

"Anthropophagy, Tropicalismo,
and *Como era gostoso meu francês*"

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*"Contra Anchieta cantando as onze mil
virgens do céu, na terra de Iracema,
-- o patriarca João Ramalho fundador
de São Paulo."
Oswald de Andrade, "Manifest Antropófago"*

In 1971, during the height of Brazil's political repression, while the left-wing intelligentsia ardently "sought to mobilize workers and students through 'revolutionary and consequential' art" (Dunn 16), filmmaker Nelson Pereira dos Santos directed a period-piece inspired by the 1557 account of a German captive among the Brazilian Tupinambás. Pereira dos Santos's film, *Como era gostoso meu francês* (*How Tasty was my Little Frenchman*), at first glance could appear anachronistic for the turbulent and engagé artistic climate of the time. However, the motion picture in fact incorporates the late 1960's *tropicália* aesthetic into a cinematographic idiom. In essence, the filmmaker "cannibalizes" *tropicalismo's* musical stylistics along the lines of Modernism's "Manifesto Antropófago," while juxtaposing an "official" history with an irreverent reinvention of Brazil's colonial period. Ultimately, this revisionist technique purposefully undermines the authoritative self-representation of the military regime after the Fifth Institutional Act of 1968.

In 1556,¹ the German adventurer Hans Staden published a book of his travels in Brazil in 1547-48, and again from 1549-1555. These accounts include his nine months as a captive among Brazil's anthropophagic Tupinambá tribe during his second voyage.² The issue of Brazil's ritualistic cannibalism is paramount to understanding Staden's experience, the indigenous totemic system, and later attempts to create a Brazilian cultural identity. Indeed, the frontispiece of the 1557 Marburg edition reads: "Descrição verdadeira de um paiz de selvagens nus, ferozes e cannibae" (Staden 13).³ According to his account, Staden was held prisoner by the Tupinambás awaiting to be eaten by his captors. Similar to the pre-Colombian Caribs whose "cannibalistic practices were limited to occasional consumption of their prisoners of war" (Boucher 6), various peoples of the Tupy culture frequently ate enemies captured in battle, literally incorporating part

¹ A first, although perhaps not definitive, edition appears to have been published in Frankfurt am Main by Weygandt Han in 1556. There is no date on the book, but the preface is from that year. According to J. C. Rodrigues, in his *Bibliotheca Brasiliense* (Rio: 1907, 590), Staden likely switched to a Marburg publisher in 1557, with an eye toward improving the historic accuracy (at the expense of artistic quality) of the woodcut engravings which illustrated the book (Staden 9, note 1).

² In his preface to the Marburg edition, Staden indicates nine months (16), while the book's Contents indicate ten and a half months (25).

³ "A true description of a land of naked, fierce and cannibalistic savages."

of the ingested individual's identity and acquiring in the process a new name (Staden 68).⁴ The renaming of an individual after the ingestion of an Other is part of the totemic belief system of Brazil's pre-Cabralian inhabitants. People's names frequently reflected their totem, a Nature spirit which expressed the individual's or the clan's identity. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss affirms, “the religious life of these [primitive] societies is dominated by beliefs affirming an identity of substance between the clan and the eponymous totem” (20). He continues, “We know that this belief poses no obstacle to the eating of the totem, but merely confers some ceremonial significance upon this eating” (21). In devouring a foreign body, that Other's traits become incorporated into the devourer. In *Tristes Tropiques*, without explicitly referring to exocannibalism, Lévi-Strauss corroborates Staden's observation about renaming after the killing a prisoner, adding that the Tupi “also acquire names on passing from childhood into adolescence, and then again when they reach adulthood” (353).

According to British anthropologist Edmund Leach, the question of what you eat is closely related to who you can have sex with in many preindustrial, rural societies (Shipman 71, 72). The defining elements are more or less proximity to self, and familiar alterity. In a treatment of the basic separation of immediacy (self and sibling) from alterity (cousin or related other), Leach indicates the “logical opposition between unity through incorporation and unity through alliance” (19), developing the generalized hypothesis that

in *any* system of kinship and marriage, there is a fundamental ideological opposition between the relations which endow the individual with membership of a “we group” of some kind (relations of incorporation), and those other relations which link “our group” to other groups of like kind (relations of alliance), and that, in this dichotomy, relations of incorporation are distinguished symbolically as relations of common substance, while relations of alliance are viewed as metaphysical [as opposed to physical] influence. (21)

As a consequence of these perceptions of relation, siblings do not marry; cousins can in some societies; and neighbors (known others) are ideal mates, while strangers are not immediately selected until their qualities can be discerned. Similarly, most carnivorous humans eat specific domesticated animals raised expressly for slaughter. In contrast, pets, such as dogs and cats in European and Euro-American societies, are not eaten by people, being perceived as more self (human) than other (animal). Non-domesticated game is also eaten; however, strange, unfamiliar

⁴ This form of exocannibalism – the eating of outsiders or foreigners – should be distinguished from autocannibalism (eating of one's self) and especially endocannibalism, the eating of one's own social group (Shipman 70). The latter is well documented as survival cannibalism (plane wrecks in the Andes, etc.), and is present in some cases as ritualistic preservation of ancestors through ingestion (Boucher 7, and Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* 387).

animals are not readily consumed, thus avoiding possible poisoning or other hazard.⁵ Shipman diagrams this in the following manner:

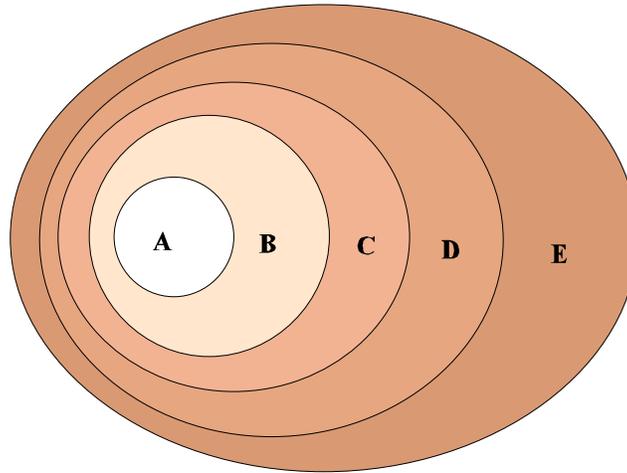


Figure 1

Shipman uses Figure 1 to diagram both Leach's expression of kinship for marriage and his evaluation of taboos for consumption. In the former case:

- A=Self;
- B=Sibling: marriage impossible;
- C=Cousin: marriage possible;
- D=Neighbor: marriage desirable;
- E=Remote peoples: marriage impossible.

In the second case:

- A=Self [humans];
- B=Pets: non-food;
- C=Livestock: food;
- D=Game: food, subject to rules;
- E=Remote wild animals: non-food. (72)

Both eating and mating tendencies vary across cultural lines, with some peoples consuming cats, dogs and monkeys, and some communities permitting the marriage of cousins. Many societies make important distinctions between first cousins and more distant relatives. For

⁵ One wonders who was the first person to eat a lobster.

example, in Portuguese, and similarly in other Romance languages, a first cousin is known as a “brother-cousin” (*primo-irmão*) or a “sister-cousin” (*prima-irmã*), emphasizes the immediacy of the bloodline. The codification of these tendencies constitute social taboos, the strongest of which are against incest and cannibalism. As paleontologist Pat Shipman indicates:

Because both cannibalism and incest violate rules of accepted distances, the two are often believed to be practiced together. Thus to accuse a group of both cannibalism and incest is tantamount to denying their humanity. (72)⁶

In his 1979 book *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, William Arens attacks "the very notion of cannibalism, calling it a myth generated to enslave or otherwise oppress a hostile 'other'" (Boucher 6). Shipman points out that accusations of cannibalism serve to distance the accuser (self) from the accused (other), and may contrast one's own "civilized state" from the animalistic barbarism, or may justify one's own inhuman behavior in time of war.⁷ The denying of humanity to another group can rationalize such acts as slavery, genocide, and appropriation of lands. Beginning with Columbus's *Diaries* (1492) and Caminha's *Carta do Achemento* (1500), many descriptions of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas in some way animalize the so called "savages" much as in Staden's account. These treatments of the “other” to the European “self” were frequently more reflective of European perceptions than of indigenous cultural realities, often serving the interests of the colonization enterprise. In *Savagism and Civilization*, Roy Harvey Pearce discusses the conceptions of America's indigenous population developed by the English colonizers: “The Indian became important for the English mind, not for what he was in and of himself, but rather for what he showed civilized men they were not and must not be” (5). Columbus himself urged Ferdinand and Isabella to enslave "these cannibals, a people very savage and suitable for the purpose" (Boucher 16), not coincidentally a move which would add capital value to explorer's newly claimed territories.

For whatever the motivations, the legacy of cannibalism heavily marked the iconography of colonial Brazil, and thus the identity of the nation which eventually developed. In 1928, Oswald de Andrade published his Modernist "Manifesto Antropófago," a declaration of Brazilianness through cultural cannibalism. Andrade acknowledges the historical occurrence of anthropophagy not as a stigma, but rather with pride. In reference to the indigenous ritual of devouring captured enemies, Andrade writes:

⁶ In Chapter II of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss discusses “The Problem of Incest,” referring to the similarities of the totems and taboos of sex and eating: “Marriage and, in very many societies, the sexual act itself have a ceremonial and ritualistic significance in no way incompatible with the claim that they represent a form of totemic communion” (21).

⁷ Along these lines, it suffices to recall Allied propoganda posters from World War II which depicted Germans as salivating wolves and Japanese as devious rats.

Tínhamos a justiça codificação da vingança. A ciência codificação da Magia. Antropofagia. A transformação permanente do Tabu em totem. (15)⁸

In the social and cultural sense, Andrade views the identity of the former colony as a conglomerate of diverse elements, incorporated (brought into the body) from foreign cultures. A society creates its own body by ingesting and internalizing pieces of other cultures, just as a human body produces its own protein from enzymes of the plants and animals consumed.

Andrade goes on to justify this consumption of other cultural elements, stating: “Só me interessa o que não é meu. Lei do homem. Lei do antropófago” (13).⁹ He adds: “Da equação *eu* parte do *Cosmos* ao axioma *Cosmos* parte do *eu*. Subsistência. Conhecimento. Antropofagia” (15).¹⁰ Haroldo de Campos classifies the “Manifesto Antropófago” as:

caminhando para uma visão brasileira do mundo sob a espécie da devoração, para uma assimilação crítica da experiência estrangeira e sua reelaboração em termos e circunstâncias nacionais e alegorizando nesse sentido o canibalismo de nossos selvagens. (Perrone 65)¹¹

The notion of devouring and assimilating foreign influences into Brazilian culture resurfaced 60 years after the manifesto. In 1968, musicians Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil released their album *Tropicália* which simultaneously criticized the Brazilian socio-political *status quo* and mixed musical styles from around the world forming a new, Brazilian artistic expression (Perrone 65). Caetano himself explains:

We took the example of cultural cannibalism, created [...] by the Modernists, especially Oswald de Andrade, who had invented this idea that you devour everything that comes from anywhere in the world and digest it however you like in order to produce something new. (Dunn 17)

The album's complete title, *Tropicália, ou Panis et Circensis*, combines the notion of Brazil as a

⁸ “We had justice, codification of vengeance. Science, codification of Magic. Anthropophagy. The permanent transformation of the Taboo into totem.”

⁹ “I am only interested in what is not mine. The law of man. The law of the cannibal.”

¹⁰ “From the equation *I* part of the *Cosmos* to the axiom *Cosmos* part of the *I*. Subsistence. Knowledge. Anthropophagy.”

¹¹ “[H]eading towards a Brazilian vision of the world as ingestion, towards a critical assimilation of the foreign experience and its re-elaboration in national terms and circumstances, alegorizing in this way the cannibalism of our savages.”

tropical country with *panem et circenses*, the classical Roman concept of appeasing discontent in the general populous by means of food and entertainment, elaborated by Juvenal in his indignant, satiric attack on imperial Roman corruption and decadence. Veloso and Gil's work is thus a critical commentary on Brazil's situation under the military rule of the late 1960s. The musicians also responded to the extreme censorship of the military government of President Arthur da Costa e Silva, which enacted the Fifth Institutional Act in December of 1968. The resulting *tropicália* aesthetic was a "justaposição de elementos contraditórios, metrificação irregular, incorporação de ruídos da cidade industrializada etc." (Franchetti 138).¹² Furthermore, the *tropicalistas* rebelled against all forms of musical limitations by taking from pop, traditional Brazilian samba, Bossa Nova, baião, and Caribbean styles, among other influences (Perrone 65). By mixing various styles from diverse locations and periods, and by consciously ignoring the political implications of modern electronic music (emanating from the "First World") *vis-à-vis* traditional, "Third World" expressions, the *tropicalistas* developed anachronisms which undermined the cultural imperialism of modernized Western society by breaking the boundaries between developed and under-developed cultures. According to Roberto Schwarz, these anachronisms result in an allegory of Brasil (74) insofar as the juxtaposition of the old and the new, the antiquated "Third World" and the modern "First World," form a social and a political absurdity (76). He explains:

[N]ós, os atualizados, os articulados com o circuito do capital, falhada a tentativa de modernização social feita de cima, reconhecemos que o absurdo é a alma do país e a nossa.(77)¹³

Influenced by both Oswald de Andrade's Modernist notion of cannibalism and the *tropicalista's* post-modern destruction of history, Nelson Pereira dos Santos recreated the conflicts of cultures exemplified in the story of Staden's captivity. The back-drop for *Como era gostoso meu francês* are the wars between the Portuguese and the French in the area of Guanabara Bay and São Vicente. Both European countries established alliances with rival indigenous tribes, among them the Tupiniquins and the Tupinambás. The title character, transformed from Germanic Staden into a nameless Frenchman, is a prisoner of the Portuguese when these are overrun by Tupinambás who take him captive, mistaking him for an enemy Portuguese. He lives among the tribe for almost a year until he is eaten.

From the opening scene, Pereira dos Santos juxtaposes official history with revisionist questioning. The film's first sequence shows French authorities punishing supposedly rebellious soldiers. The voice-over narration, a letter from the commander to the king, describes the official

¹² "[J]uxtaposition of contradictory elements, irregular metrification, incorporation of noises from the industrialized city, etc."

¹³ "[W]e, the modernized ones, the ones articulated with the circuit of capital, given the failure of the attempt at social modernization enacted from above, recognize that absurdity is the country's soul, and ours."

version of events, in striking contrast to the images on the screen. The scene closes with the voice-over elaborating a failed gesture of clemency on the part of the authorities: "We unshackled his hands so that he might better express himself, but the prisoner inexplicably ran and threw himself into the sea." At the same time, the audience views the prisoner in irons being pushed off a cliff into the surf after a priest performs an unceremonious sign-of-the-cross.

Throughout the motion picture, Pereira dos Santos provokes the audience with a clash of cultural standards. After the first scene, almost the entire film is spoken in the Tupy language, with subtitles in Portuguese for the Brazilian audience. Given that the vast majority of cinema viewed in Brazil is from either the United States or Europe, Brazilian viewers would be readily accustomed to the reading of subtitles. Nevertheless, in *Como era gostoso meu francês*, the filmmaker polemicalizes the distancing inherent in subtitles, written text which necessarily must translate only part of the spoken dialogue, separating the viewer from the aural experience of the cinematographic experience. Obviously, silent films depended on written text to transmit dialogue, but the entire filmic idiom was correspondingly distinct: directors of the silent era created motion pictures precisely as moving images which incorporated the written text, while makers of "talkies" develop their product/art-form with the aural experience of the audience included organically into the medium.

Pereira dos Santos accentuates Third World audience's constant loss of information due to subtitles by forcing Brazilian audiences to view a Brazilian film about indigenous Brazilian people while facing the filter of subtitles. In contrast, most films set in a linguistic environment other than that of the intended audience present the dialogue in the audience's home language. When a few foreign characters are present as a minority among the overall cast, they may speak normally in the audience's language, heavily accented in the audience's language, in a foreign tongue with subtitles, or in the foreign tongue with partial or no subtitles at all. Through these options, the director gives the viewer more or less information, emphasizing the role of verbal communication. In *Como era gostoso meu francês*, only a couple of lines of Portuguese are spoken, the vast majority of the dialogues being in Tupy, with a few lines in French. Besides evoking the "First World" vs. "Third World" information chasm, Pereira dos Santos also reiterates the "Old World" vs. "New World" problematic manifest by the imposition of the European languages in the cultural landscape of the Americas. By making the indigenous Tupy language be the dominant tongue in the film, the director raises the issue that Portuguese, and not Tupy, is the dominant language of Brazil today.

Pereira dos Santos also presents clashing cultural norms in regards to clothing, treatment of captives, sex, and of course death and cannibalism. Both the Frenchman and the Euro-American audience encounter difficulties in understanding the behavior of the Tupinambás in the film. One of the first obvious cultural differences is the nakedness of the indigenous characters.¹⁴

¹⁴ Jim Ito-Adler, an anthropologist and extra who played one of the French soldiers in the opening scene, indicated the filmmaker's difficulty in recruiting actresses on location in Parati (a

Indeed, throughout the movie, only a handful of French characters appear clothed. Even the title character soon strips off his European garments. The director immediately and constantly confronts the audience with an entirely unclothed cast, calling into question the social norms of dress, especially in a tropical climate.

More confusing to the Euro-American mind set is the Tupinambás' treatment of their captive. The captors give their prisoner a wife, the young widow of a warrior killed by the Portuguese, and allow him to roam freely not only within the village compound, but also around the surrounding lands. As the Frenchman transforms his own appearances to conform to that of the Tupinambás, he also becomes hunting partner to the chief, eventually even fighting and killing two Portuguese alongside his master. While never giving up hope of a return to French soil, the European begins to view himself as integrated into the Tupinambá society, to the extent of having his indigenous wife refer to him as her husband. Subtly, Pereira dos Santos demonstrates the difference in the two characters' perceptions when the Tupinambá woman calls her dead husband by the indigenous word for spouse while adopting the French word *mari* for her European partner. Presented with an opportunity to escape, the Frenchman loses his chance at freedom when the ship sets sail while he is trying to convince his indigenous wife to accompany him. Soon afterwards, he is scheduled to be killed and devoured, his wife indicating that she will eat his neck. As she prepares him for the ritual of death, he clearly does not believe in his impending fate, choosing to have sex instead of fleeing. The director thus eroticizes the scene, fusing sexuality with the act of eating.¹⁵ The double entendre of the film's title in Portuguese, *Como era gostoso meu francês*, itself accentuates the association between sex and eating: “*gostoso*,” meaning “flavorful” or “tasty,” is a common adjective to refer to an individual who is sexually appealing. In popular Brazilian speech, the sexual partner who penetrates “eats” (“*come*”) his partner; ironically, in Pereira dos Santos's film it is the woman who literally eats the man.

Thus, contrary to Staden's experience, in the film's final scene, the Tupinambás indeed kill the Frenchman, his hunting partner and wife presumably eating their allotted portions. In this manner, Pereira dos Santos demonstrates the misunderstanding across cultural lines: the Frenchman viewed his interactions with the chief and especially his supposed wife as interpersonal relations, an emotional bonding, while in the eyes of his captors he was at all times something to be eaten.¹⁶ Indeed, his wife's pet name for the Frenchman was “my little neck”; he was a

small, coastal resort community) to play the unclothed indigenous women.

¹⁵ As Pat Shipman indicates, “Sex and eating are, of course, closely associated in many societies, including our own [American]” (71). The socio-linguistic importance of the vulgar use in Portuguese of *comer* for sexual penetration has been well documented.

¹⁶ Similar contrast can be found in the Hollywood production *City Slickers* when the dude-ranchers playing cowboy come to the realization that the calf they have cared for, like all the cattle, soon will be slaughtered. The Australian animal-rights film *Babe* also creates such a polemic. The purpose and outcome of these two English language films is radically different from that of *Como era gostoso meu francês*.

substitute for the husband killed in battle, serving her while awaiting death.

The murder and consumption of the Frenchman is disturbing to Euro-American audiences. It is barbaric by definition, according to the criteria indicated by Shipman, Leach and others. Yet Pereira dos Santos seeks more than a portrayal of historic customs: he demonstrates the indigenous cannibalistic foundation of Brazilian culture while simultaneously undermining the supposed nobility of European society in the Americas. Much as the *tropicalista* music of Caetano Veloso mixed clashing sonorous elements, *Como era gostoso meu francês* presents the audience a series of internal oppositions: the voice-over and the visual images; the expected relationship-based outcome and the film's actual conclusion; even the incongruous behavior of the European characters. In one telling scene, a French merchant ship comes to trade with their Tupinambá allies. The captive Frenchman implores the ship's captain to properly identify him as French and thus not subject to exocannibalism, having been initially taken for a Portuguese when he was captured. The captain, however, purposefully perpetuates the Frenchman's mistaken identity stating: "He's Portuguese. Go ahead and eat him." The reason for the condemning lie is so that the captain will have a dependent, exploitable worker inside the indigenous compound. The audience must question what is more barbaric: a society which adheres to a commonly accepted anthropophagic totemic system, or an individual who knowingly breaks his own society's ethical code, sacrificing an innocent victim to probable death for the possibility of material gain. Pereira dos Santos emphasizes the barbarism of the supposedly civilized Europeans when in a later scene the Frenchman slays the captain with a shovel in a dispute not over his betrayal but rather for gold and gems discovered by the captive. Moreover, the Frenchman discovers the treasure by plundering the grave of his indigenous wife's deceased husband. The immoral (by the Europeans' own standards) and greed-driven behavior of the two Frenchmen serves to further undermine the official, European version of the struggle between "civilization" and "barbarism."

Pereira dos Santos made *Como era gostoso meu francês* at a time of extreme governmental control of State iconography and means of mass communication. By contrasting indigenous and European cultures, the filmmaker could question traditional, "First World" oriented images of Brazilian society, while avoiding censorship. He did so in a way which followed the compositional style of the *tropicália* movement. As Charles Perrone indicates: "Tais composições juxtapõem o antigo (primitivo, nativo, selvagem, subdesenvolvido) e o novo (moderno, industrializado, desenvolvido) para ridicularizarem valores sociais e para criticarem o estatuto dos assuntos brasileiros" (Perrone 72).¹⁷ In *Como era gostoso meu francês*, Nelson Pereira dos Santos cannibalizes this *tropicalista* aesthetic, digesting it to produce a new, filmic expression of its at once serious and satiric attack on oppression and the *status quo*.

¹⁷ "Such compositions juxtapose the old (primitive, native, savage, under-developed) and the new (modern, industrialized, developed) in order to ridicule social values and criticize the statute of Brazilian subject."

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