

Between rupture and resumption: criticism on the dominant memory of bossa nova¹

Entre ruptura e retomada: crítica à memória dominante da bossa nova

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we propose to problematize the dominant memory of bossa nova which identifies it as a break with the language of samba-canção, bolero and samba – the latter as it was played on the acoustic guitar at the time – as an aesthetic of rupture that established for the Brazilian popular music an original and modern landmark. The *new* of bossa nova deserves to be rethought, because, when analyzing the genesis of the genre, its musical aspects and language, it is possible to observe that, in part, it has only reconfigured or gave a new plasticity for samba and samba-canção, being faithful and linked to these songs lineages. The concepts about collective memory, from M. Pollak, and culture as memory, from I. Lotman, are the conceptual basis of the argumentation.

Keywords: Bossa nova, memory, popular music

RESUMO

Neste artigo, propomos problematizar a memória dominante da bossa nova que a identifica como um rompimento com as linguagens do samba-canção, do bolero e do samba – este na forma como era tocado ao violão na época – como uma estética de ruptura que estabeleceu para a música popular brasileira um marco original e moderno. O novo da bossa nova merece ser repensado, pois, ao analisar a gênese do gênero e os aspectos musicais e de linguagem, é possível observar que, em parte, ele apenas reconfigurou ou deu nova plasticidade ao samba e ao samba-canção, permanecendo tributária e ligada dessas linhagens da canção. Os conceitos de memória coletiva, de M. Pollak, e de cultura como memória, de I. Lotman, são a base conceitual da argumentação

Palavras-chave: Bossa nova, memória, música popular

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INTRODUCTION

THINKING THE MEMORY and history of bossa nova means inevitably to face many tensions on the representations about this music movement, whose emergence occurred at the end of the 1950s, especially in Rio de Janeiro, and was protagonized by young instrumentalists, composers, and singers. Such conflicts about bossa nova goes beyond the imprecision about dates, creators, origins, and its musical and poetic affiliations.

This article seeks to problematize other aspects of bossa nova, namely the ones understood as its identity marks: the rupture with prior song lineages – particularly samba-canção and bolero, and a certain way of playing samba on the acoustic guitar (Garcia, 1999) –, and the revolutionary character it established for the Brazilian music as an original and modern landmark, or even a re-foundation one. The *new* in bossa nova deserves here our attention, in the sense we want to understand to which extent it reconfigured or gave new plasticity to samba and samba-canção, remaining loyal and undissociated to these lineages, and even openly using them in its musical elaborations.

This reflection gives us the opportunity to resume concepts and notions that are important to the theoretical field of memory as a place of representation, re-inscription, and to understand the culture itself as memory. In the case of bossa nova, we are interested in discussing the prevalence of discourses that recognized this music movement as a reinvention of popular music. Certainly, there were counterpoints to such view², but apparently it prevailed in these discursive clashes the perspective that bossa nova opened a path until then unheard of for the Brazilian music. This is one of the aspects that moves this reflection and, for doing so, it is mandatory to reflect here on memory based on the notions of memory frameworks (Pollak, 1989), of memory itself as culture, through the postulates of the Tártu-Moscow School (Machado, 2003), and the uses of memory (Ricoeur, 2004). It comes also from Ricoeur the notion, which we also use in this reflection, of how memory imposes itself as a vote, a pretension that is shaped, so to speak, in the comfort of a wish.

We consider here that the collective memory, in the perspective of Pollak (1989), allows us to examine the discursive games from which the social formation of memory results or, so to speak, the versions and comprehension of how certain events will ultimately prevail on the timeline and build some representations as truth. On the other hand, our option in bringing to this article the notion of culture as memory, in the view of Lotman (1998), is justified by the author's understanding of the concept of *translation*, and on how the culture works as an information processing mechanism. It is from the repertoires of previous times that groups and individuals rework and reconfigure cultural

² The main counterpoint to the view of Bossa Nova as a revolutionary music arised at the time of its creation, and had nationalist critics, many of them left-wingers, as main authors. An example of this critical line to the deleterious influence of jazz in the Brazilian popular music was in the texts of the journalist and historian José Ramos Tinhorão. This debate has been already very discussed in research on Bossa Nova. Although important, it will be not discussed here as it is outside the scope of the article.

texts. Lotman (1998) names this process “translation of tradition”, considering that even texts that already have a meaning to a group or individual may be somehow reorganized, in a continuous process, due to shocks but also to encounters promoted among each other. That is, the tradition persists, but always faces the possibility of being reshaped, generating new signs, new meanings and new texts.

culture is a gathering of historically formed semiotic systems (languages). The translation of the same texts into other semiotic systems, the assimilation of different texts, the moving of the boundaries between texts belonging to culture and those beyond its boundaries are the mechanisms through which it is possible to culturally incorporate reality. Translating a given section of reality into one of the languages of culture, transforming it into a text, i.e. into an information codified in a given way, introducing this information into collective memory: this is the everyday cultural activity sphere. (Lotman apud Velho, 2009: 254)

Strictly speaking, for Lotman (1998: 153) culture is memory, for being a constant accumulation of texts, information, and meanings:

The semiotic aspects of culture [...] develop, instead, from laws that recall the laws of memory, according to which what happened is not annihilated nor becomes nonexistent, but is preserved, suffering a selection and a complex encoding, to manifest itself again under certain conditions³.

If in a final analysis one can understand culture as memory, what matters the most to this article, considering the issues that move it, is to seek a better understanding of how the bossa nova memory while dominant discourse ended up privileging perspectives that perceive it more as moment of rupture and revolution than as a cultural event of a translational character, which restructured previous rhythms and styles, and synthesized prior musical lineages that have influenced and formed its substance, such as samba-canção and jazz.

Dead in 1945, thus about 13 years before the emergence of bossa nova, the modernist writer Mário de Andrade, recognized by his erudition and defense of the *authentic* Brazilian values, understood that the *original Brazilian music* would result from a synthesis of the historical evolution. This aforesaid evolution crossed thematic fields⁴ such as religious music, romantic aesthetic, and foreign inspiration, and consolidated itself in the 1920s, with the nationality proclaimed by Modernism. Nevertheless, what interests us in Mário de Andrade is a thought-provoking question the author proposes in one of his essays in

³ In the original: “Los aspectos semióticos de la cultura [...] se desarrollan, más bien, según leyes que recuerdan las *leyes de la memoria*, bajo las cuales lo que pasó no es aniquilado ni pasa a la inexistencia, sino que, sufriendo una selección y una compleja codificación, pasa a ser conservado, para, en determinadas condiciones, de nuevo manifestarse”. Authors’ translation.

⁴ This fields are associated to given historical periods, namely: Brazil Colony, Brazil post-independence, and from the World War I.



the 1930s, gathered in the collection *Aspectos da música brasileira* [Aspects of the Brazilian music] (1975).

For the modernist, the Brazilian and all the American music would face a particular drama: not having the joy, unlike music from the European tradition and the great Asian civilizations, of a “development, so to speak, unconscious or, at least, freer of concerns about its national and social affirmation” (Andrade, 1975: 15). This would have led the Brazilian music to have to force its trajectory, in pursuance of identifying itself with the world music movements or even give itself a more functional meaning. It is in this idea of “unconsciousness” that we want to reflect on bossa nova, questioning the memory constructed by some characters (musicians, composers, critics, and biographers), representatives of certain social groups, which would be more elitists and with more refined tastes and would qualify it as an original musical aesthetics of rupture with aesthetic standards taken by such discourse as *traditional*, *ancient*, or *tacky*. We use here some of the Mário de Andrade’s ideas because, in a way, they give support to the debate we highlight: the perception of the bossa nova movement’s significance is understood by different views that considers it sometimes as a rupture, sometimes as a resumption of samba in its modes of inscription.

After almost six decades of its emergence, bossa nova had and still has many of its representations constructed around a logic of novelty and rupture. The idea of a revolution with beauty (Chediak, 2009) was strongly present in the discourses not only of its protagonists but also of music critics, media, and many scholars of the Brazilian popular music. Expressions such as *innovation*, *new directions*, *reformulation* and *difference* are constantly present. For the purposes of this article, considering the reflections we propose, we start from three questions about the construction of this discourse of stylistic rupture:

- a. To what extent and circumstances the prevalent memory of a music movement of effective stylistic rupture was constituted for bossa nova; and how can be understood, in a more suitable and thrifty manner, other meanings and roles of bossa nova in the Brazilian music, beyond the tradition-modernity dichotomy?
- b. To which aesthetic pattern the construction of this music genre and its memory is compatible?
- c. On the contrary, which stylistic elements of continuity present in the bossa nova contradict this perspective of rupture in the history of Brazilian popular music?

To face these questions, this article punctually sought to recover the already stretched debate about the presence of bossa nova in the Brazilian music, to establish relations among bossa nova and musical styles that preceded it, and to seek in the discourses about this music genre the dissonances, conflicts, and contradictions in terms of the memory constructed until now on its revolutionary identity in the Brazilian popular music.

BOSSA NOVA: CONSTRUCTION OF A MEMORY

To better structure the main hypothesis of this article – discussing the dominant memory of bossa nova as a rupture movement – it is worthy to take the notion of Michael Pollak (1989) of memory as a result of negotiations and clashes. For the author, if on one hand memory, in the timeline, can be understood as a phenomenon collectively constructed and “subjected to fluctuations, transformations, constant changes” (Ibid.: 202), on the other hand it tends to fix the perception resulting from such negotiations between individuals and groups memories.

Pollak notes that events, people (characters), and places are the essential elements of the memorialist construction. And the triggering of such elements – whether by experience or by indirect seizure (what the author names indirect experience) – takes place through complex historical-cultural processes in which seems to prevail an organizing selectivity. That is, while not everything is registered or recorded, there are effectively adjustment and re-inscription processes of the constituent elements of the collective memory and of the perceptions it ends up generating.

Memory is in part inherited, and does not refer only to the person physical life. It also suffers fluctuations that are a function of the moment in which memory is articulated, in which it is being expressed. The concerns of the moment constitute a structuring element of memory. This is also true regarding collective memory, although much more organized. (Ibid.: 204)

Memory is essentially multi-temporal, and in this process what matters, in addition to the past, are the intentions of the present, and the pretensions of the future. Being it a socially constructed phenomenon – and, therefore, influenced by the most diverse dimensions and dynamics of social life –, memory results from conflicts and discursive resettlements. Pollak (1989) alludes to the notion of memory frame working, i.e., the ways in which certain events and circumstances are, consciously and unconsciously, architected and designed

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in history and culture, which can be understood as key processes of memory social construction.

Returning to this article's subject, it can be asserted that the expression "bossa nova" went from the condition of adjective, in the end of the 1950s, to a noun situation, for referring to a new musical aesthetic. Even today the dictionaries have the term in its adjective function, being described as "a recent way of doing something, new fashion" (Bossa nova, 2009: 320). That is, before it was perceived as a new way to make music, this was the usual meaning, a reference to something new and different.

What matters to this article, however – rather than discussing the name's origin or who used it for the first time – is to understand how the memory constructed around bossa nova seems to have preponderantly settled the idea that this music genre brought much more changes than continuities. Furthermore, our intention is to demonstrate that it is possible to think of another discourse that explicitly states another memory, little noticed, that accounts for the many permanencies and how the samba tradition was translated into a distinctive musical and poetic text, although in debt to this tradition.

Among the narratives that attempt to understand the bossa nova phenomenon and the meaning of its emergence is the interpretation of Tinhorão (1998: 308), who lists sociocultural and even geographical aspects to comprehend what he considers an avoidance of the young people of Copacabana regarding Brazilian musical traditions:

This isolation of the middle class first generation in the post-war period led to the arising, in Copacabana, of a layer of young people completely disconnected from the popular music tradition of the city, before the absence of that social promiscuity that allowed until then a rich exchange of information between different classes.

Such view of Tinhorão approaches the reflections, perhaps even in a more critical way, of Lorenzo Mammì (1992: 64), who refers to bossa nova as a utopian project where the *botequim* [saloon], which put together Mário Reis and Sinhô, was traded by middle-class apartments on the South side of Rio de Janeiro.

In fact, the abandonment of amateurism was not, for the generation of "Chega de Saudade" a necessary process supported on a solid production structure. It was a field choice. The intimacy so very displayed in the bossa nova shows; the excess of affectionate nicknames (Tonzinho, Joãozinho, Poetinha), so contrasting with the cruel bohemian lifestyle of Noel Rosa; this continuous need of affective

confirmations – all this may evidence a malaise of who was suspended between an old sociability, which was lost, and a new definition, more rational and transparent, that failed to perform. Or perhaps it is the form the generation that created the new style resists in recognizing itself as productive, presenting its most rigorous work as leisure, as the result of a late-night chat.

In the Tinhorão understanding, this divorce, that began with bebop samba, closer to bolero, would reach its peak at the end of the 1950s, when a group of South-side boys “decided to definitely break with the legacy of popular samba, to modify what remained of genuine in it, that is, the rhythm itself” (Ibid.: 309). The author emphasizes what he considers to be the protagonism of João Gilberto in the bossa nova affirmation, who “balanced the rhythm with a combination of compact chords, which would eventually establish a bitonality in relation to the instrumental background” (Ibid.: 312), and that was considered an ideal rhythmic support to the superposition of harmonic schemes of the music from the United States, which they enjoyed so much.

Reports that are part of the dominant memory of bossa nova tend to feed two important perspectives concerning the emergence of this musical aesthetics: its character of innovation and rupture with music standards in vogue, and the heroic narrative of its creators and other protagonists, who had to overcome obstacles and resistance to the new way of making music. Such reports come basically from three types of social actors, who are the constructing and legitimating forces of this memory: texts from critics and journalists, statements of artists who protagonized the genre, and, finally, academic critics who analyzed bossa nova under new scientific perspectives.

Articles published in important magazines of great circulation at that time, such as *O Cruzeiro* and *Manchete*, fed intensely such perspectives. In the case of *Manchete* magazine it becomes even more understandable since the journalist covering this event for the media outlet was Ronaldo Bôscoli⁵ himself, one of the most active protagonists of bossa nova.

In a study dedicated to the way bossa nova was addressed, in its emergence, by the press and specialized critics, Bollos (2010) highlights two momentous events: the first launch of *Canção do amor demais*, by Elizete Cardoso, with João Gilberto on the guitar; and the critics’ reaction to a fundamental concert of Brazilian musicians in the Carnegie Hall, in New York, which generated several controversial articles, but attested the international success of the genre. If bossa nova was, at the time, a recurring theme in important newspapers such as *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *Folha de S. Paulo*, in São Paulo, and *O Globo* and *Jornal do Brasil*, in Rio de Janeiro, the author emphasizes that the most relevant

⁵ Bôscoli became known initially as the one who organized the presentations and all divulgation of bossa nova and, later, as a sort of biographer of the musical genre since he assumed such function when he started to correlate the facts of the movement’s history.

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articles were published in journals such as *O Metropolitano*, *Correio da Manhã*, *O Jornal*, and *Diário de Notícias*.

Bollos (2010) resumes the important critique of José da Veiga Oliveira, published in the *O Estado de S. Paulo* in 1959, in which the journalist examines two albums launched at the time: *Canção do amor demais* and *Modinhas fora de moda*. Veiga Oliveira presents a good discussion on all tracks of *Canção do amor demais* and, in addition to extol the richness of the album repertoire, proposes the question: Would be *Canção do amor demais* popular or classical music? And he sustains his admiration for the richness of the repertoire while commenting each track on the album. Veiga Oliveira identifies *Chega de Saudade* as a samba, and sees in *Luciana* a waltz tempo, “the classic $\frac{3}{4}$ ”. For him *Vida bela* shows itself as an almost folkloric sound, a “beach song with African hues” (Oliveira apud Bollos, 2010: 153).

Perhaps the new journalism novel *Chega de saudade: a história e as histórias da bossa nova* [*Chega de Saudade: history and stories of bossa nova*] (Castro, 1990) is one of the most representative texts of this inaugural and revolutionary perspective of bossa nova. When presenting the backstage of that music genre (“stories”, as in the title), Ruy Castro advocates, without worrying about counterpoints, dissonances, and contradictions, a view of rupture with the aesthetic until then prevalent in the Brazilian popular music, and a certain heroism of a group of young people that, at the end of the 1950s, in Rio de Janeiro, would have changed the course of popular music. Castro tells dozens of stories and testimonials that reinforce such understanding. In his romantic view, the author intensely associates the *new rhythm* to a feeling of originality and inauguration.

Even those who thought Jobim modern because of his “Foi a noite” and “Se todos fossem iguais a você” were shocked. In less than two minutes, these songs became as old as “Ninguém me ama” – relics of the noir romanticism of older men [...] “Chega de saudade”, as later would picturesquely say maestro Rogério Duprat, was ‘a walk over the Bolero age.’ That new way of singing and playing of João Gilbert illuminated everything. (Ibid.: 197)

In all interviews – and, in the early days, this seemed to happen every fifteen minutes –, Bôscoli, Menescal, Lyra, and Tom Jobim himself accused the music “of the past” of being sullen, sorrowful, and pensive, in addition to frankly defeatist. (Ibid.: 240)

This is why we must go back to the emergence moment of bossa nova to realize that, soon after its inaugural success (the song *Chega de saudade* was

identified as a samba-canção in the seal at the center of the first album of João Gilberto), bossa nova started to narrate itself as revolutionary. In other words, the genre created its own autobiography, feeding and reverberating a discourse and a memory in the media with this prevalent view.

In an interview with Almir Chediak, in *Songbook bossa nova* (2009a: 22), Roberto Menescal reiterates this innovative nature, in a very enthusiastic way. For him, it was a new path taken by the Brazilian music towards modernity.

A common goal existed, which was to make better music and more modern lyrics. The harmony was the initial incentive. It was something like this: “Carlinhos Lyra in the (High School) Mallet Salles, who makes music like we do.” There goes everybody after Carlinhos Lyra. “There’s a guy named Bebeto, up there in Tijuca, who plays the bass like this and like that”. We go to Tijuca to meet Bebeto. And the gang was gradually forming.

The evaluation of the singer and composer Sérgio Ricardo follows the same opinion – he is also considered one of the movement’s protagonists. For him, bossa nova brought novelty to the Brazilian music.

Incredible significance. At that time, the most popular songs in the radio were boleros that had nothing to do with our reality. And bossa nova started to emerge from the night, when great musicians began to come together to show their work, considered very advanced for the time. It was almost a marginal work, because the media ignored such music. (Idem, 2009b: 22)

Nara Leão, known as the muse of bossa nova⁶, was even more assertive than Menescal and Sérgio Ricardo. For the singer, bossa nova changed not only the way of making music in Brazil but also the music all over the world.

It was important for me and for humanity because it changed the music of the entire world. We must, firstly, highlight João Gilberto, because he changed everything, everything, everything. João was even called out of tune, and he is not. [...] The change in lyrics was also important. There was a material part of our music in which the lyrics were dramatic, sentimental, excessive. Bossa nova brought that thing of love, smile, blossom, sun, sky, you see? It was something light. (Idem, 2009a: 30)

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in terms of the permanently under construction memory of bossa nova, the figure of the singer and songwriter João Gilberto became iconic and synthetic of this movement. The images

⁶ The first meetings of composers, instrumentalists, and singers of what would become Bossa Nova happened in the always-remembered overnights at Nara Leão’s apartment, on the Atlantic Avenue. If Nara was among the first artists to become involved with bossa nova, she was also one of the first, if not *the* first, to break with the movement. In an interview with the Magazine *Fatos e Fotos* in 1964, when responding to the criticism to her departure of the bossa nova group, Nara wasted no time: “No more bossa nova. No more singing for two or three intellectuals a little apartment song. I want the pure samba that has much more to say, that is the people’s expression [...] I have nothing, nothing at all, to do with a music genre that is not mine, that is not even true” (Castro, 1990: 348).

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created of João Gilberto are very in tune with the bossa nova characteristics. Due to his introspective and, in the view of some, even exotic behavior, João Gilberto became one of the characters that fed more intensely the stories and legends of this music style. Among the perceptions created about the artist was the view that, even though he was born in the countryside Bahia, João was very urban, spoke low, hated agglomerations and big concerts. His acid humor and mysterious air of modernity were unusual for the 1950s Brazilian society. That is, João Gilberto was very bossa nova.

On the back cover of the historical LP *Chega de saudade* (1959), with recordings only of João Gilberto, released by Odeon, Tom Jobim assumes and defends bossa nova, in an inaugural tone, with a text that is considered a reference for the constructed memory of the music genre. Jobim introduces João Gilberto as a “27 year-old bossa nova baiano”:

João Gilberto does not underestimate the sensitivity of the people. He believes there is always room for something new, different, and pure that – although it may not seem at first glance – can become, as they say in specialized language: highly commercial. Because people understand the Love, the notes, the simplicity and sincerity. (Jobim, 1959)

This view of bossa nova as innovative was not restricted only to those who participated in the movement and the media of the time. Even scholars of different fields of human and social sciences also had the same view, some of them considering several degrees of rupture. In her study *Da bossa nova à tropicália* [From bossa nova to tropicália], Santuza Cambraia Naves (2001: 10), even after exposing that this music genre was not a rupture movement⁷, ends up explaining that bossa nova invented something new and unusual:

⁷ For the author, “movement” presupposes a collective project shown through programs, manifests, and performing attitudes. For her, those involved in bossa nova were not “imbued with this fighting spirit, ready to liquidate an outdated aesthetics and to create an entirely new one, based on formal experimentation” (Naves, 2001: 10).

Anyway, in a more individualistic schedule, the musicians linked to Bossa Nova invented an unusual rhythm and harmony for the time, breaking with a kind of sensibility long-ingrained in the Brazilian popular songs and consolidated in the 50s: the one associated to excess [emphasis added by the author], in its various manifestations. A whole tradition of the popular music was rejected by bossa nova.

Closer to the conception of the rupture provoked by the new style, Naves feeds the notion of rupture idealized by part of the bossa nova musicians, who “began to consider the previous repertoire of sambas-canções and *Brazilianized* tangos too much melodramatic and inadequate to the new times” (Ibid.: 12). But, if on the one hand, the author proves herself adept

to the rupture vision, on the other, in the same work, she seems to relativize such perception:

all admit the influence of the more exquisite jazz that is developed in the United States from the 40s – from bebop to cool jazz – on the musicians who intended to recreate the native samba. However, some, more than others, recognize the impact of bolero, especially the one developed in Mexico with Lucho Gatica, who in his LP *Inolvidable* resorted only to two instruments – guitar and bass – for the arrangement, disrupting with the bolero tradition of using large orchestrations. (Ibid.: 21)

Cool jazz, bolero, samba-canção and other styles. The endless debate on the sources of inspiration that eventually gave rise to bossa nova seems to have emerged with the musical style itself. Maestro Júlio Medaglia (1986), in the essential collection of analyses about the movement called *Balanço da bossa e outras bossas*, by Augusto de Campos, despite defending an innovative aura in bossa nova, already recognized decades ago that the subject was controversial. For the maestro, in the case of the true roots of bossa being investigated, there would be verified the importance of a popular, urban, and completely Brazilian music: samba, in particular, the samba of Noel Rosa.

It is the music of Noel. The samba “flute-cavaquinho-acoustic guitar”. The music from Lapa, capital of traditional (“chamber”) samba, as well as Copacabana – Ipanema – Leblon are the strongholds of BN. Is the language without metaphor, spontaneous, direct, and popular of “seu garçom faça o favor de me trazer depressa” [“mister waiter, please bring me quickly” – excerpt from a song of Noel Rosa], which was resumed by Newton Mendonça, Vinícius, Ronaldo Bôscoli and Carlos Lyra. [...] If during the war Noel sang “como que roupa eu vou?” [What will I wear to go?] and “traga uma boa média” [Bring me a nice glass of something], today we say “fotografei você na minha Roleyflex” [I photographed you in my Roleyflex], we sing about boíte, whiskey, and automobiles. That is, nothing more than updated versions of the same humor, the same people, the same bossa. (Medaglia, 1986: 81)

Although Medaglia recognize the debt bossa nova has with samba, in some undefined degree in his archaeology the view of the new genre as rupture still prevails. Similarly, Augusto de Campos himself, poet, and literary critic, also helped to form the discourse of rupture, of experimental music, and of a turning point, which sustains bossa nova until today. His compilation (Campos, 1986), originally released in 1968, with his texts and three articles written by Medaglia,



Brasil Rocha Brito and Gilberto Mendes, is a milestone in the consolidation of the understanding of MPB (Brazilian Popular Music) as a space of *avant-garde* aesthetic creation, in which bossa nova and Tropicália represent two peak moments. Even though Augusto de Campos has mapped old influences of bossa nova, although within samba-canção, the general concept of the new genre is his innovative aspect, rupture.

CRITICISM ON THE DISCOURSE OF A DOMINANT MEMORY OF BOSSA NOVA

Only from the early 90s on some critics started to rethink bossa nova and its position in the rough terrain of Brazilian popular music. Some analyses promoted critic responses to the dominant memory of bossa nova and pointed out a consequent deconstruction of the discourses that posed it as a watershed in the history of the Brazilian popular music. Historian Adalberto Paranhos (1990) criticizes this triumphant tone and clearly calls attention to the cumulative aspect of the construction process of the genre until its qualitative leap:

Bossa Nova did not arise from nowhere. Understanding its emergence, while a musical event, requires an analysis that most certainly will come across a succession of deviations that compose its formation process. Such deviations, often censored at the time in which they emerged, fought their way inside the history of MPB so, dialectically, the accumulation of changes would provide the qualitative leap that would instate the new. (Ibid.: 21)

In his article, Paranhos (1990) lists and discuss some elements of the “old” genres that remain on bossa nova, being taken and reconstructed on the process – and, why not, even redefined. In addition to the concept of *accumulation*, also present in his argumentation is the idea of *continuity* of other genres in the new style created in the late 1950s that, in a dynamic dialectic, combines itself with movements of aesthetic *rupture*: “these elements [of samba-canção], in addition to others, will be redesign by the bossa nova movement to the point of promoting, within the *continuity* of these more daring experiences, a simultaneous *rupture* with the past” (Ibid.: 27, emphasis added by us). Further he states: bossa nova was “modern enough not to bury the past. As much as it broke with the MPB past, it simultaneously deepened some of MPB’s best contributions, resuming them” (Ibid.: 34).

Historian Marco Napolitano also questions the “mythology” that claims bossa nova to be the “ground zero” of the “modern” MPB, for having appeared in

a sort of historical “void”. On the contrary, “the heft of tradition in the Brazilian popular music was considerable and, if some strands of samba-canção (very close, formally, to bolero) were questioned, the urban carioca samba was not fully discarded, as “square” as its rhythm could be” (Napolitano, 2001: 25).

Napolitano considers bossa nova as a kind of “filter” through which several musical traditions, especially those related to samba, were restructured and, in this new cultural and aesthetic constitution, consumed by an expanding urban market, avid for the “modernity” the new genre proposed to have. Hence the success, not only musical but also unfolding in day-to-day expressions, in propaganda, architecture, fashion and, ultimately, in the urban youth who began to claim a symbolic space that featured their new interests. Understanding of the gestation process of bossa nova is important to rethink its memory and the “revolutionary” discourse constructed on it.

Two aspects seem to be necessary in this discussion. One of them, verified by Marcos Napolitano (2007: 70), refers to the need for more meticulous research about the period immediately prior to bossa nova, between the 1940s and the 1950s, with emphasis on the songs and performances of the radio and recording industry⁸. A more detailed understanding of this period, clouded by the own heroic discourse of the musicians and bossa nova songwriters, could dispel some doubts, and demonstrate how the gestation of the genre happened. This could answer the question of how ultimately was constituted the succession of resummptions, re-adaptation, and even of the creation of the new to achieve the formula of João Gilberto’s beat on the guitar and the construction of the dominant discourse about the genre. The second aspect, a more conceptual one, refers to the route suggested in this article, which is to observe the issue from the memory point of view and, above all, from the concept of culture as memory.

As we have seen, if certain discourses of artists, journalists, and academics on bossa nova constructed a dominant memory that legitimized it to a refined aesthetic standard of elitist cultural consumption⁹, there are indications in the very language of bossa nova songs that suggest other meaning possibilities. In addition to the direct observation of the songs, such signs are clearer when we abandon the discourse of modern the genre can represent, and start to incorporate the notions of culture as memory and “translation of tradition” from I. Lotman. Contrary to popular thought, it is possible to observe, besides the differencing elements, the many data that have been translated and adapted from traditions, whether from samba and samba-canção or from north-American jazz.

Among the dissenting perspectives of rupture and resumption of bossa nova regarding the preceding styles, it is correct to observe that the gestation was slow and arisen from samba-canção, in a varied and rough path that crossed the

⁸ Such limit had been already singled out by Alcir Lenharo (1995), which define a sort of historiographical void between Noel Rosa’s death, in 1937, and the emergence of bossa nova. The same line is adopted by the musicologist and historian Theophilo Augusto Pinto (2014) in his research on National Radio musicians during this period.

⁹ To quote a parallel situation, a study on the resumption of samba and choro in Rio de Janeiro, written by M. Herschmann and F. Trotta (2007: 73-74), indicates “three sets of legitimization strategies [of these two genres] that form a complex network of discourses”: internal narratives, promoted by musicians and producers; informative and analytical narratives of journalists, experts, and academics; and, finally, narratives from the public that consumes these music genres.

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accumulation of characteristics, denial of some elements, reduction of musical information, and different genres hybridization (samba, samba-canção, bolero, jazz, and impressionist music). These processes always had in view the creation of a modern samba according to a specific pattern of aesthetical consumption of an urban middle class on the rise. The *modernization* of the samba was already embodied in samba-canção, a half-year style of samba¹⁰, with a less syncopated rhythm and emphasis on melody and harmony, therefore distinguished of the corporeal-rhythmic sensuality of traditional samba. Just to be didactic (since culture does not establish itself on teleological linearity), it is possible to think of a process, albeit tortuous and with setbacks and parallelisms, of ethnic and moral cleansing of the samba – with the cooling of its rhythmic intensity and emphasis on melody and harmony; and of its social reframing, to please an audience that favored these musical aspects as positive criteria to evaluate the Brazilian music. Roughly speaking, the passion should supplant the rhythmical appeals to the body:

¹⁰ “Half-year style of samba” refers to a slower and more introspective samba. “Half-year” means a period of the year far from the Carnival, which in Brazil takes place in February.

the traditional samba-canção also abdicates, as would do bossa nova, of this kind of [rhythmic] appeal to the listener. The reason is surely in the modernization of popular music, pursued by samba-canção since its birth, in a process that flows to bossa nova to change its level with João [Gilberto]. The vector of this modernization was always the harmonic-melodic development, suitable both to models of classical and North American music as to the passional investments of bolero. (Garcia, 1999: 40, emphasis on the original)

And even in the samba-canção of the 1950s there were some works that already flirted with jazz, especially those written by Johnny Alf and João Donato or sung by Dick Farney and Lucio Alves. In these modern sambas-canções, that already attracted the attention of the university middle-class youth of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the links with the North American genre were evidenced in the song structure: in the use of dissonant chords, in the way of playing piano by anticipating the chords' attacks and in singing like Frank Sinatra or Bing Crosby, for example.

The study by Walter Garcia (1999) demonstrates, with wide examples analysis, how the famous beat of João Gilberto on the guitar, a central aesthetic characteristic of bossa nova and its *innovative* brand, owes its rhythmic structure to basic elements of samba and samba-canção. On one side, the bordão (bass string played with the thumb of the right hand) is a translation of the bass drum beat in samba percussion, but distinctively the syncope of samba since is regularly marked in binary bars rhythm, as it was already done in

samba-canção, less syncopated and more melodic gender, and in the *modern* samba-canção, inspired by jazz. On the other side, a rhythmic irregularity in the chords progression done through the three fingers (index, middle, and ring fingers) of the right hand (respecting the syncopated and rhythmic pattern of samba), adapting to the guitar the basic beat of the tambourine in samba (popularly called of *telecoteco*) mixed with also irregular beats from jazz¹¹. Such a complex and subtle combination reduced drastically the exaggerations of samba, which helped the music to be heard and consumed by certain social groups interested in *modernization*, but kept latent its inner rhythmic structure. The combination of regularity in the *bordão* and irregular chords brought from the tambourine joined the dissonant chord and the anticipated beats to the strong tempos of them, producing a distinctive rhythmic, inaugurated by João Gilberto and imitated by many musicians at the time and later. However, we reiterate, such beat was created from the traditions of Brazilian samba and samba-canção, and jazz.

If the “beat of Bossa Nova enables the Brazilian middle-class to have a *tradition* in the popular music” (Garcia, 1999: 78)¹², such music style becomes endowed with legitimizing aspects as is chosen and continued in several symbolic realms of society: the presence of the beat in the songs of the second phase of bossa nova (the militant phase), the success of João Gilberto, the international fame of the genre, the defense of the “evolutionary line” made by Caetano Veloso from bossa nova and endorsed by critics as Augusto de Campos, the presence of the term “bossa nova” in various situations that indicate *novelty* and *modernity* (advertising is one example) etc. There are several manifestations and narratives that corroborate a discourse attentive to the modernization and to a specific urban and literate aesthetic consumption, for which there was no kind of music that gave a convincing answer.

However, in addition to the rhythmic links between bossa nova and samba, the connection of the bossa nova artists with the past is marked by the rereading of old classics. Sambas of the 30s and 40s were rearranged by João Gilberto’s guitar and gained thereby new listeners and fans. This was the case with songs written by Dorival Caymmi (*Rosa morena, Samba da minha terra*), Ary Barroso (*Morena boca de ouro, É luxo só*), Geraldo Pereira (*Bolinha de papel*), among others. João’s interpretation of this pieces both reinforces the proximity of the guitarist with the Brazilian popular music tradition as translates the sambas into bossa nova.

In the lyrics, it is also possible to observe this duality among some *modern* forms and the traditions of samba and samba-canção. On one hand, bossa nova songs have lyrics more organized by grammatical rules, even when they approach

¹¹ On the links between bossa nova and jazz, there is the classic study of Brasil Rocha Brito (1986).

¹² Marcos Napolitano (2001: 24) is more enlightening: “The upper strata of the middle classes, considered in their set, wealthier, more informed and circulating in the university realm, started to see the popular music as a ‘respectable’ space for creation, expression, and communication”.

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colloquialism; some use metalanguage between lyrics and song, as in the classic *Samba de uma nota só*, by Tom Jobim and Newton Mendonça; others use terms that are unusual in the sambas of the period (such as Rolleiflex – a professional line of cameras produced by the German company Franke & Heidecke – in *Desafinado*, Jobim and N. Mendonça). As sentenced Julio Medaglia (1986: 72), to prove the connection of this music style with wealthy and literate sectors of society, distinct of the humble social background of the samba composers, “the term ‘cabrocha [lass]’ is replaced by ‘garota [girl]’, ‘shake’ [requebrado] by ‘swing’ [balanço] and, sometimes, ‘mulata’ [mulatto] is soften to ‘morena’ [brown/black girl]”¹³.

¹³ Considering the social use of language, the terms *cabrocha*, *mulata* and *requebrado* are more popular, referring to the origins of samba in the slums and favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and to its humbler population. On the other hand, the terms *garota*, *morena* and *balanço* are part of a more elitist lexicon, revealing the origin of bossa nova – the middle class of Rio.

Another change was the construction of narratives in which love starts to be seen in a lighter, more positive, and sunnier way. Unlike the typical *sour-grape* lyrics of sambas-canção and boleros, in which love always was described through pain, fracture, melancholy, and lack of correspondence by the loved one, some bossa nova songs invest in loves, so to speak, better resolved. In *Chega de saudade*, by Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, despite the melancholic beginning and the distance of the beloved, the composer plans future amorous acts that will occur when they meet again. Other pieces are full of affection and gentleness when dealing with passion, flirting, or dating, as in *Garota de Ipanema* [The girl from Ipanema], by Vinicius and Jobim, *Lobo bobo*, by Carlos Lyra and Ronaldo Bôscoli, *Coisa mais linda*, by Vinicius and Lyra, *Ela é carioca* [She is a carioca], by Jobim and Vinicius, among others.

However, as much as the bossa nova artists had altered the way of narrating love, even outlining criticism to the melodramatic sambas-canções, many songwriters kept in the lyrics the tradition of melancholy raptures, and love as sadness and pain. Some examples are in *Samba em prelúdio*, by Vinicius and Baden Powell (“E eu sem você / sou só desamor / um barco sem mar / um campo sem flor / Tristeza que vai tristeza que vem / Sem você meu amor eu não sou ninguém ¹⁴”), *Insensatez*, by Jobim and Vinicius (“A insensatez que você fez / Coração mais sem cuidado / Fez chorar de dor / O seu amor / Um amor tão delicado ¹⁵”), *Outra vez*, by Tom Jobim (“Tudo agora é só tristeza / Traz saudade de você / Outra vez sem você / Outra vez sem amor ¹⁶”), sung in a slurred and tearful manner.

Finally, the way of singing low, one of the marks of bossa nova according to this dominant memory, is also not a novelty or exclusivity. It is true that many bolero singers, for example, exaggerated the vocal intensity to create the sense of pain and melancholy. However, in the 1930s it was already possible to listen to the discreet and charming Marco Reis with his soft voice, between speech and singing, who, when recording with the new electric system, “realized that, with the advent of microphone, it was no longer necessary to appeal to a strong, resounding voice” (Paranhos, 1990: 22).

¹⁴ “And me without you / I am only discontent / a boat with no blue / a field without scent / Sadness that goes sorrow that comes / Without you my love I am no one” (Our translation).

¹⁵ “Your insensibility / such a heart so wasteful / made cry out of throe / the one you love / such a love so delightful” (Our translation).

¹⁶ “All is now only sorrow / makes me long for you / once again without you / once again without love” (Our translation).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Paul Ricoeur (2004: 494) uses the notion of “happy memory” to indicate that the memory is rather a cognitive object of faithfulness. “Faithfulness to the past is not a given, but a wish”. For the French thinker, the originality of this faithfulness wish is that it is not of an action “but in a representation taken up again in a series of speech acts constituting the declarative dimension of memory” (Ibid.: 494). Therefore, the “happy memory” emerges, shaped in the comfort, in the desire for memorialist drive, and in the pretension fed by the passing of time, whose statements arrange itself based on the pleasure and repetition of events or, as states the author, the “happy memory” embodies an “aporia that is constituted by the present representation of an absent thing marked with the seal of anteriority” (Ibid.: 494).

Such perception seems to contribute to understand, at the very least, the senses that composed the dominant memory of bossa nova in the last decades. The faithfulness to the view of bossa nova as an inaugural and rupture movement is not fully confirmed as a data. We sought to prove this with the identification of various traits of resumption and rupture of stylistic paths historically present in the Brazilian music, as we indicated, although quickly and without exhausting the many examples. The concepts of culture as memory and “translation of tradition”, extracted from the culture semiotics of I. Lotman, unfold a more dynamic understanding of culture and memory and, in the process, demonstrate how cultural processes occur in a decentralized manner and emphasize this or that element to be later rearranged. Memory is constructed, then, in overlapping, flexible, and permeable layers, for some elements to reappear, worked accordingly to new demands, without being strictly rejected.

We seek to demonstrate that the dominant memory of bossa nova was as a wish, a claim, a framed and appeased memory. It was, however, essentially a memory that, by appeasing, legitimized certain aesthetic standards built socially and culturally and, at the same time, *forgot* or disparaged the prior production, pejoratively treating it as *old* or *outdated*. ■

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