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Women of Brazil:
**(Mis)Contested Female Identities in Contemporary Brazilian
Cinema**

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Abstract

This essay discusses the representation of female characters in relation to changes in Brazilian society. Over the last decade, there have been increasing numbers of women writers and directors in the Brazilian film industry. However, this has not necessarily led to the construction of new models of female identity. Through an analysis of *Women of Brazil* (Malu de Martino, 2006), I will suggest that, although an increasing number of films claim to contest the female stereotypes imposed by patriarchal culture, they still fail to offer an alternative model of Brazilian female identity.

Keywords: Brazilian culture; Brazilian national identity; representations of women; Brazilian cinema.



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This essay discusses the construction of female characters in the Brazilian fiction film *Women of Brazil*, directed by Malu de Martino and released in Brazil in March 2006. I will consider Martino's film in the context of other features produced between 2002 and 2006 to examine whether changes brought about by feminism and other social movements in Brazil have or have not opened the way for the construction of new female identities which contest male-oriented views.

The first reason *Women of Brazil* captured my attention was, besides the title, the predominance of women in the cast and crew: the director, producer, editor, sound editor and cinematographer are all women, and the screenplay was based on five short stories written by female authors. This strong feminine presence, still unusual in the Brazilian film industry, was used as a distinguishing characteristic in the marketing campaign for the film: 'Without discriminating against men, we can say that *Women of Brazil* is a woman's film'.¹ As a result of this marketing strategy, many newspaper and magazine reviews reproduced the idea that *Women of Brazil* has a 'female soul'.² This was further reinforced by the distributors' decision to release the film on March 8th, celebrated in Brazil and other parts of the world as Women's Day.

The filmmakers claim to present a tapestry of ordinary Brazilian women, highlighting cultural diversity and the differences in social backgrounds and religious affiliations. As observed by Raphael Mesquita (2006), attempts to represent 'the nation' have been common in recent Brazilian films. Films like *God is Brazilian* (Carlos Diegues, 2003) or *You are Brazil* (Murilo Salles, 2003) for example, take one segment of the population or one part of the national territory as representative of the whole nation. In some cases, there is a concern to give voice and space to minority groups such as Afro-Brazilians, indigenous people, economically marginalized groups and, as in the case of *Women of Brazil*, women. Mesquita argues that a common problem in these films is the distorted view they present of Brazilian society, politics and culture.

¹ Press release of film *Women of Brazil*. <http://www.ehfilmes.com.br/mulheres/index.htm> (5 May 2006)

² Miranda, D., 2006; Moura, A.C, 2006; [Anon.] Terra Cinema: <http://www.terra.com.br/cinema/mulheresdobrasil/capa.htm> (10 May 2006); [Anon.] Film guide in *Revista Veja São Paulo*, 5 April 2006, p.43.

Before discussing *Women of Brazil* and how it constructs female characters, it is necessary to summarize some of the important changes that have taken place in Brazil in the last 30 years in relation to women's rights and participation in society.

Increased Female Participation in Brazilian Society, Politics and Economy

Brazilian women gained access to education and employment at the beginning of the 20th century and were conceded the right to vote in 1933. However, they remained legally subordinate to their husbands until 1988, when a new constitution incarnated legal equality for both genders (Besse, 1996).

Encouraged partly by the feminist movement of the 1970s and partly by changes in the economy, the participation of women in the labour force increased in the 1980s and 1990s (Pinto 2003; Rago, 2003; Telles, 1993). Between 1992 and 2002 the percentage of women among the economically active population rose from 39% to 43%, according to a study by the United Nations Fund for Women's Development. The same study shows that more than half of all the married women in the country are currently employed, and that women are increasingly becoming the bread-winners of the Brazilian family: 28% of Brazilian households are headed by women. Women are overcoming men in educational levels: 59% of the students graduating from secondary school in 2002 were female, and 63% of university graduates were female, according to a Survey by the Ministry of Education (Bruschini, Lombardi and Unbehaum, 2006, p.69). Professions that were traditionally dominated by males, such as medicine, dentistry, law, architecture and engineering are becoming more balanced in terms of gender. Women occupy one third of all law-related careers, and 40% of Brazilian doctors are female (ibid, p.71).

In the 80s and 90s, Brazilian feminism became increasingly professionalised and institutionalised (Blay, 1994). A number of organizations were created to meet women's needs in health, sexuality, education, child care, domestic violence, racism and political participation (Pinto, 2003).

Although the victories achieved by feminism are fairly significant, especially in relation to work, gender equality is still far off (Blay, 2001). Women occupy only 10% of the most highly paid positions and, in all areas, their wage is on average 30% lower than men's

(Figueiredo, 2006). The combination of housework and childcare with a full time job is still a problem for most women workers.

Returning to my initial question, I will now consider whether the changes achieved by the feminist movement have changed ways of seeing and representing women in Brazil.

Questions

- Have the social, economic and political changes brought by feminism and other social movements affected views of women and Brazilian female identity?
- Is there a new model of femininity to contest the traditional *machista* one?
- Or does the representation of women in the media in general, and cinema in particular, still reinforce traditional male-oriented stereotypes?

Besides *Mulheres do Brasil*, I examined a number of films produced since the mid-90s which deal with the theme of female subjectivity or identity, and which have women as main characters. Some of these films have female directors, like *Woman's Thing* (Eliana Fonseca, 2005) and *Overwhelming Women* (Mara Mourão, 2002). For the moment, however, I will focus on *Women of Brazil*.

Women of Brazil

The film is composed of five short stories. Each episode has a different female lead and is set in a different region of Brazil. These regions are quite distinct in terms of economic development, culture, landscape and climate. The film tries to establish some degree of communality between women from the different regions – in other words, it tries to establish a Brazilian female identity.

In order to confer a degree of truthfulness on the stories, each episode includes documentary inserts where 'real' Brazilian women give testimonials about a topic that is being discussed in the story, for example: religion, marriage, prostitution and motherhood. I will concentrate on three of the five stories. Each story is analysed in relation to four themes: women and work; gendered relations; women, family and society; and female sexuality.

Episode 1: Esmeralda

Esmeralda comes from a poor and very religious family in the backlands of Bahia who make economic sacrifices to give her a good education. The family supports Esmeralda's decision to move to Salvador, the capital of the state, imagining that her religious upbringing and her strict education will help her find a good husband. Instead, Esmeralda cuts ties with the family and becomes the mistress of a powerful and corrupt politician.

As a teenager, Esmeralda defies her father's authority by bringing a young man to her bedroom while the family sleeps. As a woman, she is dominated by her lover. When she gets pregnant and wants to have the baby, he opposes her decision and beats her so hard that she suffers a miscarriage. Without telling her family what happened, Esmeralda returns home and finds solace in religion. She goes back to having casual sex with local men, as she did in the beginning of the story.

Esmeralda being sexually liberated since youth is treated in a positive light in the film, as a sign of independence and non-conformity. Her assertiveness in the scenes where she leads terrified young men into her bedroom is marked by the phrase: "What are you waiting for?" The phrase will be repeated later, by another character in the last episode of the film, establishing a common thread. In both stories, sexuality is the only part of the character's life that she controls.

Esmeralda's family tries but fails to prepare her to live in society. After a traumatic experience on her own, she returns to seek the family's protection and financial support. The implication is that Esmeralda can't cope with life on her own and that she is safer with her family.

Episode 2: Laura

In São Paulo, a forty-five year-old woman tries to grapple with her condition as a recently divorced, unemployed mother of a 10 year-old boy. Laura's marriage fell apart when her husband found out that she had had an affair. Laura feels guilty and sorry. When they have a meeting to discuss their son's support, the ex-husband behaves in an honest and sensible way,

while Laura acts foolishly. The meeting ends when he gives her a cheque; she smiles with a mixture of gratitude and embarrassment.

The film captures the sense that, in Brazil, women over forty are considered too old to offer any sexual interest to men. In a scene where Laura gathers the courage to approach a neighbour whom she fancies and who is slightly younger than herself, he calls her '*senhora*', a term which indicates significant age distance. The encounter shatters Laura's self-esteem. Director Malu de Martino says that she wanted this episode to portray the kinds of embarrassments that women over forty undergo when looking for a new love and a new job: 'This is a serious problem in Brazil . We see many women in a situation of total incapacity if they reach a certain age without a man' (cited by Miranda, 2006).

The difficulty of finding a job after several years of being a housewife is the main drama in the story. When Laura goes to a first interview, she is left waiting for five hours and finally sees herself at a disadvantage compared to a younger and prettier female candidate. Laura tries to compensate by being witty in the interview, but the employer is not impressed. Her second interview is with a former university colleague, who is now the editor of a woman's magazine. Instead of helping Laura the woman humiliates her by giving her a moral lesson: 'I'm sorry Laura, but you were stupid to believe that a man would support you while you stayed home taking care of the child. You should have known better.'

Laura finds 'emancipation' in a nightclub where she dances all night and kisses several men and women. This wild night out encourages Laura to knock on her neighbours' door and offer him sex. The neighbour looks pleased and surprised. When he hesitates, Laura asks 'What are you waiting for?', establishing a link with the first episode in the film.

Episode 3: Ana and Júlia

This is the most interesting of all five episodes, because it deals with female autonomy. The two characters are women who want to be free and in control of their lives. However, the freedom they seek is not from patriarchal rule or *machista* culture; but from modernity and everything that modern life entails, including getting a university degree, having a career and making money.

This is the story of Ana, an undergraduate who lives with her parents in a comfortable apartment in the city and comes to admire an older woman called Júlia, whom she meets during a field trip in the countryside. Ana studies Tourism at University. The film highlights the rapid development of the tourist industry in Alagoas, in the Brazilian Northeast, suggesting that she has good career prospects. She goes on a field trip to a rural village to interview a group of lace-makers who have become a tourist attraction due to their traditional lifestyle. Ana is fascinated by Júlia, the beautiful 30-year old manager of the lace-making cooperative. Like Ana, Júlia had once been an outsider to the village; she decided to live there after falling in love with a local fisherman.

The film presents lace-making as a traditional form of art, rather than an economic activity. One lace-maker interviewed for the documentary insert tells the camera that, like all other lace-makers, she learnt her skills from her mother. She shows a piece made by her grandmother and says that she could never put a price on it, for it is not a commodity, it is Art.

When Ana returns home after the field trip, she packs her bags and tells her mother she is leaving university to go on a voyage of self-discovery. Her experience in the village suggests that she might be happier if she lived like Júlia, in an environment ruled by tradition and communal values, closer to nature and to family love. Of all the female characters in the film, Júlia is the only one with a multidimensional life. She is characterized as a passionate wife, a loving mother and the manager of a cooperative. However, the film overlooks her professional capacity by highlighting the fact that lace-making is not work, but art.

Ana's family in the city seems doomed by their modern lifestyle: they live in a spacious apartment facing the sea, but the father is always absent and the mother looks lonely and bored. She keeps secrets from her husband. Family relations in the rural village are constructed differently: children play with their mothers, husbands kiss their wives before they go fishing and everybody gets together to dance and sing in village's traditional feasts. Hence the film establishes a contrast between the modern, urban family, oriented by individualism, and the traditional rural family, ruled by communal values and love. There is an implicit suggestion that women find happiness and independence in the countryside, not in the city.

It is worth noting that, in Brazil, traditional rural communities are the socio-geographical spaces most strongly marked by patriarchal backwardness and conservatism. Oppression and violence against women are more common in rural areas than in urban ones (Barsted, 2006, pp.

264-5). As suggested above by Raphael Mesquita, many contemporary films which attempt to represent the nation through a group or a geographical region tend to distort Brazil's socio-economic reality. For example, the film never tackles the question of how a lace-making cooperative is able to survive in a globalized economy. Furthermore, it constructs a rural village as an idyllic place, distant from the poverty and precariousness that affects real Brazilian rural communities.

Recurrent Ideas about Women Expressed in Films

After viewing *Women of Brazil* and numerous films from the same period, I identified some recurrent themes and ideas. The lead Esmeralda, for example evokes a character-type commonly found in romantic comedies directed by women and aimed at female audiences: the modern, sexually liberated middle-class or upper-middle class woman. This character-type is the female version of the *Don Juan*: she has casual sex with several partners, is unable or unwilling to have long-term relationships and rejects marriage. When she is married, she is unfaithful. Some examples of films where such character can be found include, among others, *Woman's Thing, Sex, Love and Betrayal* (Jorge Fernando, 2004), *Middle-Aged Hunk* (Carlos Antônio Fontoura, 2006) and *Feminices* (Domingos de Oliveira, 2004). Most of these films treat female promiscuity in a humorous way, although their moralistic endings ensure that the character gets appropriately punished. As we have seen in *Women of Brazil*, for example, Esmeralda is beaten-up by her lover and then consumed by her own guilt; Laura's adultery results in divorce and unemployment.

Another recurrent notion in contemporary films – comedies or not - is that women who reject traditional marriage end up lonely and unhappy, as if other forms of relationship were not possible. The film *Daughters of the Wind* (Joel Zito Araújo, 2005), for example, establishes a contrast between two sisters: one wants to settle down and have a family while the other wants to travel and work. The first has a happy life surrounded by loved ones; her sister, on the other hand, becomes solitary and sad. *Daughters of the Wind* also reinforces the idea that women who seek professional success have to sacrifice their close relationships; as if it were not possible to have both.

In contemporary films, the vast majority of female characters who occupy a senior position, like the editor of the woman's magazine in *Women of Brazil* – are characterized as mean, heartless, competitive and authoritarian. At the opposite extreme, we find a character-type which is valued more positively: the happily married housewife, who usually appears surrounded by family and friends. Júlia, from *Women of Brazil*, is a good example.

Finally, numerous films play with the idea that women in their late twenties and mid-thirties are desperate to find a husband, as if there were nothing else left for women of this age group to do. In films like *A Woman's Thing*, *Louise's Wedding* (Betse de Paula, 2001), *Cristina Wants to Get Married* (Luiz Vilhaça, 2003) and *Overwhelming Women*, female characters spend all their time discussing or practicing techniques to capture a man.

Mis-contested Female Identities

There appears to be an increasing gap between the actual participation and the roles performed by women in Brazilian society and the way in which women are imagined and represented, even by themselves.

In his seminal work about the formation of the Brazilian family in the colonial period, Gilberto Freyre (1933) described how the scarcity of European women favoured illicit sexual liaisons between Portuguese colonizers and African or Amerindian women. In this context, indigenous women served primarily as sexual instruments for European males. African women trafficked to Brazil faced a similar fate, except that, besides their sexual role, they were also used as slaves for white landowners. Although black and indigenous women raised their own children, in official culture they were denied the role of mothers. Such role was kept exclusively to the European wife, who was subject to the patriarchal family regime (Besse, 1996; Mezan, 1993).

Despite all the social and economic changes that have taken place in Brazil since the colonial period, the division of roles according to gender and ethnicity is still a central element of national culture. Stephanie Dennison suggests that the dichotomy of the extended family in Brazilian society, which divides women between wives and whores, was still strongly present in 1970s mainstream cinema. A good example of this dichotomy is found in *Lady on the Bus* (Neville d'Almeida, 1978) one of the most successful Brazilian films of all time. In her analysis

of this film, Dennison describes the female lead as a woman caught between two worlds: ‘the world identified with the mulata, traditionally considered to be the seductress, sexual initiator, who is promiscuous, has loose morals and enjoys sex, and the virginal, frigid, white wife’ (Dennison, 2006, p.133).

Returning to the questions initially proposed in this paper, then, I would say that, if we take contemporary Brazilian cinema as representative, then we would conclude that the general views on women and national identity have changed very little in the last twenty years, despite all the socio-economic and political changes in the same period. The majority of fiction films still reinforce traditional *machista* stereotypes in their representations of women.

However, this is not to say that there hasn’t been any form of contestation. Qualities which used to be valued positively in women, such as passiveness, subservience, obedience and subordination to men are now strongly rejected in some films, in certain ways. These qualities are now replaced by the assertion of female independence and insubordination. Significantly, however, independence and insubordination are only treated positively when they refer exclusively to the female character’s social and sexual life; the same does not apply to her economic, professional or political life.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will answer the initial questions:

- a) Have the social, economic and political changes brought by feminism and other social movements affected views of women and Brazilian female identity? Not yet. At least, not if we look at contemporary fiction films. By and large, mainstream commercial cinema, including films directed by women, still express patriarchal ideology. Some films do contest, to some degree, the roles women perform within patriarchal order, but not patriarchal order itself.
- b) Is there a new model of femininity to contest the traditional *machista* one? I would say there is, but it is limited to the sexual sphere. Views on female sexuality seem to be changing in the cinema, but the changes do not threaten the predominant *machista* culture. In fact, they reinforce *machismo* by emphasizing women’s willingness to display and behave themselves as primarily sexual beings.

- c) Does the representation of women in the media in general, and cinema in particular, still reinforce traditional male-oriented stereotypes? Definitely. For the vast majority of films, Stephanie Dennison's observation about the relegation of women in Latin American cinema remains true. 'As with many films produced throughout the world, Latin American cinema has tended only to bring women from the margins when they symbolically represent the national (...) or when they provide a love interest or sexual titillation (...)' (Dennison, 2005, p.3).

Finally, I would dispute Margareth Rago's (2003) suggestion that the feminist movement in Brazil has had a strong impact on socio-economic structures, political institutions and, most of all, on cultural views, with the proposition that cultural changes involving women's roles in Brazilian society have been much slower than the actual economic and political changes. Dominant views on the female subject are yet to match the reality of women in Brazil.

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