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## Ten (Anti-) Theses for a Brazilian Popular Musical Aesthetic

**Abstract:** This article points out some elements that can help to understand the difficulty of analyzing popular music in Brazil with the forms of analysis commonly used by classical aesthetics and philosophy of music. In addition, it indicates some possible paths for the development of a critique of national musical material. To this end, this article retrieves some fundamental questions about the history of popular music in Brazil: its triple origin (African, European and Amerindian), the influence of capitalism in the first decades of the twentieth century, the concept of ‘popular’, its connection with early lyric poetry and its multiple forms of expression.

**Keywords:** Brazilian music; popular music aesthetics; music criticism; popular; song.

### I

*Noite de hotel  
estou a zero, sempre o grande otário  
e nunca o ato mero de compor uma canção  
pra mim foi tão desesperadamente necessário  
(“Noite de hotel”, Caetano Veloso)*

Popular music in Brazil has developed to its greatest expression in the space of just over a century. It was only in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century that it took its contemporary form, with song occupying the center of this representation. Therefore, according to Luiz Tatit, the last century was ‘the century of song’. Before that, there was no popular music that we could call Brazilian – except for the music of the Indians and the music of the enslaved Africans – something that would only be confirmed in the cultural amalgamation of all matrices, already in the 20th century.

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Before that, almost everything was the result of attempts to transpose European forms into the national environment, all without extensive success, although they have fueled elitist dreams for many decades; perhaps even today. The reflection of this cultural colonialism would reach even the movement that revolutionized much of our arts: Modernism of 1922. Two of its most famous protagonists would become antithetical figures: Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade. The first idealized a national culture whose form would remain European but whose content would be national – an ambitious program, but unrealizable, because it presupposed a standardization never incremented. The second thought of a cultural anthropophagy that assimilated foreign information by swallowing it in the name of the affirmation of our barbarism and primitivism, which he considered to be statements of our difference. The consequences of these two programs can be understood when we look at the posterity of the modernist movement. Resistant works, preservation of cultural matrices in their regional representations and substrates of popular culture that underlie a powerful cultural industry can be read through the work of Mário de Andrade. Inventive movements, *avant-garde* art, creative radicalisms, in short, any and all Art Nouveau are today considered heirs of the Manifesto Antropófago de Oswald de Andrade, as is the case with the Tropicalist movement, the most outstanding example of that heritage, and as is also the case with the work of Caetano Veloso, which was built in direct and indirect dialogue with Concretism, Cinema Novo, Rock, Teatro Oficina by Zé Celso Martinez Corrêa and *avant-garde* art, with emphasis on Hélio Oiticica.

## II

Ê semba ê, ê samba á  
O batuque das ondas nas noites mais longas  
Me ensinou a cantar  
Ê semba ê, ê samba á  
Dor é o lugar mais fundo, é o umbigo do mundo  
É o fundo do mar  
("Yayá Massemba", Roberto Mendes e Capinan)

Popular music in Brazil was stylistically consolidated from the resistance of Afro-Brazilian cultures that were forcibly transposed and from cultures native to the colonized soil of Latin America. In another measure, European popular music also added elements to this amalgamation of sound, especially those that settled and developed autonomously in the coastal region of northeastern Brazil, reinvented from the Brazilian experience. However, the cultural result of this mixture is marked to a

greater extent by African culture, which is why every popular song holds in its most essential revelation a source of resistance and an aspiration for freedom: cultural, political, social or aesthetic. The Brazilian song in its most elaborated form in the work of educated or non-educated composers – but each of whom preserves that original source in their own way – creates, reinvents, restores, revives and carries on that original impetus for emancipation. Popular music, be it engaged or lyrical, remains connected to that historical source, which saddens more than it cheers, because freedom and equality distance themselves as Brazil increasingly mutilates the traces of its wavering civility.

### III

*[...] current music, in its totality, is dominated by the characteristic of merchandising: the last pre-capitalistic residues have been eliminated*  
("On the fetishist character of music and the regression of hearing", Theodor Adorno)

Advanced or late capitalism changed the relationship between Brazilian popular music and its original source, but did not destroy it. When the productive technique invaded the space of creation, the link that song had with that driving force that gave it autonomy was broken. As a consequence, Brazilian popular song became heterogeneous. This split between art and market produced a mirroring of a large part of national production in its international counterparts, generating banal (but not unnecessary) music, assimilated by large slices of consumer society, especially the middle class, but one which distances itself aesthetically and culturally from traditional song. In this game between art and consumption, apocalyptic and integrated, outlawed and famous, popular music in Brazil has not escaped the mesh of the cultural industry. Ironically, the high point of the aesthetic elaboration of the popular song coincides with its maximum integration with television. A merger that only happened for a brief period of time and should not be repeated. This type of song, which we can call traditional or aesthetic, differs from other exclusively commercial popular musical expressions due to a classic connection between *melos* [melody], *rythmos* [rhythm] and *logos* [word (poetic)], combined with a harmony not always according to the functional rules. Popular song and popular music, which is closer to popular culture, differ over the years, but their original link remains an echo of the past. Hence the suggestion of spontaneity that is constantly lent to them.

#### IV

*...mas para outros não existia aquela música não podia porque não podia popular  
aquela música se não canta não é popular se não afina não tintina não tarantina  
e no entanto puxada na tripa da miséria na tripa tensa da mais megera miséria física...*  
(“Circuladô de fulô”, Haroldo de Campos)

The heterogeneity of popular music in Brazil forces the critic to discern two uses of the term ‘popular’, constantly interpenetrated and in which two factors cannot be distinguished: when popular is linked to people and when popular means popularity, hence the recurring confusion regarding the acronym MPB, Popular Brazilian Music. They are two antagonistic meanings, although constantly entangled. After all, does the popular term in the acronym MPB mean that the origin of this music is the experience of the peoples or that its propagation is popular, that is, recognized and famous? The answer is that MPB means music that was originally born not only among the people, but that seeks its most finished expression in it, as in the professional production between the 1950s and 1970s, between João Gilberto and *Tropicalismo*. The factors that make it popular / recognized do not necessarily depend on it. Everything in the traditional song seeks the aesthetics of the people, although it often seems distant from them, due to the interpenetration with the music market and the necessary standardization of musical products. Originally, popular music in Brazil draws its strength precisely from the people and tries, in every way, for this source not to be lost. The idea that some cultured productions are more elaborate than others born among the people is a mistake. This separation occurred based on the commercial standardization processes, which have nothing to clarify the understanding of the game between them.

#### V

*Apois pra o cantadô e violero  
Só há treis coisa nesse mundo vão  
Amô, furria, viola, nunca dinhêro  
Viola, furria, amo, dinhêro não*  
(“O violeiro”, Elomar Figueira de Melo)

Brazilian popular music remains artisanal in its most essential form of elaboration, that is, in its first materialization, in the game between lyrics and music. Technical advances, although they lend elements for their finalization and commercialization, remain a post-production work, and almost never serve the work of elaborating popular music and traditional song, often frankly primitive, as in the popular rural

demonstrations that remain. It is no accident that a musical instrument that for a long time was synonymous with trickery and vagrancy is the most recurring image in the hands of the singers: the six-string nylon guitar. The Brazilian guitar is for the Brazilian song, in its simplicity, as the electric guitar is for rock. Outside Brazil, and outside the world of flamenco music, it is common to see songwriters mimicking the sound of the Brazilian song from the unusual nylon guitar. When a singer and songwriter creates his own way of playing his songs on the guitar, we immediately identify an unrepeatable style in him. Even so, the artisanal way of creating popular music is proportional to its anachronism, because the technical enhancement of the guitar does not produce ruptures in language. The popular song is a style of the past, even though songbooks appear like grass in the soil inherited from bossa nova and tropicalism in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and expand stylistically in the international world of pop music. Musical craftsmanship that extends to the past, reconnecting us with the Greek form where art and technique did not separate, and that today puts the art of the song in the condition of artifice, not always linked to talent, and not always limited by it.

## VI

*There is something in it that other musical traditions do not possess, and which exerts a fascination over them*  
(“João Gilberto and the utopian project of bossa nova”, Lorenzo Mammi)

This anachronism is not limited to the artisanal way of composing. Popular music in Brazil has secular phenomena in its structure. The most striking of these is the lyric source, which communicates directly with the Greek form, where word and music were not separated, but also with the oral traditions that have developed throughout history; nothing seems capable of altering that link. This dependence on the word signifier results in a hypertrophied production, the result of which is the saturation of the capacity for assimilation of new ones. The cultural industry sweetens this ballast, expelling its tragicity from popular music, which nevertheless remains even though its promises of happiness have already passed. As a reconnection, popular music in Brazil (and Latin America) reinserted the sung word on the international scene in order to seem like an unprecedented invention, when in reality it is nothing more than a reinvention, a revival and an archaic reorganization in contemporary cultural life. Its fascination is its archaic condition, and resigned listeners mirror it. Not being an essential quality, this characteristic has shaped the commercial music scene in Brazil since the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## VII

*The narrator has acquired in Brazil a special pertinence in virtue of the innumerable forms of life and of narrative which linger together in the immensity of the country, from the northeastern repentistas up to the vanguard lyric or the urban contemporary novels*  
(Walter Benjamin: *the smithereens of history*,  
Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, “preface to the new edition”, 2018)

Due to its tragic condition, in popular music in Brazil there is a phenomenon that often subverts a classic proposition by Walter Benjamin about the difficulty of narrating, or about the end of traditional narratives. It is unequivocal that popular culture suffers the effects of capitalism, even when applied in a lame way in places without electricity. The result is the weakening of popular musical broadcasts, which still remain isolated, despite this, we do not know for how long. Many songs composed outside the rural environment – the urban song that is defined as national representation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – but also within it, constitute new ways of narrating, they are the ‘avant-garde lyric’, a protection of which the permanence is also not fully guaranteed, although its inheritance is indisputable. However, unlike Europe and part of the east, popular music forced Brazil to remain on the verge of an achievement. As a new fact that sounded like a promise to the world, popular music in Brazil suggested a new atmosphere to the controlled and administered world, an Edenic restoration that is now in check, if not completely disfigured, as the country’s civilizational backwardness is, in everything, different from the active primitivism of its music. The moment of this alliance between Oscar Niemeyer and Tom Jobim, as the culmination of this promise, remains as a history and a regret. A return to a world that was advancing at the expense of its own continuity and that no longer seems capable of revealing anything. This step backwards that is sustained in oral transmission, which remains with all its strangeness ‘in the immensity of the country’, is the thread that connects us to time and destiny.

## VIII

*Since I do not see a way to simply forgo the Adornoian criteria of negativity, of aesthetical origin present only in the most complex cultural phenomena, I propose that the solution of this deadlock be to consider the presence, in phenomena such as Hip-Hop, of a negativity of mixed character...*  
(“On the aesthetic-social construct”, Rodrigo Duarte)

Understanding the unique condition of popular music in Brazil is the only way to think about it in the light of philosophical and musical aesthetics. The criteria of appreciation and criticism commonly used to judge canonical works of art (classical music, cinema, plastic arts, etc.) do not apply without mediation to popular musical

material in Brazil. Neither musicology nor classical aesthetic treaties encompass this musical fact of the Brazilian experience. Its ‘mixed character’ means that part of its production is, at the same time, part of the market for musical consumer goods and the most potent resistance against it. At the same time forgetfulness and memory. A dialectic of absurdity guides this contemporary event, but does not derive a broader meaning from it: that popular music, even when integrated with low consumption, does not fail to safeguard its historical obstinacy factor, its resistant source to the cooptation of any order. To deny the value of song and popular music in the name of transpositions of experimental music to Brazil is to neglect a principle of ethical-aesthetic resistance that we do not have the strength to restore. To accept this primitivism that has taken a turn on itself is to carry on its aspirations for freedom. The disruptive works within popular music itself lie under the silence of aesthetic criticism, which, while neglecting innovative creations, remains attached to the musical material that, with every right, I would like to see born in Brazil. In view of the impossibility of being able to institute *avant-garde* music based on external genres, the aesthetic-musical-philosophical criticism of popular music in Brazil cannot develop because there is a mismatch between its theoretical principles and the musical material with which it should meet.

## IX

*The best music in the world is Brazil’s music, made by me. I do strut my stuff. I have to say this, because you can’t hear this silly a thing from a guy like Caetano who, as a poet is very good, but musically is a small-time musician. (...) Caetano is a mediocre musician, he doesn’t play well the instruments he plays, he doesn’t play well at all, close to nothing.*

(Hermeto Pascoal, August, 2004, Revista Continente)

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*Será que apenas os hermetismos pascoais  
E os tons, os mil tons  
Seus sons e seus dons geniais  
Nos salvam, nos salvarão  
Dessas trevas e nada mais?  
 (“Podres poderes”, Caetano Veloso)*

Jazz is not any and all instrumental music that is made in the world, although a lot of instrumental music can use the established formulas of the American style. Popular Brazilian instrumental music is not jazz. Its aesthetics are as out of place as our dependence on the sung word and the permanence of popular culture. This displacement generated *choro*, a unique genre in our popular music set, but also “schools” for

single men, such as those by Egberto Gismonti, Toninho Horta and Antônio Madureira. They are unique representations of an environment that is distinct from the North American market. This results not only in a lack of theoretical-critical understanding – one that commonly does not recognize these creations from the category “concert music” – but also apparently an impossibility of artistic self-understanding about the musical genres that we can consider Brazilian. A musician with a vast repertoire and multiple inventive possibilities, who may not understand his own “anti-jazzist” place, nor could he understand that a non-musician can be the greatest Brazilian artist when seen from his global aesthetic communicability. And if this absolute musician can be considered one of the greatest in the world, even without the formal technique that distinguishes him from a jazz player where the practice and virtuosity mentioned are preserved, such an aporetic situation puts him in the same position as that which he cannot clearly see. It is not only within the scope of popular sung music that particularities can be distinguished in Brazil, but also within the instrumental production some details are outside the scope of traditional musical and aesthetic criticism. Brazilian instrumental music also contains elements of the same order as popular sung music, but it takes musical language forward.

## X

*There are many ways of making music. I prefer all of them.*  
(Gilberto Gil)

Distinguishing the types of popular music in Brazil is the point of arrival for a popular musical aesthetic to develop and consolidate itself. There is no method that can compartmentalize popular music, in its various forms of expression, based on cold and objective criteria. At the same time, it is wonderful to consider yourself able to distinguish popular music for its *literomusical* quality, as it is naive to highlight in its interior what is integral to what is supposedly banal. It is necessary to implode strictly musicological categories of distinction or analyzes which are purely and classically supported by classical aesthetics. Popular music in Brazil has a more or less established canon, where new authors with the same popular representation no longer enter. The most noted artists are, in fact, the ones who took the style to its highest point of elaboration. Their works, however, frequently recover elements of popular culture, and for this reason remain active from the aesthetic-political point of view. In Tropicalism these crossings were incorporated as a formal procedure, clearly pointing to the inefficiency of watertight distinctions. In much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, popular music was a source of sentimental education for all social classes. This fact was neglected by the aesthetic studies transposed to Brazil together with the reference works in relation to which they were designed. We remain critics exiled in our own land, to speak as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, until we turn to a specific understanding of our musical material.



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