The Dialogue Between Literature and Film in Early Twentieth Century Rio de Janeiro

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In *Consuming Visions: Cinema, Writing, and Modernity in Rio de Janeiro,* Maite Conde charts the dialectical relationship between literary composition and incipient Brazilian film production in Rio de Janeiro at the turn of the twentieth century. Conde observes a two-part movement: Brazilian writers including Olavo Bilac and João do Rio commented on the emerging medium of film, and in certain cases, as in Monteiro Lobato’s “Marabá” (1923), incorporated cinematic techniques or motifs into their work. Meanwhile, early Brazilian filmmakers sought inspiration in nineteenth-century novels such as José de Alencar’s *O guarani* and *Iracema* (dir. Vittório Capellaro, 1916 and 1920) and Joaquim Manuel de Macedo’s *A moreninha* (dir. Antonio Leal, 1917), as well as in French and U.S. models. Conde backdates Brazilian literature’s engagement with cinema to the first two decades of the twentieth century, demonstrating that “Brazilian writers had been observing film well before the advent of modernism in 1922” (2). She thereby contributes to a valuable, ongoing reappraisal of the vitality of Brazilian literary culture during the period commonly referred to as *pré-modernismo,* which has traditionally been overlooked.

Conde highlights several interesting features of early twentieth century Rio de Janeiro’s literary culture. In her second chapter, “Comic Visions of the New City,” she describes practices of the period that bridged the journalistic, literary, theatrical and cinematic. These include the *jornal falado* (spoken newspaper), in which “new bohemian” writers recited their newspaper pieces in venues such as cafés and theatres, “mak[ing] fun of contemporary life, parodying fashionable writing, as well as Rio’s Europeanized social and political landscape” (73), and Bastos Tigre’s *fitas impressas* (printed movies), which were “tantamount to a *crônica* written in the form of a movie” (74). And early films such as Alberto Botelho’s *Paz e amor* (Love and Peace, 1910) drew on the vaudevillian tradition of *teatro de revista,* and in doing so “domesticated, or localized” film, rendering it more authentic to—and critical of—Brazil (77). In what to my mind is the book’s best chapter, “Envisioning a New Political Landscape,” Conde describes the film production of recent,
often Italian immigrants to Brazil. She convincingly argues that their films, frequently produced by mutualist associations, constituted a cinema of identification distinct from the exotic foreign vistas marketed to fashionable carioca moviegoers. And finally, in the chapter “Women, Rio’s Modernity, and Film’s Visual Pleasures,” Conde makes a strong case for Benjamin Costallat’s novel Mademoiselle Cinema (1923) as an important reflection on consumerism and changing women’s roles that has perhaps been obscured by the prominence of the São Paulo-based Brazilian modernistas.

Conde’s broad literary-historical claims are bold, and invite debate. In arguing for the specific importance of the first years of Brazil’s Old Republic, Conde risks downplaying certain overarching historical continuities. First, in her introduction and opening chapter, “Documenting New Urban Experiences,” she describes early twentieth century Rio de Janeiro’s “French-style makeover [which was] aimed at expressing and projecting the country’s new and modern identity, which was profoundly identified with Europe” (4). She also references Brazil’s contemporaneous insertion into “neocolonial” economic relations in which European nations “export[ed] consumer items and new technologies in exchange for raw materials, such as coffee” (26). While Rio’s “Haussmanization” under Mayor Francisco Pereira Passos (1902-06) was dramatic, it followed earlier urban renewal efforts, which can be backdated at least to the arrival of the Portuguese court in 1808. Indeed, as early as Manuel Antônio de Almeida’s comic novel Memórias de um sargento de milícias (Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant; 1852-53), which chronicles the period of Dom João VI’s residency in Rio (1808-21), carioca writers had been documenting a city that had since been altered by urban reforms. Similarly, the Brazilian economy had been built since colonial times on the export to Europe of primary products in exchange for manufactured goods, and in this regard the Old Republic was not necessarily unique.

Further, Conde astutely observes the alienating effects of Rio’s early twentieth century urban makeover, effected in pursuit of “an ideal that owed more to Europe than to Brazil” (65). She cites valuable examples of writers who critiqued this process, such as José do Patrocínio Filho in his “Cartas de um matuto” (Letters from a Country Bumpkin), and Bastos Tigre, in his filmic crônicas, which “comically depict a shallow society constructed purely on image and containing no substance” (76). It would have been interesting had she placed these writers into dialogue with Machado de Assis, for example, who routinely lampooned the superficiality and Francophilia of earlier generations of wealthy cariocas. For example, Machado’s novel Quincas Borba (1891) features a guileless country “rube,” Rubião, who similarly to Patrocínio Filho’s matuto “reveal[s] the superficiality and absurdity of Rio’s worldly civilization in ways that parody, question, and undermine the teleological narrative of Rio’s modernity” (68).

Finally, in addressing the journalism of early twentieth century writers like João do Rio, Olavo Bilac, Bastos Tigre and others, and in arguing for their economic dependence on newspapers, Conde describes the press as one of the era’s “emerging mass forms” (86). Though the Brazilian press modernized between 1900 and World War II, as Conde references, local writers had nonetheless been active in journalism in prior decades, and their journalistic work reached a carioca reading public, although of modest size. To cite two prominent examples, Romantic novelist José de Alencar worked as an editor and writer for multiple Rio-based newspapers during the 1850s, and Machado de Assis, who began
his career as an apprentice typesetter, published *crónicas*, criticism, and book chapters in newspapers throughout his career. This begs the question of what, in a society defined by persistent illiteracy and unequal access to print media, constitutes a “mass form.”

In terms of stylistics, it should be noted that *Consuming Visions* features a number typographical errors that could have been avoided through careful copyediting. Though these oversights do not detract from the scholarly quality or readability of Conde’s book, they nonetheless occasionally distract from her compelling analysis and many pertinent observations.