Black Orpheus and the Portrayal of African-Derived Religions

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Introduction

The 1959 film *Orfeu Negro* (*Black Orpheus*) celebrated its sixtieth anniversary in 2019. Directed by the French director Marcel Camus and produced by Sacha Gordine, this Portuguese-language film transports the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro at the time of Carnival. In the ancient myth Orpheus, a supernaturally talented musician, and Eurydice, a beautiful nymph, fall in love only to have their happiness cut short when Eurydice is fatally bitten by a snake. In the version recorded by the Roman poet Virgil, Eurydice is bitten while fleeing the advances of a shepherd called Aristaeus. In the wake of her death, Orpheus is driven mad with grief; his songs are so mournful the gods, humans, and animals all weep with him. Orpheus' last chance is to travel to Hades, the Underworld and the realm of the dead, to try and retrieve the soul of his beloved. Though his devotion moves the heart of Persephone, the queen of Hades, who agrees to release Eurydice, Orpheus is unable to keep a promise to Persephone to not look upon Eurydice until they have returned to the world of the living. As a consequence, Eurydice is doomed to stay in the Underworld and Orpheus becomes inconsolable, so much so that he does not notice when a group of crazed maenads, female devotees of the god Dionysus, tear him limb from limb in a violent ecstatic frenzy.

In Camus' film, the charming trolley conductor Orfeu from the *favelas* of Rio falls for country-girl Eurydice who is at Carnival to escape a menacing man in her hometown. Against the backdrop of the colourful chaos of preparations for Carnival, the flirtatious neighbourhood girls, excited children, and constant beat of drums, the short and tragic love story of Orfeu and Eurydice unfolds. A wise old man named Hermes—the ancient Greek messenger god and psychopomp—delivers a warning to Eurydice in the form of a welcome to Carnival, telling her "no one can resist the madness!" Indeed, after Eurydice dies at the hands of her stalker, dressed as Death, Orfeu carries her body back to the *favela* where his

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former lover Mira (in place of a maenad) pelts him with rocks in a jealous rage causing him to tumble off a cliff and die with Eurydice in his arms.

There are many references to the original story interwoven into the narrative of *Black Orpheus*, sometimes cleverly transposed, other times awkwardly or obviously inserted (Fredricksmeyer 2007). In particular, the themes of love, death, music, madness, and fate, and the crucial motif of Orpheus' descent into the Underworld, are repeated by Camus in his film. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is not the presence of ancient Greek mythology that concerns us, but the way in which African-derived religions are used in this re-telling. The religious syncretism of the Afro-Brazilians in the film is clear: houses in the *favelas* are decorated with crucifixes and during the parade Orfeu is costumed as the King of the Day (perhaps another reference to his mythical father of Orpheus, Apollo, god of light and music) and Eurydice dressed as his Queen, wearing the blue robes and beaded veil of the *orixá* Yemanja, a water goddess important in the African-derived Brazilian religions Candomblé and Umbanda. When Orfeu tries to track Eurydice to the 'Underworld'—the basement of a government building—he finds an unusual vision of 'hell': a Macumba ritual where white-robed participants fall into trances and commune with the spirits in front of an altar of candles and statuettes of saints. The overall impression of African-derived religion in Brazil given by the film is one of exotic otherness, something wild, 'primitive', and pagan. Though the film has been praised for years as a visual and auditory artwork, this aspect has been, quite rightfully, subject to criticism.

Black Orpheus achieved international fame and won several awards in 1959 and 1960 such as the Academy Award for the best foreign-language film, the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, as well as a Golden Globe Award and a British Academy Award. Its soundtrack made *bossa nova* music famous the world over. It is still one of the most well-known films ever to have been made in Brazil, which established a long-lasting image of the *favelas* and the Carnival in Rio on an international stage. However, there is another side to the story. Barack Obama confessed in his autobiography *Dreams From My Father* (1995) that he did not like the film despite it having been the favourite of his mother. He writes that when his mother persuaded him to watch it during a visit to New York he

> suddenly realised that the depiction of the childlike blacks I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse image of Conrad's dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to

Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white, middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different (Obama 2004: 70).

Reflecting on Obama's response, Cathy Brennan notes that "it is impossible to divorce the film from its European perspective. This film exoticizes its black cast through a European gaze. When Eurydice first arrives in Rio by boat, Camus presents the city from the viewpoint of a tourist. A montage of vendors selling their exotic wares seems to say 'look at how different this is!'" (Brennan 2017).

While a touristic gaze is not wrong *per se*, it shows that *Black Orpheus* is "a film by Europeans for Europeans, rather than black Brazilians telling their own story" (Brennan 2017). The criticism is even more prominent in Brazil, where many prefer the Brazilian verse play *Orfeu da Conceição*, which was first staged in 1956 by Vinícius de Moraes and on which the film is (loosely) based, though Camus began working on the film earlier (Oliveira 2002: 450). This chapter starts with a reflection on both the play and the film in light of the social setting in the 1950s. The second section focuses on the portrayal of the African-derived religion in the film, and the final section places the film in the wider context of representation of African-derived religions in Brazilian cinema. The chapter aims to reveal the ongoing significance of the film in the present, but also its many faults. While these misrepresentations of the social setting and the African-derived religions can be explained within the historical context of the film, it is still important to raise awareness of them.

From *Orfeu da Conceição* to *Orfeu Negro*: Brazil in the 1950s

The verse play *Orfeu da Conceição* (*Orpheus of the Conception*) by Vinícius de Moraes premiered in Rio de Janeiro in 1956, during a time when the Greek myth was adapted for the stage in the United States and Europe in various versions (see Celso de Oliveira 2002). While the play was never translated and adapted for other theatres (Oliveira 2002: 450), it has inspired, in addition to *Black Orpheus* by Camus, the Brazilian film adaptation *Orfeu* by Carlos Diegues (2000), as well as two musicals, *Orfeu* (Brazil, 2010) and *Black Orpheus* (USA, 2014). When *Orfeu da Conceição* opened at the Municipal Theatre of Rio de Janeiro on 25 September 1956, it was the first time a black actor stepped on the stage of the Municipal Theatre in Rio. It was extremely well-received by both critics and the audience, and is still revered today for having broken taboos in an unprecedented and unexpected way, and

bringing Vinícius de Moraes, previously known mainly for his poetry, to the stage (Nist 1964: 711). While Moraes came from a different social and ethnic background than the protagonists of his play, the stage adaptation drew much attention because he managed to recruit some of the most famous Brazilians at that time to his cast and crew. The music was written by Antônio Carlos Jobim, Oscar Niemeyer, the architect who designed the new capital of Brazil, Brasilia, built the stage set, and Carlos Scliar and Djanira (Djanira da Motta e Silva), two famous Brazilian painters, designed the posters. The actors came from *Teatro Experimental do Negro* (see Fernández 1977) founded by Abdias Nascimento, at the time already a prominent African Brazilian actor and scholar, who appeared on stage himself together with other well-known actors such as Haroldo Costa and Ruth de Souza (VM Cultural n.d.).

Vinícius de Moraes got the idea of transferring the Greek myth to the *favelas* of Rio when he showed the American poet Waldo Frank around Brazil in 1942. Robert Stam even describes Frank as a "midwife" for the conception of the play (197: 168). During this trip Moraes became aware of a different side of Brazil with its *favelas*, samba schools, and African-derived religions. Though he was born in Rio his social upbringing as the son of a civil servant and a pianist distanced him from the dilapidated and poverty-stricken *favelas*. Moraes went to university where he studied law, and after the publication of his first collection of poetry in 1933 he won a British Council scholarship to study English Language and Literature at Oxford. Later, he became a diplomat and took on posts in the USA, South American countries, and Europe. However, it was his travel through Brazil with Frank that opened his eyes to his home of Brazil, although it was the music that inspired him the most: Moraes was reading a book on Greek mythology in the house of a friend in Niteroi when he heard the sound of drumming in the distance, and the idea for the play was born.

The outcome is a divided presentation of Europe versus Africa, reason versus emotion, as Stam comments: "in the tradition of European primitivism and of the Negritude movement, which posited Greece as reason and Africa as emotion, de Moraes saw Afro Brazilian performance as bringing a Dionysian dimension to an Apollonian theme" (1997: 168). Abdias Nascimento, who was much involved in the stage adaptation, later criticized it for similar reasons. He argued that Moraes used the performance skills of the Afro-Brazilians but not the values of African culture. Furthermore, Nascimento describes the play – in line with other productions – even as "historical rape of his people" because of its disregard for

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Africa: "Blackfaced white actors, Black Christ, *Black Orpheus*: in the last analysis they all conspire in the historical rape of my people. We have no need to invoke Greece or the Bible in order to raise it to the status of mythology. On the other hand, Greece and Europe owe Africa a great deal of what they call 'Western Civilization'" (Nascimento 1992: 46, quoted in Stam 1997: 169). This critique of the representation of African culture as opposite to European reason is even more obvious in the film *Orfeu Negro* by Marcel Camus. Nascimento describes the film as "nothing more than a commercial exploitation of the misery of the hills of Rio, transfigured through the Carnival into a place of joy, songs, and love, where the rhythm, the colours, the sound of the drums, and the chorus of guitar exist to bring those people happiness" (1978: 420).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the film became an international cultural event and catapulted Brazilian music to yet unachieved fame. Its ongoing fame is linked to its energetic dance sequences and the *batacuda* and *bossa nova* soundtrack. M. Owen Lee even described it as "almost a ballet" (1961: 311). It captured, as Glauco Ortolano and Julie A. Porter write, "the hearts of an entire generation with poetic images and the heart-warming music of Antonio Carlos Jobim and Luis Bonfa" and it confirmed "that the history of Brazilian cinema is as rich and storied as the films itself" (2009: 19). However, it was never about social accuracy or even critique. While the film is usually characterized as presenting a positive image of Brazilian culture it is, as Cathy Brennan notes, a European film for Europeans and other Westerners. The film depicts poverty in a sterile, sometimes aesthetically beautiful way: "There are no mosquitoes, no open sewers. The *favela* of *Black Orpheus* is a rustic oasis of music, drenched with golden sunlight. It is a simple fantasy for the white middle-class Westerner" (Brennan 2017). However, it is a rather successful fantasy, as Patricia de Santana Pinho's study shows. She interviewed African American tourists visiting Brazil and found out that the main reason for them to visit Brazil is the perception of Brazil as a 'black country', and many explained that the film *Black Orpheus* was important "in exposing them to their first images of Brazil and instilling in them a desire to travel to this black country to witness firsthand the flourishing culture of its people" (2008: 75). It seems not to matter that the portrayed 'black culture' had little to do with the social reality of Brazilians living in the *favelas*. As the later film adaptation, *Orfeu* (2000) by Carlos Diegues, shows such a confrontation with reality does not translate well in success at the box offices. Diegues updated Moraes' stage play to the context of the 1990s and its drug gangs and wars

with the police and depicts the social situation in the *favelas* in a realistic and often brutal way. However, *Orfeu* remained relatively unknown (and unsuccessful) outside Rio (Oliveira 2002: 454).

Instead of social accuracy, Camus aimed to portray in his film the blackness of Brazil in an aesthetically pleasing way. Consequently, he recruited several of the actors because of their physique and not ability or even acting experience. Apart from the starring role as Eurydice for which he recruited Marpessa Dawn, a French actor born in the USA who had worked with the Katherine Dunham dance troupe previously, Camus recruited for the other roles mainly unknown and sometimes inexperienced Brazilians. For instance, the role of Orfeu was given to the Brazilian football player Breno Mello who had no acting experience. The *New York Times* commented in 1959 that Mello "performs the role more as a dancer than as an actor trying to show a man in love" though other film reviewers were more favourable about Mello's performance. Eurydice's cousin Serafina was played by a relatively unknown actress Léa Garcia, for whom it was a breakthrough role. The role of Death, Eurydice's stalker, was given to another Brazilian athlete, the triple jumper Adhemar da Silva, who won Olympic gold but had no acting experience, and did not continue acting afterwards. Body image is probably always a factor when selecting actors, even today, and it is remarkable that Camus recruited so many Brazilians; even his technical crew was mainly Brazilian, and many of the actors Afro-Brazilian. However, as Stam points out, while the film made millions, it "brought little to the Brazilian artists who energized the film" (1997: 176). Nevertheless, the recruitment of so many Afro-Brazilians set the film apart from previous productions, as black Brazilians did not feature prominently "in the symbolically 'white' cinema" at that time (Stam 1982-83: 16-17).

Hence, *Black Orpheus* can indeed be called a Brazilian film, despite being directed by a Frenchman and produced in France. The outcome is highly aesthetic product. The *favela* in Rio, its people, and the Carnival are all beautifully portrayed through artful use of movement, landscape, sound, and colour. The film is sensual, exotic and very different to other films of its time. Even now, decades later, the film still has its "innocent charm" as Peter Bradshaw wrote in *The Guardian* in 2005 when the film was revived in the UK (Bradshaw 2005). However, we live in different times now and cannot close our eyes about the ongoing ignorance concerning injustice. As Bradshaw wrote in 2009, "Before Barack Obama's presidency, *Black Orpheus* was perhaps destined to be something for film buffs

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only. Now, rightly or wrongly, it may become a classic text, a text about something quite other than that intended by its director, Marcel Camus: a loss of liberal innocence about racial difference" (Bradshaw 2009). Reflecting on Obama's memories Bradshaw writes that while Obama was too tough in his critique of the film, his comments about the film highlighted the different perception based on social background and race:

> And yet for me this passage exposed, more dramatically than anything has in a very long while, the fact that critical perceptions are governed by class, by background and by race. I saw *Black Orpheus* as a white man, a white liberal. Of course I did. The assumption of progressive good faith on race, and the indulgence of potential condescension or even stereotyping in an old movie is something that a white liberal can afford, and as far as the arts and culture are concerned in the prosperous west, white liberals are in the ascendant. But Barack Obama responded to the film quite differently. He responded with impatience, with scepticism and with pain; he saw no reason for black men and women to be objectified – and now, as the president of the United States, he is the subject, the most important subject in the world" (Bradshaw 2009).

Therefore, when we see *Black Orpheus* today, in the twenty-firth century, we may still be enchanted by the passion and beauty of the film as its director intended. But we also need to acknowledge that the film is made in "the tradition of French fascination with black culture" (Stam 1997: 169). Instead of engaging with African values and African culture, "it was evident that white people were fetishizing a fantasy of black life which they found to be exotic" (Brennan 2017). This attitude towards black culture and black people "reflected a mixture of condescending paternalism and fetishized exoticism" (Brennan 2017). Even the music that made the film so famous represents more the white, middle class interest than the music in the *favelas* at the time. Brennan refers for instance to the *bossa nova* expert Ruy Castro who commented that the music itself was part of the fantasy, a fantasy celebrated by Camus and French bohemians (Brennan 2017).

This fantasy shows an ignorance of the historical context of slavery that I find surprising. When Camus shot the film in Rio, people were still alive who were born into slavery. Slavery was abolished in Brazil only in 1888 when the newly founded Republic decided to attract more European settlers and wanted to be seen as a modern society. But the abolishment of slavery did not create a just society. Like in other countries, former slaves were left alone, without any compensation and the work they were forced to do previously without salary was given to new immigrants from Europe and Asia. The liberated black Brazilians had nothing, no job, no education, no expectation and were not in a position of

power to change their situation. Hence, when Camus arrived in Rio and commented "that black people lived in *favelas* to flee from civilization" (Brennan 2017), it showed his obliviousness of the poverty and social situation in the *favelas*.

Interestingly two other famous French authors, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, visited in Brazil around that time (between August and September 1960) and developed a slightly different perception of the social situation and its ethnic divides than Camus. De Beauvoir noted in her diaries that Sartre became increasingly aware that his contacts were mainly white and from the middle and upper classes: "We have never seen in the *salons*, in the universities, or even in the auditoriums chocolate or milky coffee-coloured faces. Sartre made this observation aloud during a conference in São Paulo and then corrected himself: there was a black man in the room – a television technician" (de Beauvoir 1963: 561, quoted by Guimarães 2009: 160). But despite their awareness of social inequality, they, too, subscribed to the myth of a racial democracy that influenced the image of Brazil throughout the twentieth century. Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães writes that "Evidently, Sartre and Beauvoir did not find in Brazil anybody who thought that Brazilian black people were victims of racism; on the contrary, they met with a unanimous discourse in which the segregation of black people was seen to be of an economic nature, and therefore the struggle for liberation should be one of classes" (2009: 160). Nevertheless, they noticed the underlying racism as de Beauvoir's note shows: "all the descendants of slaves continued to be proletarian; and in the shanty towns poor white people feel superior to black" (de Beauvoir 1963, quoted by Guimarães 2009: 160). Interestingly they also identified the impact of African-derived religions as the difference between the two former slave countries, the USA and Brazil. While Sartre saw the USA as European transplant, Brazil – and de Beauvoir clarified that she meant all Brazilians – were influenced to some degree by African-derived religions (de Beauvoir used the term 'nago cults') (Beauvoir 1963: 561, quoted by Guimarães 2009: 160).

This observation might have been influenced by their host, the Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado whose novels often features rituals and beliefs of Candomblé, the dominant African-derived religion in his hometown of Salvador da Bahia. However, we can also see in these comments a reflection of Gilberto Freyre's portrayal of Brazil. Inspired by the anthropology of Franz Boas, Freyre published in 1933 a portrayal of the Brazilian society (*Casa grande e senzela*) that celebrated Brazilian multiculturalism which he saw as superior

to the racially divided USA. Freyre described the origin of *brasilidade* or 'Brazilianness' as a combination of indigenous, African, and Portuguese roots and challenged the 'racial pessimism' of his era. A focus of his book was on the colonial times which he characterized with the bipolar opposition of 'master house' and 'slave hut'; only together they managed to create an economic, social and political unity (Schmidt 2008: 112-113). Hence, the Brazilian slave holder society incorporated elements from the enslaved Africans into *brasilidade*. This image of Brazilian culture influenced the perception of Brazil for decades until an increasing awareness of racial conflicts and social injustice led to the development of a Black movement in Brazil (Schmidt 2008: 113, Hofbauer 2000). However, during the development of the film *Black Orpheus* – and Sartre's and de Beauvoir's visit – Brazil was seen as a society divided by class and not by race:

> Liberals and Marxists, whites and blacks, both had the same anti-racist project of building a mixed race nation, Brazilian and post-European, which overcame the polarity between whites, on the one hand, and black and indigenous peoples on the other. The only thing that divided them was the defence of the bourgeois order or a commitment towards class struggle. Races therefore, disappeared, with the conceptual and political overexposure given to the idea of social classes (Guimarães 2009: 160)

What we see therefore in Camus' *Black Orpheus* reflects Freyre's myth of *brasilidade*, which highlights the blackness of Brazil without criticizing the social inequality entrenched in its ethnic diversity. Even though Camus mixed his staged carnival with actual carnival footage from the 1958 carnival to increase the film's authenticity (Stam 1997: 170), it did not show the labour and effort that goes into the production of the carnival floats, the samba school, and the high level of organisation. It did not delve into the difficulty of 'slum life' for the inhabitants of the *favelas* who, in their neighbourhood, seem unburdened by the institutions of law, education, and occupation. Instead Brazil was portrayed as a place full of frivolity and laughter, sunshine and passion, music and dance, a tropical paradise, and ultimately a mythic place.

The Portrayal of Macumba in *Black Orpheus*

While the previous section examined the social setting of *Black Orpheus*, the focus shifts now to the presentation of religion, or, to be precise, of African-derived religion. While religion is not at the forefront of the film and even difficult to recognize for viewers

unfamiliar with African-derived religions, it is nevertheless embedded in the representation of Brazilian culture. To some degree it is the opposite to *The Ten Commandments* which Tenzan Eaghll uses to get his students to think about religion. He writes that students unfamiliar with the study of religions usually point out that it is religions because "it deals with a biblical story, speaks about and represents gods, or provides a tale about the origins of a scriptural law or a religious people" (2022: 2). While the film does not give an accurate re-telling of the biblical story, what makes it religious for the students is that it represents the scriptural message. The *Black Orpheus* does not have such a message despite of featuring elements of African-derived religions. I doubt therefore that first-year students unfamiliar with the type of religions would describe it as religious. After Eurydice dies Orfeu searches for her in three locations which represent Hades in the film: the office for missing persons; a ritual space of the African-derived religion Macumba; and the morgue. In the ritual he encounters her spirit inhabiting the body of an old woman, while at the morgue he finds her body. In an interview Camus reflected on his three representations of hell: "One of my themes was the denunciation of apathy: apathy in religion (as shown in the religious sect of the Macumba); apathy in public office, symbolized by the advance of red-tape bureaucracy; apathy in the face of distress which rules those white hells of the hospital and the mortuary" (quoted by Lee 1961: 312). However, in a comparison of different contemporary adaptations of the Greek myth, Owen Lee argues that Camus' intention failed: "While Camus has something important to say, the Orpheus myth hardly seems the appropriate vehicle in which to say it. For the myth obscures the message; instead of adding an extra dimension to the social theme, it makes abstract types of what should be sympathetic characters" (1961: 312). Interestingly, however, Lee uncritically affirms Camus' presentation of Macumba as evil sorcery, for instance when he describes the rituals in Camus' film as "diabolic." Such comments, as well as Camus' confirmation that a Macumba ritual acts as a metaphor for hell, reflect the widespread negative perception of African-derived religions the twentieth century. Malorie Nye's critic of Martin Scorsese's movie *Silence* can therefore also applied here, in particular his comment that "it is not the purported racism of Scorsese that is the issue, it is the dominant cultural racialized positioning of the audience for the film" (Nye 2022: 71).

Macumba is – like other African-derived religions in the Americas – an amalgamation of beliefs and practises from different origins; mainly African but also European and

Brazilian. The pantheon consists of a range of African deities and indigenous spirits that are sometimes merged with the iconography of saints of popular Catholicism (though this is more dominant in Umbanda). The ritual practice in Macumba focuses on healing as well as other ways of influencing the destiny of humans. Consequently, Macumba is seen as "an often derogatory name for non-organised Afro-Brazilian healing and magical rituals" (Brown 1985: 11, quoted by Engler 2016: 212). In academic studies (for example, Bastide 1960) Macumba is often differentiated from Umbanda, one of the most widespread African-derived religions in Brazil. Some even argue that Macumba has led to the creation of Umbanda. For instance, the Brazilian scholar Brigida Malandrino describes Macumba in her PhD thesis as "a symbolic system in which Umbanda has its origins" (quoted by Engler and Brito 2016: 161). However, a growing number of scholars doubt whether the term Macumba was ever used by practitioners or whether it was instead a – usually pejorative – term by outsiders for an amalgamation of Afro-Brazilian religions. Steven Engler and Enio Brito write, for instance, that the term 'Macumba' is used in Brazilian popular discourse "as a generic designation for all Afro-Brazilian religions" which is even "implicitly paralleled in scholarly designation of Macumba as 'magic'" (2016: 160). Nevertheless, setting the dispute about the term and its origin aside, the term 'Macumba' became used to describe a set of beliefs and practices that were regarded as illegitimate, even inferior, to one's own system (Hayes 2007: 287, quoted by Engler and Brito 2016: 161). Consequently, the claim that Umbanda has its origin in Macumba serves predominately as a characterisation of Umbanda as authentic (that is, 'superior' and 'proper') religion and Macumba as magic, often even black magic. It is this designation of Macumba as black magic which is portrayed in *Black Orpheus*.

To understand how Macumba, with its focus on healing and rituals, ended up as a metaphor of hell in *Black Orpheus* it is important to reflect on the discourse of popular culture during the time of production. As Macumba was set in the film against the background of Carnival, I start with the latter. Carnival is usually depicted as the most Brazilian feature of Brazilian popular culture (Levine 1984: 12). It was introduced to Brazil in 1505 but was initially rather limited. By the middle of the nineteenth century it became popular throughout all classes, including the enslaved population. Nevertheless, it remained at that time, as Levine writes, largely an upper-class event until the turn of the century when the city council of Rio began to organise the Carnival. Levine explains that "the major motivating force behind official efforts to shape Carnival behaviour to 'civilized' norms was

embarrassment over the 'primitive' and African side to the celebration" (1984: 13). According to Levine "officials by the late 1930s candidly stated their distaste for the unwashed masses. Popular culture became a target: […] Carnival must be stripped of its 'pagan' nature and advocating that the government 'combat' the penchant of the lower classes for 'sensuality' by 'dominating the barbarous impetus' of samba on the radio" (1984: 15). While Carnival was able to retain its spontaneity in smaller towns, in larger cities such as Rio it became "an orchestrated pageant, planned over the entire year" (1984: 14). Though Levine rather harshly describes the film as "a cloying version of the Orpheus and Euridice myth played out by childlike blacks in a fairy-tale *morro* (*favela* hill) atop glittering Rio de Janeiro" (1984: 13-14), *Black Orpheus* exported a romanticized image of the spectacle worldwide and through the film's success Carnival music and dance styles like samba became sanitised and popular among the middle-class.

However, in the end the intention to cleanse popular culture and vernacular religions from any 'pagan' features failed as Brazilians were used to living in two worlds and were flexible in handling any contradictions. Levine describes Brazil as having a "unique environment [which] yielded two parallel and openly antithetical strains regarding cults: tolerance, even to the point of direct participation, by upper class Brazilians, and hostility from middle class groups" (Levine 1984:17). He explains the different attitude with the reference to Gilberto Freyre's portrayal of the colonial slave holder society in which (white) upper class people were raised by slaves or later black servants. Levine argues that "the seeming contradiction between the vehemence of bureaucratic efforts in seeking to suppress the cults and the equally powerful hold of Afro-Brazilian spiritism among all sectors of the population may in part be explained as a practical consequence of the impact of black culture on Brazilian family life." (1984: 17). Hence, Levine puts various forms of vernacular traditions together under the label of 'Afro-Brazilian spiritism'. However, the umbrella term is misleading when we take their social spread and political treatment into consideration. While spiritism and its core practice of communicating with the spirits of the dead spread indeed through all sectors of the population in the first decades of the twentieth century, African-derived religions developed differently and were also suppressed differently by the state.

For instance, Candomblé, which is today the most famous of the African-derived religions in Brazil and the focus of the vast majority of academic studies on African-derived

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religions in Brazil (see table 8.1 in Engler and Brito 2016: 161), was pushed to the periphery of society in that time. Only later, when novelists such as Jorge Amado and other Brazilian (and French) intellectualists made Candomblé famous, the religion spread to other sectors of society. On the other hand, Macumba was drawn to the attention of the state early on because it was perceived as a threat to public authorities who tried to push people away from Macumba. However, the oppressive handling of Macumba led to the contrary: Macumba communities became even more unorganised and individualised and attracted more people, as Levine writes: "more and more its leaders displayed their powers as *feitieeiros*, or sorcerers, and increasingly it became the refuge of the lowest and most peripheral members of the social order" (1984: 18). At the same time Umbanda established itself as a more socially acceptable alternative to Candomblé and other African-derived religions, despite being also a target of political persecution. Umbanda incorporates a range of beliefs and practise originated from Candomblé and other African-derived religions as well as from spiritism. Until today Umbanda is highly fragmented in individual communities despite various attempts to centralize these communities within associations that "emphasis doctrinal and ritual conformity" (Engler 2016: 213). While Umbanda continued to be subject of legal sanctions because of its offer of healing until the late twentieth century (Engler 2016: 214), the flexibility and adaptability of Umbanda made it attractive also among "nominally Catholic adherents from the white affluent classes, individuals presumably unimpressed by the heavy-handed government efforts to legislate morals and impose officially-sanctioned values" (Levine 1984: 18).

This is the religious background of *Black Orpheus*. Camus shot the film at a time when African-derived religions were marginalised among social lower sectors of society and the depiction of Hades as an African-derived ritual would have been uncontroversial. Stam even cites a Brazilian film critic in *O Globo,* Octávio Bonfim, who wrote in 1959 that the Macumba sequence was 'disagreeable', though "it does function within a mythic context" which illustrates, as Stam points out, the "prejudices of a colonized elite scornful of Afro Brazilian culture seen as a symptom of 'backwardness'" (Stam 1997: 172). Not only Macumba but all African-derived religions in general were perceived as "superstitious, quasi-demonic cults rather than as legitimate belief-systems" (Stam 1997: 206). On the other hand, while African-derived religions were suppressed as 'pagan' worship which had no place in a modern society, the practice remained widespread, even outside the marginalised

classes. Hence, the Macumba sequence in *Black Orpheus* made sense to the audience at that time as Brazilians were familiar with rituals of spirit possession and messages from the dead which is the core practice of spiritism. By setting it in the middle of the life-affirming celebration of Carnival, Camus presents Macumba as a perfect link between the Greek tragedy and the Brazilian reality in the *favelas* with its constant threat of death.

Christopher Shinn praises the film exactly because of this link between past and present when he writes that "Camus thus mixes Greek mythology and New World African religions, Brazilian carnival and spirit-possession, the descent to Hades and a celebration of modern-day life in Rio de Janeiro. Carnival and spirit-possession come together to reflect the complex mutuality of European, African, and, indeed, Amerindian cultures under the legacy of colonialism and the shared experience of death" (Shinn 2002: 251). Even the Classicist Hardy Fredricksmeyer sees the transfer of the Greek tragedy to a different cultural setting as successful. According to him Camus stayed close to the Greek classic and "reinvents the ancient, rural and European myth of Orpheus and Eurydice by resituating it in a modern city of the Africanized 'New World'" (2007: 148). Fredricksmeyer praises how Camus presented the parallels between both systems that he describes as "mystery religions whose core beliefs and practices are revealed only to initiates, both facilitate communication with the dead, and both do so through music" (2007: 166). However, for Stam Camus did not go far enough. He criticizes Camus for failing to make the connection between the ecstatic religion of ancient Greece with the African-derived religions of Brazil: "even though the film includes a macumba ceremony, it never perceives the world of the *orixás* as in some way parallel to the pantheon of the Greeks. Rather than create a synthesis or a counterpoint, it simply superimposes one set of cultural references over another" (Stam 1997: 175).

I agree with Stam's critique. While the film is invigorating with its dance and music scenes, Camus could have gone further when linking the Greek mythology with the Brazilian religious imaginary. Instead Camus' fascination with Brazilian black culture transferred only into the portrayal of a fantasy which kept the religion into the realm of black magic and sorcery. Instead of seeing Macumba like the other African-derived religions as a form of cultural resistance in Brazil, Camus fell into the trap of negative perception of its core practice, spirit possession. Despite being a worldwide practice, there is a widespread misconception about spirit possession in Europe. Stam even uses the term "ecstasy-phobic Western society" where spirit possession is seen as "aberrant behaviour" (Stam 1997: 209).

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In African-derived religions the divine in form of the *orixás* manifest themselves in the bodies of their believers and can be identified with specific movements and other forms of behaviour. Most practitioners even dislike the term 'spirit possession' as the *orixás* are divine entities not spirits and a human body could not, therefore, be possessed by them (see Schmidt 2016). Instead the human body becomes seen as "gloriously displaying the divine" and spirit possession becomes, as Stam eloquently writes, "the supreme religious act expressing the fundamental nature of the relationship between human beings and their deities" (1997: 209). In *Black Orpheus* however, this core sacrament is presented as communication with the spirit of the deceased Eurydice instead of receiving a message from the divine. While the focus on the dead is also a core feature of the Greek drama – and Camus is therefore true to the ancient text – Camus overlooks the consequences of his transfer to a different cultural and religious setting. In African-derived religions communication is usually between the realm of the divine and the human realm, enabled through specific trained mediums. The communication with the spirits of the dead is core practice of spiritism and takes place usually via automatic writing or other techniques that are perceived as secular, not via spirit possession (Schmidt 2016: 121). While there are many variations and mixtures between African-derived religions and spiritism, Camus ignored the religious setting and simplified a rather complex ritual for the purpose of the storyline. The result is a misrepresentation of Macumba and the African-derived religions as 'black magic'. Echoing Nye who writes about Scorsese's film *Silence* that it is "a movie about whiteness (and hegemonic white masculinity) that also happened to be about (what gets called) religion" (Nye 2022: 71), *Black Orpheus* is an Orientalistic depiction of Black Brazil that happened to be religious. Nye elaborates that whiteness is "a way of classifying and controlling the world", it has "as its basis other racializations, relying on the classification of other people as non-whites" (Nye 2022: 72, referring to James Baldwin). Racialization is according to Nye not a scientific or natural description of difference but derives from colonialism which "has created this racializing classification as a form of power and control" (Nye 2022: 72). However, *Black Orpheus* has no clear colonial setting, there is no White Saviour. Nevertheless, as Obama's recollection of seeing the movie with his mother cited earlier shows, the film brings alive a racialized classification of a different (i.e., non-white) world.

The Portrayal of African-Derived Religions in Brazilian Cinema

The distorted portrayal of African-derived religions is a widespread phenomenon and not limited to films or television but also featured in literature. In a discussion of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) Christopher Shinn, for instance, reflects on the portrayal of religious practices within the wider context of race and images of whiteness and blackness "through carnival's distorted mirrors" (2002: 243). With regard to the portrayal of the religious practices of African and African American cultures in literature, Shinn mentions Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (1845), Charles Chestnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899), Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1902-03), and most strikingly, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), all of them "notably included various representations of conjuring, voodoo/hoodoo practices, mysticism, and occultism that, while confirming the powers of these spiritual arts for the black community's own cultural existence, often recognized their supernatural abilities to counter white power and authority" (Shinn 2002: 250). It is this perception of African-derived religions that is also a popular strand within Brazilian cinema (see Stam 1997, 1982-83). While black Brazilians were absent in Brazilian cinema in the first half of the twentieth century, *Black Orpheus* was not the first film produced in Brazil that portrayed the world of black Brazilians. Stam mentions, for instance, Antonio Marques Filho's 1929 film adaptation of the novel *A Escrava Isaura* (1875) by Bernardo Guimaries, which perpetuates the implicitly racist tone of the novel by using a white actress, Elisa Betty, for the title role (1982-83: 18).

The situation improved slightly in the 1930s when Gilberto Freyre's portrayal of the racial democracy of Brazil emphasised the positive contributions of black culture. Stam argues that while the silent era was symbolically white, "the cinema of the ensuing decades might be called 'mulatto'" (1982-83: 18). From the mid-1930s to the late 1950s black Brazilians featured strongly in Rio-based comedies with musical numbers and carnivalesque-themes though often just as background for the white stars. Some readers might remember the actress Carmen Miranda who appeared in several Hollywood movies. One exception was *It's All True*, a semi-documentary by Orson Welles that was unfortunately never finished. Welles was shown around Brazil by Vinícius de Moraes during his visit in 1942 and filmed two episodes of *It's All True* that featured the black actor Sebatiao Prata (known as Grande Otelo). Stam mentions that Welles described Otelo as one of the finest comic actors of the

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twentieth century. Otelo was active over decades and played in over 100 feature films including Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982).

In the 1960s Brazilian cinema began to present some of the marginalised corners of Brazil such as the *sertão.* This change led to the creation of a "symbolically 'black' cinema" in which black Brazilians had crucial roles (Stam 1982-83: 21). Leading example is Triguerinho Neto's *Bahia de Todos os Santos* that is set in Bahia, regarded by many as the "most Africanized" city of Brazil and for some the main place of Candomblé. It is therefore no wonder that the main character of the film, Tonio is also linked to Candomblé but also to the nightclub scene. Stam describes him eloquently as "in between," with a black mother and a white father, but also between traditional community and urban individualism. Stam quotes him with "they say that everything is easy, that color doesn't matter, but it's just empty words" (Stam 1982-83: 21). Stam mentions some other films of the Bahian Renaissance that refers – in different form – to Candomblé, sometimes in contrast to Catholicism (such as Duarte's *Pagador de Promessas* [The Given Word] from 1962 that Stam describes as anti-clerical or Rocha's Barravento [1962] which criticises Candomblé for a standpoint of historical materialism). In the 1970s white directors began to engage more with Umbanda. Stam highlights as an example Dos Santos' *Amuleto de Ogum* (Ogum's Amulet, 1975) which demands from the audience previous knowledge of Umbanda:

> The film simply assumes *umbandista* values, without explaining them to the uninitiated. A Catholic audience, the director points out, need only see a priest raising the host to know a mass is being celebrated. An *umbandista* audience, similarly, recognizes the ceremony which 'closes' the protagonist's body, recognizes his protection by *Ogum*, the warrior divinity and symbol, in Brazil, of the struggle for justice. It recognizes the voice of the *preto velho* (the old slave who possesses mediums of all colors) and the provocative manners of the *pomba-gira* (evil in the form of woman). At the same time, the film does not idealize *umbanda*: one *umbanda* priest in the film works for popular liberation; the other is a greedy charlatan and opportunist (Stam 1982-83: 27).

Stam reports that the film was criticized for an uncritical approach to Umbanda which the director rejected as biased against religion. Other criticized the focus on Umbanda which they saw as "an illegitimate whitening" of Candomblé. However, Stam insists that the film presented a respectful treatment of African-derived religions, even when the focus was on Umbanda and not Candomblé. "While Candomblé is communal, Umbanda is individualistic

and therapeutic, 'the poor man's couch' ... [and by] showing the multi-racial participation of this religion [the film] is indeed 'popular' in the deepest sense of that word" (1982-83: 27-28).

The discussion around the film highlights an increasing fascination with Candomblé which is idealised by many – in particular outside Brazil – as a symbol of Africa in Brazil. I still remember a workshop at my alma mater, Marburg University, in the 1990s, at which I was criticized for presenting Umbanda instead of Candomblé as the most important Brazilian vernacular religion. While census figures are not an accurate presentation of religious practice (see Schmidt 2014), one should not ignore that the number of Brazilians that identify with Umbanda is much higher than the number that identify with Candomblé in the national census. Nevertheless, many anthropologists and other (Western) scholars today are more fascinated by Candomblé than Umbanda, though Umbanda is more widespread and attracts a range of different Brazilians, from all sections of society. On a positive side, the debate whether Umbanda or Candomblé are the best representation of Brazil shows how the attitude towards African-derived religions as well as black culture has changed in Brazil. Once considered marginal, Afro-Brazilian culture becomes, as Stam writes, "the vital source of the powerful originality of Brazilian culture. Religion, no longer the opium of the people, becomes the scene of struggle and the locus of resistance to imperialist hegemony" (1982-83: 30).

Here we can see, perhaps most powerfully, the legacy of *Black Orpheus*. As outlined above, Camus was not interested in social problems of black Brazilians but in the aesthetics of black culture. But by showing the audience the beauty of Brazilian blackness, he drew attention to it internationally. Sixty years later Candomblé is at the heart of Brazilian art and culture (see Sansi 2007) and Umbanda communities are spread across the country. The colourful and very beautiful presentations of the *orixás*, the African deities that dominate the pantheon of the African-derived religions in Brazil, are recognizable by any Brazilian, practitioner or not. Though Camus portrayed only a distorted image of African-derived religion as a metaphor of Hades, his film unintentionally helped to make people aware of the 'magic' of this form of religion.

Conclusion

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Black Orpheus is not a singular but typical attempt of Western filmmakers to film 'native' stories in non-Western settings. Brennan sees it in line with Danny Boyle's 2008 Hollywood hit *Slumdog Millionaire*, about the miraculous rise of a poor man from Mumbai, as an ongoing symptom of transnational cinema. As Brennan notes, the film critic Siddhant Adlakha aptly argues that in such films there is an "'exotic' cultural disconnect between the storytellers who are perceived as 'the norm' and subjects whose experiences can only be recognized if there is, in fact, a disconnect between worlds, leading to the *lack of commonality* becoming an inadvertent focal point" (Adlakha 2016). Consequently, Brennan sums up, that while *Black Orpheus* is not a bad film, it is important to recognise today, in the twenty-first century, that it also represents "a damaging and inaccurate Western gaze" (Brennan 2017). When the audience admires the "pulsating energy of carnival" (Stam 1997: 176) it does not see the work that goes into the preparation of each samba school float, the hours of practice and artistic craftsmanship; the devastating social and racial injustice of everyday life outside the carnival; the suppression of young women and their voices; and, finally, the impact the ongoing representation of vernacular religions as black magic has on its practitioners.

Nevertheless, the ongoing prominence of *Black Orpheus* is obvious, even when compared with Camus' later attempts to repeat his success with the same formula. In 1976 he adapted Jorge Amado's novel *Pastores da Noite* (Shepherds of the Night) into *Otália da Bahia* (Otália from Bahia). Once again, he downplayed the social aspects of the novel and focused on the joyful side of Bahian life with its parties, intoxicants, and sexuality (Stam 1997: 178). However, it did not work a second time and the film is rather obscure today, quite different from *Black Orpheus*, the enduring charm of which is undeniable. While there is the occidental fascination with love and death which makes the topic of the film perfect, there is also the beauty of the setting: "The film takes advantage of the spectacular beauty of Rio itself as a kind of tropical Paris set within Yosemite-like granite mountains and placed beside a blue-green Paul Klee sea. The urban topography, in conjunction with colourful carnival costumes, turns the film into a visual paradise, where barefoot Adonises strum enchanting guitars in order to make the sun rise" (Stam 1997: 175).

It is this image that survives and makes the film so important, even today, sixty years later. *Black Orpheus* has made Carnival a symbol of Brazil, introduced the world to *bossa nova* and samba, and highlighted the blackness of Brazil. As Pinho's study has shown, several

of her interviewees – African-American tourists in Brazil – referred to the film as one of the main inspirations to visit Brazil and to experience this tropical 'black country'. *Black Orpheus* was even often the sole foundation of their knowledge about Brazil. It led to "'a postcard idealization' of the *favela*" but also highlighted "Brazil's blackness and the Africanized phenomenon of its Carnival" which became established as the main image of Brazil (Pinho 2008: 75, referring to Stam 1997: 164–176). Its success also "made Brazilians aware that they had been taking the physical, spiritual, and musical beauty of their country for granted" (Stam 1997: 172). In the 60 years since the release of *Black Orpheus* we can encounter a vibrant Brazilian film industry with a growing number of good representations of black characters and black themes. There are, of course, still many popular misrepresentations of African-derived religions on offer. Prejudicial representations of African-derived religions are still present within Brazilian cinema as well as outside Brazil (Stam 1997: 207). *Black Orpheus* is part of this discussion. While directed by a Frenchman and produced in France it is also a Brazilian film, representing Brazilian themes and values of its time, highlighting the misunderstandings and prejudices. By discussing the film in its historical, social and cultural context we can learn how African-derived religions were perceived in that time and what misconceptions people had about practices such as spirit possession and trance. In line with Eaghll (2022:19), I am not simply looking for religion in *Black Orpheus* but show how it contributes to the wider narrative about African-derived religions in Brazil. But we can also enjoy the film and its life affirming message that death is not the end.

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