência ou Morte* was highly praised by the heads of the regime. The film follows most of the rules established by Hollywood conventions, this time with far greater resources than Humberto Mauro had in the 1930's. The film depicts the political and romantic (mis)adventures of Pedro I, the Portuguese prince who is officially recognized as the leader of the movement for the independence of Brazil from Portugal. *Independência ou Morte* was shot in technicolor in many 19th-century landmark buildings and displayed a sumptuous wardrobe, which suggests an effort to maintain a discourse of historical authenticity.

Pedro I is supposed to have proclaimed the independence of the new country on September 7, 1822, a few kilometers from the city of São Paulo, after having received some upsetting correspondence, in which his father king John VI of Portugal urged him to come back to Europe. Even though his reasons for having stopped that afternoon by a hut near the Ipiranga creek have been the crux of a long controversy,⁸ the image of the event published in school books, stamps and civic posters is invariably *O Grito do Ipiranga*, painted by Pedro Américo in 1888. Américo was also among emperor Pedro II's favorite artists. His work was more expressionistic than Victor Meirelles' and his vision of the proclamation shows off, in vibrant colors, the vigor of his brush techniques. Pedro I is seen on horseback on top of a hill, holding up his sword as he supposedly shouts the words "independence or death!," while his escorting troops manly pull back the bridles of their vigorous horses. The troops don impeccable uniforms and surround in the foreground the emperor-to-be of the new nation. In one of the lower corners of the frame Américo placed a barefoot rural worker pulling his oxcart as he witnesses the historic moment; this personage has been often read as a representative of the Brazilian people, thus legitimating Pedro's gesture. In his film, Coimbra uses the same rhetoric Mauro chose in 1937: the actors slowly place themselves in the same positions as in the painting, composing the civic scene as represented in the painting.

The challenging intertext

Glauber Rocha's cinema can be viewed as a challenge to this aesthetics. The depiction of historical events in his films often suggests the assemblage of different sources and readings of history. *Terra em transe* (Land in anguish, 1967), for instance, also features a Discovery Scene, but the results of Rocha's aesthetic experimentation here are far from the complacent narratives of the films commented above, which employ academic art in order to confirm official versions of the events depicted.

Land in anguish is structured by a first-person, voice-off narration which is presented as an assemblage of the fragments of memory of the character Paulo Martins (played by Jardel Filho) at the moment of his final agony. These fragments are ordered in a way that disregards the causal linearity of conventional narratives, suggesting the blurry reasoning of the dying protagonist. In this sense, the non-linearity of the scenes in *Land in anguish* suggests the appropriateness of a psychoanalytical reading (privileging the subjectivity of the character-narrator), one that can jettison the possibilities of other readings. These other readings, for example, can be informed by different representations of time in different cultural contexts, representations which are not necessarily "explained" as conforming to the apparently entropic world of the Freudian unconscious. Seen from an ethnographic perspective, these possibilities can vary a great deal—according to various world visions.

One of the events (re)constructed by Paulo Martins's memory is clearly linked to official Brazilian history. I refer here to the scene described by Ismail Xavier as the "myth of foundation" that establishes the connection of Martins's saga with the historical destiny of his country.⁷ The scene comes to the screen amid Paulo Martins's first agonizing memories of his mentor—the conservative politician Porfírio Diaz. Diaz is first shown parading in what seems to be a convertible car, deliriously gazing at the sky as he carries a crucifix and a black banner. African-Brazilian religious drumming is heard in the soundtrack. Diaz

is framed from a low angle, which prevents the audience from seeing whether his parading has a public at all. Indeed, all of Diaz's "public" appearances in the diegesis happen in open spaces devoid of people, as if the *mise-en-scène* of his built up image were foregrounded in Paulo Martins's memories. Later on in the film, the sequence titled as "Biography of an Adventurer," a program Martins produces for Eldorado TV, makes clear that Diaz was the object of a *mise-en-scène* by Martins himself. Thus, in retrospect, these first appearances of Diaz can very well be read as fragments of Martins's program, re-elaborated by his fading memory.

Diaz's second appearance in the film is framed from above; he is seen carrying a flag, accompanied by three figures in the open landscape of a vast beach: they are a priest, a conquistador and an Amerindian. The four of them approach a huge crucifix, stuck in the sand; Diaz drinks from a silver chalice. We have here the re-elaborated enactment of the Discovery of the New World by the Europeans (the arrival on the beach) and the First Mass (celebrated not by the priest, but by Diaz). In a certain sense, the scene evokes much of the discourse of legitimation of the Brazilian ruling class: at the same time that it claims the colonial heritage and European values (here represented by Christianity), it strives to absorb the Amerindian image, which ultimately represents just ownership (of the land). But the scene, allegorized as it is, cannot be easily bound by one reading. For, if Diaz's role in the "mass" seems already a complicating factor (in a Napoleonic gesture, the secular ruler takes the service over from the priest), the very depiction of the conquistador and the Amerindian suggests more complication. As Ismail Xavier notes, the characters' garments are clearly styled after the costumes that are part of the pageants of carnival balls. The Amerindian is fully attired—and not naked, as the ones Caminha described in his letter—and his costume may evoke carnival celebrations. Both conquistador and Amerindian strikingly contrast with Diaz's 20th century suit and tie. As for the conquistador, it is rather difficult for the Brazilian public to dissociate his figure from carnival: the role is

played by a popular carnival celebrity, Clóvis Bornay, a historian who specializes in carnival pageants, and who often claims his costumes are carefully researched “allegories” of historical characters. The excessive embroidery of the conquistador and the feathered robe of the Amerindian can thus be viewed as allegories within the allegory: a narrative strategy which operates an immediate distancing effect. It also frames events such as the Discovery and the First Mass as discourses, in an open rejection of naturalism, opening possibilities for the unfolding of multiple meanings. Rocha, in this sequence, resorts to folk celebrations, African-Brazilian percussion, Villa-Lobos erudite music, and stylized acting in order to re-enact a historical scene in a style that borders parody. From a realist point of view, the solemn seriousness of the acting and the soundtrack as well as the temporal displacement suggested by the figures of the conquistador and the Amerindian add to the absurdity of the scene, which blends 20th and 16th centuries and also suggests a tongue-in-cheek reinterpretation of Discovery and Mass.

This reinterpretation is also distant from the revisionism of the left and other progressive sectors, which strive to rewrite Brazilian history not from the point of view of the colonial authorities or the present dominant class, but rather as a result of economic domination and political struggles. These revisionist works of Brazilian history, despite their efforts to present different points of view, have generally maintained the conventional, linear formats of researching and writing. Rocha’s cinema, far from following the requirements of linear narratives, meshes and syncretizes times and places in ways that (re) situate historical events. In this sense, Rocha’s aesthetic choices further the dialogue of Cinema Novo with popular cultural practices and form and point to textual possibilities that have yet to be processed by the various areas of Brazilian cultural expression.

Notes

- 1 There are several editions of the Letter. I have chosen to quote from *Carta a El Rey D. Manuel*, org. Leonardo Arroyo (São Paulo: Dominus, 1963), p. 65. This paper was translated by Fernando Simão Vugman and myself.
- 2 *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- 3 *idem*, p. 64.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 The excellent *Cinema e História do Brasil*, by Alcides Freire Ramos & Jean-Claude Bernardet (São Paulo: Contexto, 1988) discusses that issue on the realist representation of history; yet Sérgio Augusto, in a review for *Folha de S. Paulo*, claims that the scarcity of “historical” Brazilian films is due to the lack of the necessary technology to produce such kind of film in Brazil —as if the well-to-do Hollywood standards were the only possibility of historical representation in cinema. In “Cinema americano nunca se interessou por Colombo”, 11 October, 1992.
- 6 For an analysis of those metaphors, see the essay by Ella Shohat, “Imaging Terra Incognita: The Disciplinary Gaze of the Empire”, in *Public Culture*, vol 3, no 2, Spring 1991.
- 7 In *Alegorias do subdesenvolvimento* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1992).
- 8 According to alternative versions, it has been claimed that Pedro was sick and had to stop for sanitary reasons; that Pedro didn’t care much about the correspondence, for the whole independence scheme had been woven by his wife, the Hapsburg Leopoldine and her ally, the Brazilian statesperson José Bonifácio; that Pedro was in a hurry to meet his mistress in São Paulo, etc.