

Texts, Sounds, and Images of a Dictatorship: Memory and Nostalgia in Brazil through *Rebel Years*

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“(…) History happens twice. First, in the instantaneous eruption of facts. Second, in the literary, historical, biographical, memorialist, and, today, in the audiovisual: on television, cinema, and CD-ROM. If in the first history we lost, in the second we didn’t do that bad.” This statement was made by the Brazilian writer and politician Alfredo Sirkis in the preface to his autobiography *Os Carbonários*, a book that narrates Sirkis’s experience as a member of an urban guerilla against the military dictatorship in Brazil.

My paper deals with the media translation, memory, and nostalgia in Brazil regarding the period of military dictatorship in the ‘60s and ‘70s. In special, I focus on the collective past as projected by *Rebel Years (Anos Rebeldes)*, a miniseries exhibited by Globo TV in 1992 that follows the trajectories of a group of youngsters from Rio de Janeiro during dictatorship. *Os Carbonários*, along with the book *1968, The Year That Never Ended*, written by Zuenir Ventura, was the main literary historical source for Gilberto Braga, the miniseries’ sriptwriter. The main character in *Rebel Years* was inspired by Alfredo Sirkis’s autobiography. I also briefly mention the miniseries’ interactions with the political circumstances in 1992. As I hope to show, audiovisual adaptation from historical literature implies much more than discussing notions of ‘fidelity’ to the ‘original source’; it implies ways of engaging into the past, and different discursive modes (such as texts, moving images, and sounds) that might articulate that past.

In Brazil, military dictatorship lasted from 1964 to 1985. To justify the restrictive policies and restrain the so-called ‘subversive’ activities, it was essential for the military government to establish effective and extensive channels of communication to diffuse a notion of improvement coming from the inside and threats coming from the outside. TV and radio broadcasters, as well as newspapers (with varied levels of *connivance*), promoted this optimistic nationalism, in which events such as the World Cup conquest in soccer were mixed with messages of economic growth and eventual ‘communist terrorism’ undermining national stability. For the government, the increasing economic disparity between the rich and the poor should solve itself in the long run. As the Minister of Economy would argue, “we need to make the cake grow before we can split it.”

In the cultural arena there was an ambivalent relationship between the State and the artists. On the one hand, mass mediated artistic expression was filtered by a censorship ready to remove any explicit suggestion of sexual, political or racial controversy; on the other, the Government took part in establishing legal incentives for the promotion of a national culture and the venues for its circulation, in special television. For instance, from 1965 until 1985 TV broadcasters organized a series of Festivals of Brazilian Popular Music, which became extremely popular among the increasing number of Brazilians with access to television. The competitors, musicians like Vinícius de Moraes, Toquinho, Tom Jobim, Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Elis Regina, and Geraldo Vandré, would produce what many consider not only the ‘national soundtrack’ of the dictatorship era, but also the very core of MPB, *Música Popular Brasileira* (Brazilian Popular Music).

Indeed, music is a crucial and powerful element in *Rebel Years* in adapting from written words to audiovisual discourse, as *watching* and *listening*, more than *reading*, have tended to become collectively experienced activities. Thus it seems to me that the sonic element assumes a leading role in framing a nostalgic past, as it creates multilayered affective links between the enacted past and the audience. We can take Alfredo Sirkis's own assessment of *Rebel Years*: "what really moved me was [the miniseries'] opening credits, with [Caetano Veloso's song] *Alegria Alegria*" (2008: 27). Interestingly, both Sirkis and Ventura refer to this period – more specifically the charged late '60s – as representing a generational shift from literature to audiovisual works as central cultural agents. For Zuenir Ventura, "the generation of 1968 was perhaps the last literary generation in Brazil – at least in the sense that its intellectual and aesthetic learning were forged by reading. It was created, one can say, more by reading than by watching" (2008: 52).

As we examine the differences and adjustments from words to sounds and moving images, we realize that *Rebel Years* operates with intertextuality, and also with 'inter-musicality', and 'inter-visuality.' This relates not only to the 'audiovisual' nature of television, but also to the collaborative exercise that TV programs like *Rebel Years* encourage. Let me suggest some cases in point. First, the insertion of other autobiographies into the plot. As usual in Brazilian miniseries and telenovelas, *Rebel Years*' plot revolves around a central romantic couple, an element absent both in Sirkis's and Ventura's books. In a melodramatic fashion, the scriptwriter Gilberto Braga placed the couple in two opposed ethical positions within the increasingly repressive regime of the period: she, an individualist who has seen the altruistic life of her communist father

with a mix of pity, pointlessness, and respect; he, an engaged activist who gives more importance to the political events in the country than to their relationship.

Throughout its 11 hours, *Rebel Years* also shows numerous parallel trajectories. One of these trajectories is a young apolitical playwright (eventually hippie) that becomes a TV scriptwriter: this person is Gilberto Braga himself, who has inserted his own biography into the plot. We could also add other biographical insertions into the narrative, such as the memories of the older actors in the miniseries who lived during the period (some were even jailed and tortured), who were able to transmit their experience to the younger actors. Also, the director Dennis Carvalho had an immense role in framing Gilberto Braga's script and collecting other texts, images, and sounds, to express a historically coherent narrative.

Thus the miniseries offered a unique opportunity for many to share and recollect sounds and images of memories that could remain unheard and unseen – as Sirkis suggested in the comment with which I started this paper, the second history is also a history of atonement. I don't want to suggest that atonement is all *Rebel Years* is about. In fact, Globo TV's vice president considered the atmosphere of the first draft of the script improper. For him, the scenes showing political repression were emphasizing too much the political aspects over what *Rebel Years* should be about: the love story. Perhaps he was feeling that the narrative was getting too close in raising questions about another controversial biography, that of TV Globo itself.

For the sake of narrative cohesion, every character in the plot is somehow related to the other, but each individual or group of individuals occupies a specific social position by enacting a set of incorporated class-, gender-, and, especially, generation-

oriented dispositions. In that sense, the characters in *Rebel Years* are agents enmeshed in a tense social field and using various strategies to achieve certain goals, either collective (political) or personal (affective or professional) ones – the central couple represents the tension between these two poles. The ‘images of dictatorship’ can be seen in the varied dispositions that these characters embody. In the adaptation from Zuenir Ventura’s description of behaviors to the characters’ incorporation of these behaviors, the engagement with the narrative is transformed. Visualized memories tend to become more fluid, in the sense that textually described elements merge into the audiovisual narrative. The power of this engagement with the audiovisual has, of course, many implications. As the film director Pudovkin argued regarding the emergence of the audiovisual, “film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body.”

Again, music has a central role in creating distinctive modes of engagement between audience and characters. According to Gilberto Braga, the scriptwriter, the miniseries tells not only the history of Brazil during dictatorship, but also the history of Brazilian popular music, including songs by “*everybody* who showed up during that time.”¹ We find inter-musicality and nostalgia in *Rebel Years*, for instance, in the song *Carta ao Tom 74*, composed by Toquinho and Vinicius de Moraes, and whose lyrics were taken from a letter that Vinicius wrote and never sent to his friend Tom Jobim. This Bossa Nova song talks about to the golden years of Bossa Nova in the late fifties. Vinicius writes: “Do you remember what a happy time? Oh how I miss it. Ipanema was only happiness. It was as if love hurt in peace. Our famous girl [referring to *The Girl from Ipanema*] barely knew how far the city would dirty, this flood of love that was lost.”

¹ From the interview included in the DVD box.

Before concluding, I want to offer a last case of inter-musicality and inter-visibility in the miniseries, one that merges the two to convey historical realism and infuse the projected past with emotional tones. I refer to what the *Rebel Years*' director Dennis Carvalho called 'historical panels.' These are music videos that blend shots originally made in the 1960s and 1970s with 'fictional' scenes that insert the characters in that context.

For Zuenir Ventura, *Rebel Years* was a landmark in Brazilian television. According to him, "we complain that the country has no memory, that it is *amnesic*. And then a bold project like this comes, one that will be transmitted to millions of people and that has done exhaustive and impressive historical research."² Although it was not a huge success during its exhibition **in 1992**, *Rebel Years* motivated young Brazilians to take part in public manifestations demanding the impeachment of president Fernando Collor de Mello. According to the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* of August 16th 1992, "the youngsters are using in street protests for the impeachment old songs from the soundtrack of *Rebel Years*, and even rebel gestures depicted in some episodes. Caetano Veloso's *Alegria Alegria* is being sung on the streets and the slogans of old street protests are being repeated."³

More recently, another articulation of the memories from dictatorship in Brazil occurred. Many of the persecuted and tortured anti-dictatorship activists from the '60s and '70s followed a political career and took leading political positions. Under their pressure, in May of this year [2009] the Brazilian Government launched a Website called *Revealed Memories*, making accessible to the civil society the secret files held by the

² <http://www.tv-pesquisa.com.puc-rio.br/mostraregistro.asp?CodRegistro=18527&PageNo=2>

³ <http://www.tv-pesquisa.com.puc-rio.br/mostraregistro.asp?CodRegistro=18721&PageNo=7>

Government from '64 to '85. As previously unseen and unheard documents – what Sirkis called the 'first History' – become available for the Brazilian society to experience, the 'second' History will continue to expand in the intersections and interactions of texts, sounds, and images.