Debatable Tastes! Rethinking Hierarchical Distinctions in Brazilian Music

JOÃO FREIRE FILHO AND MICAEL HERSCHMANN

Introduction

Contrary to the predictions of the traditionalists, the dynamic of culture and the present-day economy, far from failing to exclude ‘popular cultural expressions’, have actually facilitated their global expansion. Canclini (1997) notes the fundamental reasons for this growth: (a) the impossibility of incorporating the entire population into urban industrial production; (b) the market’s need to include traditional symbolic goods within the channels of the media as a way of incorporating the mass public; (c) certain political sectors’ interest in incorporating folklore, with the aim of strengthening their hegemony and legitimacy; and (d) the persistence of the popular sectors of society in ensuring the continuity of their cultural output.

The emergence and expansion of a culture of ‘popular origin’, which developed in a different way from those idealized by the modern artistic and intellectual vanguards, gave rise throughout the twentieth century to impassioned debates in Brazil, particularly in the area of music. What is evident in the comments of a significant number of critics, historians and ‘specialists’ is a growing attempt to separate the virtuous domain of the popular from the corrupted domain of the popularesque (or the ‘false popular’, irredeemable from the political and aesthetic point of view). In this essay, we will attempt to show that the demarcation and the policing of this (moveable) boundary are founded in imaginary criteria of purity and in the questionable concept of ‘authenticity’, whose heuristic value (though not its normative and market status) seems destined to become submerged in the complexity of the contemporary cultural dynamic. We also aim to emphasize, in the harsh condemnation of ‘cultural trash’, the latent connection between disgust and the objects of social antagonisms—a link that is, frequently, only thinly disguised by the feigned disinterest and lack of an explicitly stated agenda by the discourse in question.

The Origins of the Division between Popular and Popularesque in Brazil

As far as it has been possible to determine, there is no reference to the use of the qualifier popularesque prior to the work of Ma´rio de Andrade. This makes sense: the nationalist musical movement of the 1920s and 1930s, with Mário at its head, gave rise to rather more systematic reflections by the literary intelligentsia on the
emergent urban-industrial popular culture, a world to which the concept of *popularesque* is intimately linked. The most likely scenario is that the author of *Macunaíma* was inspired by the Italian *popolaresco* or its Spanish derivative *populachero*. Both adjectives refer to artefacts and practices which belong to or which are suitable for the entertainment of the *popolaccio/populacho*, that is, ‘the lowest level of society, or the social rejects’, ‘the defective and chaotic population’.

A piano instructor and music historian at the São Paulo Conservatory of Drama and Music, as well as an amateur ethnologist and learned composer, Mário, in his copious writings on musicology, classified as ‘*popularesques*’ those songs linked to the phonographic industry—the *maxixes* [a refined dance tune in 2/4 time which emerged in the late nineteenth century] of Ernesto Nazaré, Marcelo Tupinambá and Chiquinha Gonzaga, the carnival *marchinhas* [up-tempo, often humorous tunes], the urban (or ‘scored’) sambas of Donga, Sinhô and Noel Rosa, the *sertanejo* [Brazilian ‘country’ music] compositions of Catulo da Paixão Cearense (Andrade, 1987/1942, p. 193). They were songs produced ‘in the popular vein’ but shaped by the ‘harmful influence’ of urban society and international fads, warns the author in ‘Popular Music and Song in Brazil’ (1936), republished in his *Ensaio sobre a música brasileira* (Andrade, 1962).

In the lecture entitled ‘Popular and Erudite Music’, presented at the Art and Culture Society in 1934, Mário had already—emphatically—separated out genuine Brazilian music from urban *popularesque* music, ‘sub-music, fodder for radio and records, a mere tool for courtships and commercial interests, sustaining factories, businesses and singers, and appealing to the shallow sensuality of a bewitched public’ (in Mariz, 1983, p. 43). The speaker admitted that—on occasion—‘pretty or technically notable elements’ emerged within the *popularesque* sphere; still, 90% of this output was ‘dreary, plagiarized, false’, disposable by nature: ‘It is a kind of art for easy consumption, as necessary and as consumable as milk, vegetables, perfumes and shoes … . The work is forgotten and substituted by another. And as the artist only exists as a function of the work he or she has created, he or she is also used, used up and immediately forgotten and substituted by another’ (ibid.).

Five years later, in the article ‘Popular Music’ (1963/1939), Mário went on the attack again against the *popularesque* repertoire. The pretext was the contest for the launch of that year’s carnival songs. It was not so much the openness of the selection process that bothered him: even if the whole population of Rio de Janeiro voted freely, ‘this wouldn’t stop what was good being sacrificed to the worst’, since ‘the taste of the masses is a frequently inexplicable element and is in no way indicative of discriminate selection’ (p. 279). Mário noted, with a certain disquiet, the crowds of ‘members of the masses’ who, during those January days, hung around the doorways of music stores or commercial radio stations. They were ‘people of the people’ (an excellent term!) who, although burdened with daily chores, were in thrall to the—‘almost essential’—need to ‘religiously’ memorize in full the lyrics of the new sambas and *marchinhas*. Lyrics which were ‘often difficult to excuse’, compositions which ‘made a boastful show’ out of ‘defects’: ‘One must always be saddened by this somewhat unpleasant symptom, faced with the vulgarity or purely superficial sensuality of the words of certain carnival compositions’ (pp. 279–280).

The original sin of the new crop of sambas, *marchinhas* and *frevos* [upbeat
carnival music originating from the Northeast of Brazil] was to have been created by individuals who, ‘without being truly popular, lacking any real “folkloric” validity, were exposed to all the cultural forces and characteristics of the city, without having the slightest musical or poetic education’. The samba of the contests was not, therefore, ‘a native, and much less, an instinctive product’. It could never be confused with the ‘true’ samba of the favelas—which, even when it was not ‘strictly beautiful’, conserved an unarguable folkloric value (p. 280). For the carnival songs—‘false like the songs of American movies, the imported Argentine tangos or mediocre Portuguese-style fados’ (p. 281)—there remained, once more, the unfortunate label of ‘sub-music’, defined exactly in the terms of the lecture given in the Sociedade de Cultura Artística.

As the above paragraphs show, in the philosophy of Mário de Andrade, popularesque compositions occupied an uncomfortable intermediary zone: they did not possess the elevated aesthetic credentials of erudite art (intrinsically individualist, disinterested), or the dignity, authenticity, or the usefulness in documenting and building a Brazilian national identity contained in the popular, a synonym for art that was committed, ritualistic, social and folkloric (essentially of rural or sertanejo extraction); a synonym also for spontaneous cultural expressions that came up directly through the ‘people themselves’, uncontaminated by commercial interests or by questions of copyright.

It is more or less clear that Mário contemplated the popular muse through the romantic and nationalistic lens of the nineteenth century. The apologetic discourse of the intelligentsia at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries did not consider socioeconomic factors when they came to set the boundaries of the popular. Eventually, the idea of the ‘people’ would encompass the whole population of a country. In the majority of cases, the term was more restrictive—it referred exclusively to uneducated people, as in the distinction made by the German poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder between the Kultur der Gelehrten (‘culture of the educated’) and the Kultur des Volkes (‘culture of the people’). At times, in order that the concept could do justice to expressing the glory of the past, the purity of tradition and the national spirit, it was necessary to be even more selective: peasants stood out, in this context, as ‘the people’ par excellence: they lived close to nature, they were less influenced by alien ways of life and they had preserved primitive customs for longer than anyone else.

On defining the ‘people’ as the founding stone of the nation, Herder was careful to distinguish it from the ‘common herd’, the ‘populacho’. With regard to popular songs, he stated: ‘The song of the people need not come from the mob and be sung by the mob; the people are not the rabble of the street, who never sing nor compose, but who shout and mutilate the true songs of the people’ (in Burke, 1989, p. 49; Ortiz, 1989, p. 84).

At the same time as it had rendered homage to the folk—described in terms of everything that those who had ‘discovered’ them (the majority of them from the upper classes) were not (or believed they were not): simple, good, natural, irrational, instinctive, rooted in tradition and region, lacking all sense of individuality (Burke, 1989, p. 37)—the reductionist concept of popular culture engendered in the romantic era practically excluded the (lack of) culture of the ignoble savage who lived it up and made his living in the ‘big city’, including the versatile fraternity of itinerant street artists (idem, pp. 116–136).
Frightened by the anarchic-democratic presence of the urban masses ('the uneducated people') in the physical space (carnivals, strikes) and in the virtual space (gramophones, radios) of the city, the ideologues of musical modernism also denied a whole emerging popular cultural world which expressed 'the contemporary world in the very throes of an unfinished process, but one not easily reducible to the academic idealizations of a retrospective or prospective nature', in favour of the aesthetization of the crude raw material of popular culture, which resulted in a 'language which reconciled the country in relation to the horizontality of its terrain and the verticality of its class structure (transporting rustic culture to the universalized level of (bourgeois) culture, and giving bourgeois musical production a social base which it was lacking)' (Wisnik, 1983, pp. 131, 148).

To summarize, the conceptual range of the term popularesque encompassed, in the pioneering version of Máximo de Andrade, any kind of music which attempted to pass as genuinely popular: (a) songs of zero aesthetic value, bereft of any artistic flourish and perpetrated by people without any talent or formal musical education; (b) moderately accomplished songs, written by individuals with formal training or by proud autodidacts such as Catulo da Paixão Cearense.  

It is certainly true that, at times, the scholar found himself in a fix when it came to applying, in practice, his rigorous criteria of purity. In the Compendio de historia da música (1929), for example, Catulo is defined as the inventor of 'some of the most admirable creations of popular poetic song' (p. 176). Thirteen years later, in the Pequena historia da música (1987/1942), the composer was mentioned as no less than the inventor of 'some of the most admirable creations of popularesque poetic song' (p. 193).

On other occasions, Máximo further proclaimed the necessity of differentiating between the commercial popularesque genre and—so to speak—the well-meaning popularesque genre. This distinction was made clearer, recently, with the publication of the fertile correspondence between the São Paulo writer and the poet Manuel Bandeira ('Manu'). In this correspondence, we witness, rather surprisingly, Máximo's preoccupation with emphasizing the points of contact between his own poetic work and that of Catulo da Paixão Cearense, both of them being engaged with the worthy tasks of disseminating national culture and stylizing popular language.  

The moral of the story: we should not let ourselves be seduced by the old romantic myth of a pure and unchanging popular tradition, which is coherent and autonomous and frozen, reptile-like in the 'tranquillity of a backwater of history' (Certeau, 1995/1970, p. 57)—autism as a synonym for authenticity. One must always be alert to the interactions, the reciprocal contaminations between popular and erudite, countryside and city, in a cultural dynamic made up of permanence and change, resistance and exchange, which, as we will shortly see, became even more complex with the growth of mass communication.

**The Growth of a Popular Market**

Since 1960, with the growth of a cultural industry and a home-grown market of symbolic goods, the adjective popularesque began to crop up with greater regularity on the music pages of the major papers and in the studies undertaken by journalists and historians. The intense debate about popular/popularesque, during
this period, signalled the development of a hierarchy within the recording industry into three levels. On the whole, there was an elevation of the cultured popular, so to speak, of MPB (Música Popular Brasileira), a label which appeared around 1965 and which did not, as it would be reasonable to suppose, encompass the whole historical and stylistic range of ‘Brazilian popular music’ but referred strictly to a more refined style of music—lyrics of ‘literary craftsmanship’ (sometimes with strong political themes), inventive melodies and harmonies—absorbed by young university students based in Rio de Janeiro, almost all of them with links to leftwing or vanguard groups, who became noticeable because of the television music festivals (Napolitano, 2002, pp. 62–69). There was equal reverence for the genuinely popular, which was symbolized, for example, by the samba-canção (or mid-year samba) [i.e. in contrast with Carnival sambas], a musical sub-genre which developed around 1928 (based on the experiments of semi-classically trained, or at least musically competent, instrumentalists) and was rediscovered and revalorized by Rio intellectuals in the mid-1970s (Borges, 1982; Tinhoraó, 1997/1966, pp. 51–55). Finally, there was a throwing up of hands at the horrendous glory of the popularesque or tacky performers and composers, as adored by the mass public, because they were despised by musical critics and researchers.

In a confrontation marked by insults, envy and mutual resentment, we have, schematically, on one side, the high-handed rejection by those with a higher level of formal education of the ‘alienating’ or ‘cheap emotions’ of tacky songs; and on the other, the resistance, within the field of production and consumption of the popularesque, to the aesthetic and political concerns and self-proclaimed virtues of the ‘elite artists’, of the ‘intellectuals’ or ‘pseudo-intellectuals’. Both sides took refuge, with gleeful frequency, in the questionable argument of authenticity to legitimize their positions. The critics emphasized the purely commercial impulse of the record companies and creators (or ‘creations’, ‘constructions’), counterposing it to the purity of intention of the ‘roots’ genres or the disinterested or politically committed expression of ‘authentic artists’. On the other hand, the humiliated and offended performers proclaimed their, shall we say, emotional authenticity, contrasting it with the coolness and restrictively cerebral nature of their attackers— who were invariably much distanced from the social and emotional life of the people (Soriano and Campos, 1977, 11).

In the second half of the 1990s, the dispute over the borders of taste acquired a dramatic tension with few parallels. It was all the fault—according to accusations in the review sections of the São Paulo and Rio press—of the Plano Real (Real Plan), implemented in July 1994. The Plan was launched with the promise of providing the country with a gateway to the developed world and, as the papers saw it, the set of measures aimed at economic stabilization, by liberating those on low incomes from inflationary taxes, had ended up, after all, helping to consolidate (bad) popular taste in the media. ‘A little more palm oil and macumba for the tourist over in Bahia, a little more feijoada and fundo do quintal [the pagode style of samba] in the Southeast, and that Tex-Mexicanisation of the inland country regions’, as the journalist Marcos Augusto Gonçalves mapped it out in a special edition of the Mais! section of the Folha de S. Paulo (‘The Culture of the emerging masses’, 12 April 1998, p. 4). On a menu consisting of the indigestible and ‘strictly kitsch’, the sentimental intoxication of the neo-sertanejos, the
pagodeiros and Mexican soap operas (‘São Paulo’) were added to the ‘pornographic lyrics’ and suggestive, swaying buttocks of axé-music (‘Bahia’).

Direct from Bahia, the Caymmi family [a famous Brazilian musical family, doyens of Bahian MPB], was ready to sound the general alarm: ‘Brazil is a musical graveyard these days. That Jamaican stuff, that sound and that long hair, has nothing to do with us. The hero of Bahia and Maranhão is Bob Marley. Loads of people are calling their son Marley’, Dori Caymmi complained. According to him, axé-music was ‘rubbish, a backward step of 100 years in terms of Brazilian music …. It’s not just the music. The lyrics are dire’ (Bundas, 16 November 1999, p. 8). His father, Dorival Caymmi, struck the same note: ‘What is being produced in Bahia is not really Brazilian music. It’s nothing more than a catchy chorus, poetry has been substituted for easily imitated sounds. That music says nothing to me and I refuse to even utter the English name used to describe it’ (in Guerreiro, 2000, p. 136).

Honourable mention of the genuine (and distant) popular gained ground as a frequently used expedient in the cultural media across the most diverse editorial leanings. It was certainly a shrewd strategy: as well as emphasizing the free fall in the quality of post-folkloric popular expression within a increasingly powerful cultural industry, it served as an alibi against possible accusations of elitism that could be provoked by an attack on the musical din of the Brazil of the Real in the name, alone, of the young sound of the urban middle class or of classical music.

It would not have been so bad if the popularesque invasion had been restricted to the charts or the big music venues of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. But the ‘neo-kitsch’ performers did not only benefit from their celebrity status, fêted as national and Latin American sex symbols and invited to parade down the catwalks of important fashion weeks (the music industry functioning, once again, as a rare channel of social mobility for black people), they also insisted on sullying Brazil’s name ‘abroad’ (read Europe)—whether in the show organized by TV Globo in Paris, during the 1998 World Cup, or (the cheek of it!) at the Montreux Festival, in Switzerland.

Variously tinkered with, sublimated and dislocated, the popular vs. popularesque paradigm remained a driving force behind the debates that ran in the major newspapers of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The discussion around the bastardization of the worthy and traditional popular ensnared in the meshes of the television and recording industry acted, frequently, as a critical alibi for concealing age-old fears and disgust at the presence of the Invader: ‘Why is it that the humble sertanejo singer of “Romaria” (Pilgrimage) is more palatable than those who state ‘É o amor’ (It’s Love) (a hit by the new country duo Zezé di Camargo e Luciano)? Is it not because the former “knows his place”, quietly hidden away in the middle of nowhere, while the latter have seized what we thought belonged by rights to the realm of our “good taste”?’ challenged Bia Abramó, quite rightly, in the Folha de S. Paulo (‘Maria Bethânia insults “good taste”’, Ilustrada, 12 June 1999, p. 5).

Curiously, when it came to drawing up the indisputable and fateful distinction between the wholesome popular and the contemptible popularesque, the cultural media frequently resorted to the same repertory of images, warnings and adjectives which, at a point in the past, had been applied to the (now) genuine popular. In this vindicating refrain, artists and cultural artefacts formerly execrated as ‘cheap and cheerful’, ‘vulgar’, ‘mercenary’… and of, course, ‘popu-
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In the realm of cultural critique, "laresque", were redeemed and celebrated as the quintessence of congenial Brazilian talent and creativity. It was a redemptive revisionism whose primary inspiration seemed to be merely effecting contrast, the object being to stress even further the poverty of present-day cultural life.

There is no mileage in arguing in favour of a reversal of the hierarchy between high and low culture, between popular and popularesque or countless other versions of an absolute and Manichean contrast which impedes a more considered reflection, treating complex realities as if they were archetypes. It is more profitable to examine the binary logic through which such all-inclusive descriptive categories are organized: to examine how these oppositions are supported, with great frequency, in the problematic argument of authenticity. Authenticity has been mistakenly treated as a 'natural' given, self-evident, unarguable and not as a 'cultural construct' which involves diverse actors and interests (Vianna, 1995; Peterson, 1997). It is a theoretical concept which not only animates ethereal intellectual disputes but also answers to the financial interests of the recording industry, which finds, in the discourse of authenticity, an extremely important ally in the marketing of successive forms of black popular culture for white audiences (Gilroy, 2001, pp. 204–205).

As Hermano Vianna observes in O mistério do samba (1995), 'authenticity' is always born of 'impurity' and not the contrary (even if, at a later point, 'authenticity' ends up passing itself off as being original or, at least, closer to 'roots'). The first samba, folkloric in nature, from Bahia, mixed diverse musical expressions of the nineteenth century, then it was influenced by the maxixe, and later re-created by the composers of the Estácio favela of Rio de Janeiro; this modification of the samba, however, came to be seen as the true samba: 'The samba of the favelas, recently invented, has come to be seen as the purest rhythm, uncontaminated by alien influences, which must be preserved (removing any possibility of more obvious change) with the aim of also preserving the “soul” of Brazil. This makes the myth of its “discovery” necessary, as if the samba of the favelas was always there, ready, waiting for the rest of Brazil to go and listen to it so that, as if in a blinding flash, their deepest roots would be revealed' (pp. 152–153).

What seems to irritate the illustrious about popularesque musical styles is less the growing commercial watering down of the genuine popular due to the transforming effects of the global economy and cultural shifts, than the face-to-face confrontation with what, in these styles, more clearly refers back to popular origins. In other words, the only thing worse than the devastating and standardizing power of the globalized cultural industries is their power to incorporate and disseminate unseemly regional cultural forms.

The best example of this is Bahian pagode. The first group of this genre to explode nationally onto the radio programmes and music venues was Gera Samba, with the CD É o Tchan! (1995), released by Polygram. At this stage, the quintet had already been going for 13 years and had brought out three independent CDs. What were the roots of their success? First, the moves of the callipygian Carla Perez, who re-created the choreography of the dances created collectively in the streets and popular festivals of Salvador (Goli, 2000, pp. 255–257). Delighted or outraged, television viewers from the rest of the country witnessed a truly unusual form of dancing samba: 'As well as the traditional difference between samba based on the movement of the feet (Rio) and the
“bottom” or hip-swinging samba (Bahia)—which comes from the difference between refined samba and *samba de roda* (samba danced in a circle)—one can see in Rio a more controlled, slender and sinuous posture, whilst in Salvador the important thing is the wiggle, the sway and the thrusting of the waist’, explains Sansone (1997, p. 234). The author puts forward the plausible hypothesis that this may be the reason there was no mutual seduction between this raw samba and Bahia’s intellectuals, as occurred with the samba of Rio de Janeiro.

In addition, the *double-entendre* lyrics of *Gera Samba* (now *É o Tchan!*), typical of the *tradition of forró* [popular accordion-based music of the North of Brazil], are far removed from the genteel style, the striving for an elegant sound, the ‘beautiful Portuguese’ of the *samba-canção* of Cartola, Nelson Cavaquinho, Guilherme de Brito and Carlos Cachaça. The slower rhythm and use of a more elevated poetic diction reflected a desire to rise in *social and cultural status*. ‘It would be good to go to the South Zone of Rio [the middle-class part of the city]’, declared Cartola, in 1975. ‘My style is different now, I don’t make music for the neighbourhood square any more, but for the musical salon, slower all the time. I think it’s more beautiful’ (in Borges, 1982, p. 36).

Obviously we are not trying to suggest, in the preceding paragraphs, that Bahian *pagode* is, in some way, more *authentic* that the *samba-canção* of Rio de Janeiro, since we have already explained our reservations in relation to the use of this slippery concept. The aim of this very short genealogy of Bahian *pagode* was to stress that it is necessary to be aware of the multiple strands of contemporary musical phenomena, before summarily discarding them as mere inventions of eroticized and sensationalist media culture.

**The Anti-funk Hysteria of the 1990s**

In the second half of the 1990s *axé* and *pagode* artists gradually stopped making such a big impact on the charts. The specialist critics, however, did not have time to celebrate. In the blink of an eye, new barbarians invaded radio and television studios. Brazil’s most recent territorial ‘good taste’ dispute was incited by the funk movement of Rio de Janeiro. In the media, the image of the *funkeiros* was frequently linked to gangs and criminal organizations, reports of anonymous sexual liaisons at dances, alienation, bad taste, pornography and machismo in dances, lyrics and slang.

The debate put the following question on the agenda: to what extent are young people being ‘corrupted’ or ‘led astray’ by funk? From the mid-1990s the state proved intent on banning what were known as ‘community dances’ (which took place free of charge in sports centres at the outskirts of the city and in *favelas*). At weekends, these dances were already bringing together more than 5000 young people from all sectors of society to enjoy themselves, almost always in a peaceful fashion. In fact, it was always notable how committed the community was to ensure the well-being of the party-goers, and how hospitable an attitude it adopted. During a period of intense fear of urban violence, the warm reception of the organizers and their attention to questions of security made this kind of dance the big hit of several summers.

Those who clamour for the dances to be closed down waiver between the argument that funk, as well as creating a noisy disturbance in the neighbourhood, is a threat to the young party-goers from ‘good families’ (read middle
class), since the dances give rise to fights between groups of youths and indiscriminate familiarity with 'locals' involved in drug-trafficking. Rivalry between groups of youths is only one ingredient at the dances, in which enjoyment, humour and eroticism play an equal part. The majority of the promoters and organizers of the dances—with the exception of a few who organize the so-called fight dances or 'corridor dances'—sought to channel this rivalry creatively, organizing what were called *galera* (crew) festivals at which competitions took place between the groups who frequented the parties. Furthermore, this relationship between funk and this kind of criminal organization, embedded in the daily life of Rio's pockets of poverty long before the emergence of funk as a local cultural expression, barely exists or is, in general, overstated. What does exist is a relative identification by these youths with the acts of virility and rebelliousness made possible through the criminal way of life and this was expressed in certain raps that narrated the day-to-day life of the community.

The wave of conservatism, of anti-funk hysteria, sweeps back and forth over the media scene but, to the despair of conservative sectors of the middle class, fails to stop the national popularization of funk and its consolidation within the entertainment industry. The spokespersons for the demonization of funk have concentrated lately on the question of eroticism: what is most roundly condemned today is the supposedly exaggerated eroticism of the dances, and the pejorative treatment dealt out to women in certain tracks. Now, eroticism and dodgy humour, whether the middle class likes it or not, is part of street culture and style. Funk, like other expressions of popular culture, is not politically correct and never was. To the despair of the feminist guard, young women coexist playfully with tracks such as 'Um tapinha não dói' (A Little Slap Doesn't Hurt), 'Éguinha pocoto' (My Little Trotting Mare) and others regarded as offensive to women. Stories of adolescents who supposedly become pregnant dancing at these events appear regularly. This kind of argument only makes sense to those who are ignorant of the realities of the outskirts of the city and the *favelas* of Brazil. How many young girls from these social sectors get pregnant after only the second or third menstruation of their lives? Are we to believe they are all *funkeiras*? How many social prejudices are hidden by the label 'funkeiro'? What about developing an intensive educational programme with these young people?

An article by the poet and literary critic Affonso Romano de Sant'anna is fairly characteristic of the kind of criticism that popular cultural expressions suffer in Brazil. The author begins by underlining his authority to discuss, within a literary supplement, the 'ethical and aesthetic anomie' driven by funk—after all, had he not written, some years ago, the (structuralist-influenced) *Música popular e moderna poesia brasileira*? His attacks on the rhythm of the day were initially based on two concerns. Firstly he analysed (or rather, quoted) two obscene lyrics 'which bragged on the radio and television, and to which adolescents and even children dance' (in fact, the two songs in question received restricted coverage in the mainstream media). Second, he referred to the revelation by Rio's Health Minister of the high number of cases of pregnancy and AIDS contracted during the 'hip grinding dances' of these events (the alarming figures were later revised by the government).

The article's subtitle, 'Músicas porno-dançantes trazem de volta o que há de
pior no machismo’ (Porno dance tunes bring back the worst of machismo), is highly misleading with regard to the real focus of the columnist’s ponderings, which are directed more towards an updating of the Arnoldian problematic of *culture* versus *anarchy* (Arnold, 1932/1869) than any feminist theoretical approach.

Sant’anna’s target is both the global artistic vanguard (which has carried the cult of transgression to an extreme) and the Brazilian cultural industry (which has expanded massively under the protection of the licentious post-dictatorship climate and under the pressure of globalization, and which transforms the citizen into a simple ‘consumerist clone’ and has turned ratings into the supreme regulators of the production of symbolic goods). What, then, is the relationship between the two phenomena? Simple: in the same way that, in art, anyone can do what he or she wishes because today anything is art, ‘marginality takes the place of the system, the illiterate take control of the media, quantity displaces quality, and what we used to call “culture” is now exiled as an authentic counter culture, an alternative culture’. The ethical and aesthetic anomie and the very chaos that result from it are ‘unconsciously’ verbalized in the lyrics of funk, as ‘literary analysis’ [sic] can clearly demonstrate: ‘It is impossible to hear the war cry—“tá tudo dominado” (everything’s under control)—without hearing an echo of the PCC or a gang like the Comando Vermelho (two criminal organizations based in Rio de Janeiro). It is impossible not to recognize in “um tapinha não dói” a seductive variant of violence against women and children. It is impossible to hear women called “bitches” and not see a return to the worst of machismo.’ In the face of so many interpretive impossibilities, the only thing left to do is call for an urgent return to order—that is, for a rapid re-establishing of the canon as an efficient weapon against the chaotic upheaval of values promoted (and reflected) by funk and the artistic vanguards.

At this stage it should be fairly clear that the routine use of the expression ‘cultural trash’ to refer to *popularesque* (hybrid, foreign-influenced, commercial, strident) cultural products is not coincidental. The *popularesque* (like the ‘popula-cho’, which is its symbolic and monetary base) tends to dramatize the syndromes of *purity* and *danger* studied by Douglas (1976/1966) in her classic work of cultural anthropology. The author argues that *dirt* is, essentially, disorder, imbalance, a challenge to systematizations and borders—all that which offends the aesthetically agreeable and morally calming sense of harmony. In the social imaginary of cities such as Rio de Janeiro, for example, the funk *galeras* are seen as ‘pollutants’, troublemakers and, therefore, major enemies of the social order. The preoccupation with purity and the determined fight against dirt constitute, according to Douglas, universal characteristics of human beings—the models of purity, the patterns to be preserved change from epoch to epoch, from one culture to another, but each epoch and each culture has a certain model of purity and a certain ideal pattern which must be zealously protected from genuine or imagined disparities.

As Bauman confirms (1998, pp. 13–48), purity cannot be considered without having an image of ‘order’, without assigning things to their ‘correct’ and ‘appropriate’ place—which happen to be places which they would not occupy ‘naturally’, of their own spontaneous accord. It is not the intrinsic characteristics
of things which make them ‘dirty’ but only their reluctance to remain in the place considered appropriate for them, revealing the fragility of all arrangements aimed at creating or preserving a regular and stable atmosphere, conducive to the sensible action. *Dirty* therefore refers to all those who do not fit into the cognitive, moral and/or aesthetic map of the world. Who does not recall, for example, the adjectives used by the scribe Isaías Caminha, on describing the instant in which the exalted image he had of himself evaporated? Treated as a ‘little mulatto’, disgraced, debased by who knows how many other humiliations and insults, he seemed, in his own eyes, ‘dirty, imperfect, deformed, mutilated and filthy’ (Barreto, 1984/1909, p. 51).

To conclude, it would perhaps be opportune to recall here the synonyms for ‘populacho’ recorded by the *Aurélio* dictionary in the various regions of Brazil: *bagaceira* (‘spirit made from grape pulp; collection of useless items; remains, residue, prostitute’); *borra* (‘sediment, dregs, faeces, silk residue not used for spinning, of which coarser cloths are made; ‘de borra’—shitty’); *fezes* (faeces); *gambá* (skunk); *lixo* (rubbish); *mundaça* (rabble); *poeira* (dust); *rabacuada* (from ‘rabo’—tail or bum), among many other terms, ranging from less well-known to widely recognized terms. Perhaps only ‘meretriz’ (prostitute) has as many recorded synonyms. Disgust is loquacious—an immensely powerful verbal aphrodisiac.

Notes
1. Text within square brackets is translator’s notes.
2. Poet and composer from the Maranhão region. A figure essential to an understanding of the premodernist and modernist cultural scene, he habitually boasted of having caused a ‘great reform’ of the modinha [traditional lyrical, syncopated and sentimental Brazilian musical style], by ‘civilizing it’. He was also the composer of *Luar do serlão* (Backlands Moonlight) (1913), the ‘official hymn’ of the regionalist trend of the first three decades of the twentieth century.
3. ‘The resemblance to Catulo. There is no doubt that it exists therefore I don’t intend to change this …. And whether Catulito is false, as they say, or whether he is a true serlano, what is certain is that he is unmistakably Brazilian in character and speech, is he not! … And my dear Manu! … in the final analysis what have I been doing if not pastiches … . That’s why I’m really not disheartened. My life has been, and will be and I want it to be, an *Invitation* to the Brazilian people to recognize themselves’ (Andrade [07 September 1926], 2000, pp. 308–309); ‘ Translated by Lorraine Leu. At most, I am no more than a link in that chain in which a Caldas Barbosa, an Alencar, a Catulo, are also links; certainly a more curious link, not more useful because I have made use of everything, even the grotesque, in order to normalize the problem [of the creation of a cultured Brazilian language]’ ([16 August 1931], p. 520).
4. *Axé* is a Yoruba word, originating in *candomblé* and meaning strength, energy, power. The expression *axé-music* appeared for the first time in the Bahian press in 1987, in a column written by journalist Hagamenon Brito, to identify a hybrid musical style which resulted from the mixing of the sounds of the *blocos de trio* [carnival floats typical of the Northeast, with the carnival group following a lorry from which music is played over loudspeakers] and the *blocos afro* (Bahian *frevo* and *samba-reggae*): ‘Bahian rockers called this type of music *axé* and referred to the musicians as *axezéiros*, it was a really pejorative thing. I decided to call it *axé-music* and all the press started to use it’, Brito explained (in Goli, 2000, p. 137). The label was immediately adopted by the national media to refer indiscriminately to every musical sound from Salvador: the Bahian *pagode* of É o Tchan!, the sound of the *blocos de trio elétrico* such as Cheiro de Amor and Chiclete com Banana, the afro-pop of Carlinhos Brown etc.
5. For more details of the trajectory of funk in the 1990s see *O funk e o hip-hop invadem a cena* (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. UFRJ, 2000).
References


