

Black people in the Brazilian media are either invisible, or strangely visible, or present as consumers, argues **Sueli Carneiro**. Media in Brazil are turning their backs on important social gains...

The Empty Mirror

Why Brazil's blacks don't recognise themselves in the media's reflection

RACISM and the media in Brazil, for me, divides into three aspects: the question of the invisible black; the question of perverse visibility; and the question of visibility in the context of Brazil's current racial neo-democracy.

I shall begin with a statement by the black militant poet Arnaldo Xavier. Using what he calls Muniz Sodré's metaphorical equation, Xavier says in an article recently published in *Jornal da Tarde*:

"Brazilian television is to blacks what a mirror is to a vampire. Blacks look: they do not recognise themselves, they do not see themselves."

The 'invisible black' is the consequence of the aesthetics of white privilege: the paradigm, the standard, of 'good looks' is set by colour – the lighter someone is, the more they ennoble a product. The black man, on the other hand, represents the opposite, the negative pole, for the blacker he is the more he degrades the product. Therefore he must be made invisible!

Yet visibility, when it occurs, can have an even more devastating effect. Let us take as an example the soap operas of Globo, the television network that for the last two decades has topped the ratings with its Brazilian audience and has also had some success in exporting its soap operas abroad.

One of Globo's more controversial soaps was *Pátria Minha*. In that soap opera, three black characters enabled the character played by Tarcísio Meira to exacerbate his racist and reactionary personality. The black characters were also used to enhance the progressive and contentious character played by Cláudia Abreu, who, in the context of the racist scenes, acted as a reborn Princesa Isabel – the saviour of the three impotent black characters in the programme.

Last year TV Globo, commemorating the 500th anniversary of Brazil's 'discovery' by Europeans, broadcast what was virtually a follow-up of *Pátria Minha* – the soap opera *Terra Nostra*. Part of the story line has the rich, pitiless coffee plantation owner pondering the impossibility of settling the Italian immigrants in the slave quarters deserted after the abolition of slavery.

—Are you going to put the Italians in the slave quarters? asks the contractor.

'infantile'

to the treatment dealt out to blacks. Spirit, pride and courage are thus attributes which only whiteness can confer.

The author of *Terra Nostra* answered the repudiation of the black community by saying that a black avenger is on his way. One fears to see what may materialise. But even if this avenger turns up, will he be able to wipe out the impact on the social imagination and on the self-esteem of blacks, especially children and adolescents, of dozens of episodes equating black people with supposedly voluntary and submissive servitude?

In *Terra Nostra* as well as other soap operas, black people show no resentment for

A landless peasant family camps outside in Rio de Janeiro.



for 500 years – a national project of white, western hegemony with the minority and subordinate admission of blacks, Brazilian Indians and non-whites in general.

The story lines of these soap operas deliberately ignore what happens to blacks in the real world: ignore the struggles for equal rights and opportunities; the efforts for assertiveness of ethnic-cultural identity; the demands for public politics; the heroic examples of survival in a society racially hostile to blacks.

The press, for its part, goes even further than televised soap operas. Recently *Correio do Povo*, a Porto Alegre newspaper, in a story on transgenic techniques and cross breeding (eg, maize and chickens), concluded with this coarse reference to Brazil's women of mixed race: "In the debate about transgenic techniques, the noblest of fruits was not mentioned: our glorious 'mulata'."

As physician-activist Fatima de Oliveira responded in *Jornal do Povo*: "Women are not fruit, they are human beings."

Ah, but there have been changes!

Some of the advances are due in part to the recycling power of the myth of racial democracy in our society, and to the wariness of the country's elite towards the explosive character of the racial question in Brazil.

What are the signs? TV Globo has settled for a minimum of one and a maximum of three blacks per soap opera, representing at least a slight increase in blacks' media presence. An increased black presence is also noticeable in advertising – though an ad depicting a black person in a crowd of whites is not exactly an inclusive perspective.

The magazine *Raça Brasil*, "the magazine for Brazilian blacks," according to its own definition, is an editorial success. And the research agency Grotera has found out that there is a black middle class of seven million people capable of more sophisticated consumption and anxious to abandon invisibility, especially through the media and advertising.

But the achievements of black people concerning the

'submissive'

The 'invisible black' is the consequence of the aesthetics of white privilege: the paradigm, the standard, of 'good looks' is set by colour – the lighter someone is, the more they ennoble a product.

— No. They're white. They have in their hearts the spirit of freedom. They're not going to accept slave quarters, answers the coffee baron.

On the verge of a new millennium, we see/hear a black child, the talented child actor who plays Tiziu in *Terra Nostra*, complain against his fate: "God didn't want to make me white." In a dialogue between Tiziu and the Italian Matteo, the boy tells the Italian that if he misbehaves the overseer will put him in the stocks, as he used to do with the blacks. Matteo, the Italian hero, responds by saying that the overseer will be a dead man if he tries anything of the kind.

This is the key that explains these stereotyped constructions. The subtext is the assumed resignation of blacks in the face of slavery's violence, in contrast to the courage, pride and spirit of the white immigrant, who would never submit

centuries of slavery, no demand for equality, no contention in relation to the social hierarchy into which they have been inserted. The critical discourse against slavery, where it exists, is generally uttered by white characters.

The stupidity with which blacks are portrayed aims to emphasise, to maximise, the assumed white superiority. The stupidity, submissiveness and infantilism of black characters in these plots seek to reiterate the racist image of an incomplete humanity for blacks that contrasts with a complete humanity for whites, even when they are whites of a subaltern class, as in the case of the Italian immigrants of *Terra Nostra*.

This racist stereotyping justifies blacks' exclusion and marginalisation. It legitimises a national project being built

demystification of Brazil's racial democracy, making racism visible and reverting some discriminatory practices, have not quite legitimated our political action as a social movement. Rather, we have begun to *subsidise* something that I call a 'racial neo-democracy', whose slogan is: *Yes to the consumer, no to the citizen*. This is the visibility granted within the boundaries of the current neo-democracy – a visibility restricted to our capacity of consumption.

'stupid'

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