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## **The *Tropicália*-Movement and the Challenges to Brazilian Art in the Age of Culture Industry<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the original way in which the Brazilian cultural and musical movement *Tropicália*, led by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil in the late 1960s, dealt with the constant imminence of seizure by the culture industry. Instead of seeking isolation from this modern reality of the market, *Tropicália* strove to critically amalgamate it, in addition to its technological innovations. In doing so, it established a language that brought together erudition and popular elements, as well as foreign influences and the Brazilian subject matter. *Tropicália* was not about using aesthetical autonomy as an alibi for shunning the world, but about accepting the challenges of artistic communication in a mass society, especially by means of popular music. It thereby introduced to Brazil the possibility of having vanguard art done while harnessing new media forms.

**Keywords:** *Tropicália* movement; culture industry; art; market; technology; Brazil.

No one in Brazilian music criticism noted the emergence of Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil as early as poet Augusto de Campos. In 1966, he pointed to the arrival on the scene of the two artists who were about to be known, with the *Tropicália* movement, among the leading figures of Brazilian cultural life. “The forward step of Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil” was the title of an article in which Campos highlighted that their songs were aimed at an increasingly internationalized modern life, as a result of industry and technology – particularly in terms of the circulation of information. While underscoring modern mass media, newspapers or magazines, Campos concluded that “it is impossible for anyone to live one’s daily life without facing Vietnam, the Beatles, ongoing strikes, 007, the Moon, Mao or the Pope at each step”<sup>2</sup>. The merit of tropicalists, in this sense, would be to integrate such reality of the urban experience of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into their compositions. Veloso’s song “Baby” was seen as a perfect example of this phenomenon, as it speaks

<sup>1</sup> This article in English language takes up some key points of the reflections presented in my book *Tropicália* (Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Augusto de Campos, *Balanço da bossa e outras bossas* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1974), 142.

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of swimming pool, gasoline and margarine. The world of globalized consumption is there; it is part of one's life.

In the late 1960s, Marshall McLuhan became popular for his theories on the “global village” produced by mass communications and new technologies.<sup>3</sup> In his famous work, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he depicts the historical transition from ancient oral to modern written culture, while pointing to what was occurring in the 60s: a new transition through information technologies. The tropicalists were interested in the proposition that technical means were not only instruments for mankind, but also ways in which mankind could invent itself. The global village would be thus an effect of this process, in which a country's culture, connected by technology, was less and less national, only to become truly international. The world's codes and elements would reach all places. José Agrippino de Paula's novel *PanAmérica*, in which Veloso became so interested, was an example of an object that arrived from the Gutenberg galaxy while inhabiting the global village. Marilyn Monroe and James Dean, Che Guevara and Andy Warhol: they were all in Agrippino's 1967 book, written with a cinematographic-style prose.

In its own way, the *Tropicália* movement was doing in Brazilian popular music the same operation that Andy Warhol was carrying out at the same time in visual arts in the United States. Their common denominator, namely pop art, encompassed the symbols of urban life and consumption. There is indeed virtually a pop art-pedagogy for *Tropicália*. In his book *Tropical Truth (Verdade tropical)*, Veloso admits that he only learned to consider figures such as Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe through Warhol's representations,<sup>4</sup> in which the reproducibility techniques were manipulated so that such personalities would explicitly appear as what they had always been: not persons, but images. The colored silkscreen in which their bodies and faces emerged did not estrange them from a solidary bond – to mention other examples of Warhol's works – with Campbell Soup cans and Brillo soap boxes. In the realm of consumption, it would be all in all the same. The corrupted and trivial setting of cities with their consumption goods was invading the arts, which were still looking for a way of commenting on them, while taking up a stance between endorsement and irony, acceptance and criticism. As much as Elvis, Marilyn and Campbell Soup cans in pop art, the collective LP *Tropicália ou panis et circencis* by the tropicalists in 1968 cites Frank Sinatra, Paul Anka and Formiplac (then a leading Brazilian brand of laminated plastic furniture).

In this regard, tropicalists were historically updating the Brazilian Modernism of the 1920s to the pop context. As Veloso states in *Tropical Truth*, “we never lost from sight, neither I nor Gil, the distinctions between the modernist experience in the 1920s and our TV and phono-mechanical clashes in the 1960s.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, none of the members of *Tropicália* lost them from sight. All of them were mindful of a decisive

<sup>3</sup> Marshall MacLuhan, *A galáxia de Gutenberg* (São Paulo: Ed. Nacional & Edusp, 1972), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Caetano Veloso, *Verdade tropical* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997), 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 248.

transformation that had taken place in the history of Brazil and the world: the overwhelming implementation of the market everywhere, including in the field of culture, and of the technologies that disseminated the arts, such as television and the cinema, as well as radio transmission itself and vinyl records in music. None of these realities had started to exist at that point, but only then were they all systematically used. One may say, thus, that the *Tropicália* movement was practicing a form of modernism in the “age of technical reproducibility” – a notion put forward by the philosopher Walter Benjamin in 1936, at a time when the previous original uniqueness of the object of art (e.g., in painting) was replaced by emancipated mass reproduction technique<sup>6</sup> which brought about the transformation of artistic conception and reception conditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And *Tropicália* did so consciously, that is, in awareness of the risk that, while using the newly available techniques, art would be immediately subjugated by the acritical capitalist circuit that was seizing it for its own ends.

In the words of another philosopher, Theodor Adorno, who was a close friend of Benjamin, the recent ‘culture industry’ imposed its own challenges to the tropicalists inasmuch as their works would be promptly encroached on by the commercial logic that was alien to their nature, and then forced into the plain homogeneity of consumption. At the heart of this discussion, stood the issue of the reproducibility of technique, which had removed from the object of art the erstwhile original uniqueness found in painting. “The culture industry’s technique has only led to standardization and serial production”, as Adorno noted still in the 1940s, “thereby sacrificing what made a difference between the logic of the work of art and that of the social system.”<sup>7</sup> His thesis was that due to the requirements of serial production, the technical dimension had homogenized the creation of works of art and the production of objects of consumption. There still remained avant-garde efforts in face of this reality, which set themselves increasingly apart from the industry – as “hermetic artworks exercise a lot more the criticism of the state of things”,<sup>8</sup> as Adorno later noted in his *Aesthetic Theory*. His heroes were then Beckett in dramaturgy and Schönberg in music. Such was the aesthetical negativity that could exercise a criticism of the society.

And this is where the originality of *Tropicália* movement in general, and of the album *Tropicália ou Panis et circencis*, in particular, can be seen: for indeed it was a vanguard, but in popular music. It was *at once* experimental and commercial. To use Augusto de Campos’ expression, it worked out popular elements with new information, instead of appealing to redundancy.<sup>9</sup> The *Tropicália* movement did count on learned or classical musicians, and worked with the commercial labels. Therefore, it did not break with the market’s pact and continued to assert itself as a sellable product. It sought the formal evolution of music, but did not relinquish its place in the

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, “A obra de arte na era de sua reprodutibilidade técnica,” in: *Obras escolhidas*, v.1. *Magia e técnica, arte e política* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994), 175.

<sup>7</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialética do esclarecimento* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1985), 114.

<sup>8</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Teoria estética* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 1993), 167.

<sup>9</sup> Augusto de Campos, *Balanço da bossa e outras bossas* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1974), 179.

consumption of the masses. *Tropicália* was at the same time a still modern and, as Liv Sovik pointed out, already a postmodern movement.<sup>10</sup> Junctures such as this should not be taken as problems to be solved, but as keys that allow us to open the door into the specificity of *Tropicália*. Its own way of dealing with the clash between inventiveness and the market is its interesting feature, since it was neither about forsaking the former on behalf of success, nor about ignoring the latter in the name of purism. The tropicalists did not see the entry into the age of technical reproducibility only as a problem, but also as an opportunity. For the new media forms were also experimental.

Veloso explained this situation in 1968: “I believe that the need for communicating with the masses at large does account, in itself, for musical innovations.”<sup>11</sup> He was undoing the rigid opposition between mass communications and avant-garde innovation. Within technical evolution itself, lied not an interdiction to experimentalism but, instead, a path towards it. According to Veloso, radio, TV and records had created a new music. By imposing themselves as the technical means of aesthetic reproduction, they at once required and made possible new expressions. All this was said by him, who even so did not refrain from asserting that the “new communications-process is a prey of a larger scheme”, in which aesthetical laws arise from commercial needs and in observance of moral commitments – which oftentimes prevent innovation. But on the other hand, the inventive leap of pure researchers is always beset by the threat of oblivion, since it can barely reach anyone without the market. “On the one hand, music, violated by a new process of communications, making itself new and strong, yet a slave; on the other, music, safeguarded”<sup>12</sup>, as he concluded.

The album’s title itself, *Tropicália ou Panis et circencis*, already embedded the ambivalence of a vanguard that both criticized and adhered to what is popular (‘popular’ no longer in the sense of an original folklore but, instead, in reference to the new urban masses). Historically, *panis et circenses* (‘bread and circuses’) was the well-known expression of Juvenal’s satire of Rome in the early centuries after Christ. In the Roman Empire, the expression referred to the giving out of basic food together with circus or sports events in order to entertain audiences. Its alleged aim was to foster amusement as a means to distract the people from the economic exploitation to which they were subjected, while enabling a commercial activity at such events. Violent coercion by the Empire was obviously not lacking then. The bread and circus of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were entertainment and amusement, commerce and celebration too, but in the context of a bourgeois society turned into a spectacle, in accordance with the designation ascribed to it by situationist thinker Guy Debord<sup>13</sup> in 1967. The world connected by media formats such as newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations was one single society of masses interlinked both nationally and

<sup>10</sup> Liv Sovik, “Ponha seu capacete: uma viagem à tropicália pós-moderna,” *Revista da Bahia* 28 (FUNCEB: 05/1998): 60.

<sup>11</sup> Caetano Veloso, in: de Campos, *Balanço da bossa e outras bossas*, 199.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 200.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Debord, *A sociedade do espetáculo* (Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 1992), 13.

universally by the market and by communications. In this context, the question posed by many artists – and particularly by tropicalists – was which option should one adopt in such society: should one be part of it or deny it? Would bread and circuses be adequate synonyms for *Tropicália*, or its opposite to be criticized? *Tropicália ou Panis et circencis*.

We do not usually dedicate much attention to how much the more discrete part of this title – the word “ou”, ‘or’ – makes it ambiguous. It could mean either identification or disjunction, leading to opposite meanings. In the first case, the word ‘or’ indicates that one thing could be equated with the other: ‘*Tropicália*’ would be a synonym for ‘bread and circuses’. As if the album’s title were interchangeable: it is ‘*Tropicália*’, but it could be ‘*Panis et circencis*’. But in the second case, the word ‘or’ hints at a disjunctive contrast, in the sense of a bifurcation: on the one side, we find *Tropicália*; on the other, bread and circus – accordingly, the two expressions appear visually distributed on opposite ends of the record’s cover. Such ambiguity is decisive for grasping how the album consciously formulates, based on itself, the challenge that permeates the entire avant-garde art of those days. It was about knowing how the relationship between art and culture industry would be. The pact with the very thing one was setting out to subvert appears in the songs of *Tropicália ou Panis et circencis*.

Perhaps this may be at the heart of the oddness of this record. It speaks of love and the dagger; it has a heart and a cannon; it is at once lyric and epic, affectionate and parodic, playful and critical, humorous and serious, religious and secular, popular and erudite; it sings “iê-iê-iê” (‘yeah, yeah, yeah’) and protests. It looks like a Baroque monster dancing with unsuspected lightness between hell and the deep-blue heavens, between the propaganda girls of the urban industrial park and the ‘*bumba-meu-boi*’, a dancing ox figure from Brazil’s rural countryside. One does not guess how such far-off extremes could be possibly combined, as if they were made for each other. For instance, in the song “Bat macumba”; its exercise of concretist poetry points to a secular urban modernity, whereas the *macumba* of its name reminds us of a religiosity beyond Catholicism that is characteristic of Brazil. If on the one hand, its reference to Batman is pop, North American and recent, on the other, the beat of its drums comes from an ancient or even undated, that is, unchronological African tradition. The English ‘yeah!’ is conjugated to the Yoruba language of ‘*Obá*’: ‘iê-iê-iê’ and ‘*oba*’; the Beatles, to Africa; current rock ‘n’ roll to ancestral rhythm; technology to the gods; whites to blacks. All that appears together in its lyrics – in its words – without mediations.

This tropicalist way of acting seemed to serve an imperative that another intellectual of the same epoch, the Italian author Umberto Eco, pointed to in 1964. In his words, “placing oneself in a dialectical, active and conscious relation with the constraints of culture industry has become the only path through which an operator of culture can fulfill his function”<sup>14</sup>. This explained the desire of the tropicalists to attend to auditorium shows such as the one hosted by Chacrinha: very popular and far away from any good taste. As tropicalist José Carlos Capinan warned, “preserving music

<sup>14</sup> Umberto Eco, *Apocalípticos e integrados* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1998), 14.

against the risks of the market is a negative standing of abashment”, since it would “have the effect of continually moving this music away from the places where it should be now”<sup>15</sup>. The singer Nara Leão used to ask musicians to appear on TV and on Chacrinha’s show<sup>16</sup>. In a conversation with Torquato Neto and Capinan, it was said that it was necessary “to survive the market’s corruption – with it”<sup>17</sup>. In certain situations, the tropicalists were more straightforward: “we were not the ones who turned our music into merchandise”, said Gil, “but it only gets through once sold”<sup>18</sup>. If the market is the mediating way of the modern age, then one should enter the market – though critically.

So much so, that even with this untamed standing vis-à-vis the market, the tropicalists would still confront it several times. Not always did the media structures in those days and vanguard creations walk side by side, and the more so as we remember that Brazil was politically undergoing a military dictatorship. An emblematic occasion, in this regard, was the manifesto-speech in which Veloso said that he had “the courage to take on the festival-structure” in order to, together with Gil, “make it then explode”<sup>19</sup>. This assertion contains the tropicalist tactics in a nutshell: one joined the system, but in order to explode it along; one had the market serve him, but only as long as it was interesting for him, with no ingenuity whatsoever. And Veloso concluded: “we – he and I – had the courage of entering all the existing structures and then walking out of them”. There were not few clashes in the course of history among the leading figures of the movement and the media. Yet, they never ceased to be involved in it.

In all that, *Tropicália* ran against both a folklorish clinging to the past of Brazil – which, in its attachment to tradition, shirked new technical advances – and essentialist nationalism – which, in its fatherland-conservatism, stepped away from foreign influences. It sought to do justice to Brazil’s cultural make-up, in which the modernization-process exists, though with faltering steps, and preserves residues of a past that is cleared off in other places in the name of the future. This would not be an excuse, however, for an artistic production less rigorous in regard to the techniques that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an interview of 1967, Veloso explains that he is a *baiano*, but Bahia does not mean folklore only. The state’s capital Salvador was a large city where one could find *acarajé* (a typical Brazilian food), but also diners such as the *lanchonete* mentioned in the song “Baby”. “I refuse to *folklorize* my underdevelopment to compensate for technical difficulties”<sup>20</sup>, he concludes.

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<sup>15</sup> José Carlos Capinan, “Que caminhos seguir na música popular brasileira?” in: *Tropicália*, ed. by Sergio Cohn and Frederico Coelho (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue, 2008), 24.

<sup>16</sup> Nara Leão, “Que caminhos seguir na música popular brasileira?” in: *Tropicália* ed. by Sergio Cohn and Frederico Coelho (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue, 2008), 29.

<sup>17</sup> José Carlos Capinan and Torquato Neto, “Capinan dá as cartas,” in: *Tropicália* ed. by Sergio Cohn and Frederico Coelho (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue, 2008), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Gilberto Gil, “Debate na FAU,” in: *Tropicália* ed. by Sergio Cohn and Frederico Coelho (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue, 2008), 130.

<sup>19</sup> Caetano Veloso, “É proibido proibir”, in *Tropicália: uma revolução na cultura brasileira*, ed. by Carlos Basualdo (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007), 244.

<sup>20</sup> Caetano Veloso, *Alegria alegria* (Rio de Janeiro: Pedra q ronca, 1976), 23.



Inasmuch as foreign information was arriving to Brazil – and, increasingly, through the market – *Tropicália* could not turn its back to it. It moved forward unabashedly, indeed, and even playing with propaganda, as mentioned in the song “Parque industrial” and used by the movement. The tropicalist pact with the market, however, remained a taboo at the time for many artists and intellectuals. For instance, “the participation of a tropicalist in a Chacrinha show obeys all the stipulations of the program, and not those of a tropicalist – in other words, the singer obediently accepts its rules without changing them at any moment”<sup>21</sup>, as theater director Augusto Boal once accused. In his words, *Tropicália* “purports to be everything and is actually nothing”. However, his reasoning ignored the fact that for tropicalists, Chacrinha was not only an opponent to be subdued, but an element to be summoned into composing a broad image of Brazil. There was no prejudice against him. Even thus, when the tropicalists deemed that the state of the industry called for a break with docility, they would do so. There was friction in the relationship, and there was a relationship in friction. The episode in which Veloso performed the song “É proibido proibir” (“It is forbidden to forbid”) is a clear-cut example of this attitude vis-à-vis the then current structure of music festivals, as well as the irony contained in the song “Parque industrial”, with its image of a ‘bottled smile that comes ready-made and at a fixed price’. But this clash was not an *a priori* feature; it only emerged when there was the case for it, considering that in so many other occasions, it appeared to the tropicalists that the industrial techniques could open up new aesthetical ideas.

But nowadays, even critics who identify the virtue of a democratizing use of the market at the roots of the *Tropicália* movement, as in the case of Nuno Ramos, show some distrust in considering that its subsequent historical normalization may have elicited an opposite effect. “I suspect that Tropicalismo might have naturalized our culture industry to a point of no-return”, Ramos wrote, “and that the cycle of democratic conquests stemming from this operation has ended decades ago”<sup>22</sup>. His remark has two sides: on the one hand, the legacy of *Tropicália* is accused in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of naturalizing the culture industry of spectacle-entertainment. On the other, it recognizes that in the late 1960s, this process performed a key role in the public expansion of art based on a more open-minded view. In retrospect, one has the sensation that half a century ago, the new media-techniques and mass communication were still being experimented, and their very meaning was in dispute.

Would it still be today?

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<sup>21</sup> Augusto Boal, “Que pensa você do teatro brasileiro?” in *Tropicália: uma revolução na cultura brasileira*, ed. by Carlos Basualdo (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007), 272.

<sup>22</sup> Nuno Ramos, “Suspeito que estamos,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, May 28, 2014.

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