

**Roberto Cabot**

### **From the Banana to TotalFlex**

Fantasy can have an enormous power, and as a recipient of countless fantasies and dreams, the tropics can unleash unsuspected forces. During the time of Germany's reunification, one of the main reasons given by East Germans for their eagerness to reunite was their hope of eating more bananas, which in East Germany were prized fruits available only on rare occasions when they arrived from their tropical socialist "brothers," like Cuba. The fall of the Berlin Wall also meant being able to eat bananas whenever they wanted; that is, the right to a brief tropical moment enjoying the taste of this exotic fruit that symbolized a distant and inaccessible paradise known only through the Western TV channels, since they could not travel abroad. A recent symptom of this phantasmagoric relation of the Nordic people for the tropics is the Tropical Islands theme park in Brandenburg, East Germany. In the middle of that region's desolate landscape, where the winter temperatures often drop to twenty below zero, an oversized silver dome was erected that houses what is supposedly a tropical climate, complete with warm, moist air, a huge pool, "tropical" gardens, artificial rain, and even thatch huts offering juices and drinks. The advantage of the "tropical island" of this reinvented tropics is that the environment is totally sterile: there are no favelas, insects or other undesirable animals, often so "annoying" in real tropical paradises. The "paths" are made of anti-slip rubber, and the UV radiation is carefully controlled.

Etymologically speaking, the word "tropical" comes from the Greek *trópos*, which means "turn."

From the standpoint of geography, the tropical region is the area of the earth between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, with the equator at the center. This area includes all points of the earth where the sun at midday is precisely overhead on at least one day per year. North of the Tropic of Cancer and south of the Tropic of Capricorn the sun will never be directly overhead.<sup>1</sup> It is a part of the world that is radically different from the "temperate" regions of the globe (I'll never understand how a region where the temperature can reach  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the winter and  $+35^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the summer can be called "temperate"), and which has become a legend.

As a European creation, the tropical legend has gone through various phases over the centuries in terms of the various fantasies that have been projected onto it. The tropical El Dorado of the 15th and 16th centuries, with its "green hell" so formidably described by Herzog in *Aguirre*, gave way to the tropics of the pirates with their gold; in the 18th century this legend was transformed into the tropics of

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia. Available at <<http://wikipedia.org>>.

the Enlightenment with its noble savage, which in turn gave way to the stigma of underdevelopment and neocolonial exploitation of the tropics as a source of raw materials. The colonization of South America, as well as that of the southern portion of the British Empire, took place in wanton disorder. This chaos favored the control of local populations by the colonizers and was also a consequence of the invaders' inability to understand the conquered peoples. From this initial disorder, societies developed which escaped from the control of the metropolises, creating their own totally novel, hybrid logics. Finally, thanks to the tourist industry boom and the invention of the bikini in the 1960s, the tropics were eroticized and fantasized with a positive connotation, to the point where they became the enchanted paradise of Club Med. This fantasy is perhaps best epitomized by the movie *The Girl from Rio*, a splendid trash film that blends all the clichés of tropical Rio de Janeiro with science fiction à la James Bond. One of its quintessential scenes is the one where the good guy apologizes for having intruded into the girl's hotel room, because "After all, you are single girl," to which she responds, "Don't worry about that, after all, we're in Rio..."<sup>2</sup>

Fantasies are normally projected onto the unknown, the incomprehensible. To the eyes of the European adventurer of the Middle Ages the tropical regions presented an incomprehensible scene; his prior experience offered no clues for deciphering the myriad novelties that confronted him in everything from the startling new shapes (surprising plants and fruits, fabulous animals) to the unpredictable and exaggerated climate. It was this era that saw the formation of the first "curiosity cabinets" – those collections of peculiar specimens from the nature and cultures of the exotic latitudes – which exist to this day in the form of museums. The encounter with the people from the tropics placed the explorer into contact with people who seemed straight out of another reality. The African pygmies, the Tahitians, the Amerindians of the Brazilian coast and the Amazon region: all of them had evolved according to a paradigm alien to the understanding of a 15th-century European Christian. Even as late as the last century, with all his insight and sensitivity, Lévi-Strauss brought with him to Brazil a heavy load of projections and fantasies, which gradually crumbled as he discovered what he would come to call the "sad tropics." He compared the *cerrado* with the paintings by surrealist abstract French painter Yves Tanguy,<sup>3</sup> and tells of his "first tropical shock,"<sup>4</sup> thus showing that as late as the first years of the 20th century the tropical environment was still largely incompatible with the European conception of the Real. Lévi-Strauss's book describes the process by which the original oneiric fantasy of the tropics, with its cast of noble savages set against a backdrop of natural purity was transformed into the disenchantment of finally recognizing that it is just another Reality, with all the weight that this term carries.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Girl from Rio*. Directed by Jess Franco. England, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes trópicos*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Brazil is the first country to define itself as tropical. In general, countries with a tropical climate and nature tend to distance themselves from this label and do not consider these characteristics as essential to their identity. Thailand, despite its tropical biotype, does not define itself as a tropical country, nor does Venezuela, for example. The temperature of offices and automobiles serves to diminish the “unpleasant” sensation of being in a tropical country: the colder the air conditioning, the subjectively farther one is from the tropics, which are always associated with underdevelopment in the mindset of the colonized elite. Miami has considered itself tropical ever since the tourist boom, and became the prototype of the successful “Paradise” for the tropical elites, giving rise to more or less successful mirror cities, such as Cancun or Rio de Janeiro’s Barra da Tijuca District.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the notion of tropical has been split into a dual concept under two perspectives with opposite vanishing points; besides the projection of the Western Dionysian imagery it has become an identifying, liberating and revolutionary concept in Brazil. With two symmetrical points of view, each seeing the other from the other side of the mirror. In a rare example of powerful synergy among the arts, at a moment when they were in a process of recognizing their own cultural particularities and drawing closer to everyday life, an exhibition at the Rio de Janeiro’s Museum of Modern Art featuring the now famous installation *Tropicália* by Hélio Oiticica set off a creative explosion with far-reaching aftershocks that would also affect theater, music, filmmaking, poetry and fashion. The Antropofagia movement, in the early XX century, had already availed itself of the tropical characteristic, though without explicit use of the term, which bore pejorative connotations for the Europeanized elites of that time. The desire of the Brazilian modernists to distill local elements in order to develop an aesthetic universe in keeping with their own reality prefigured the overriding formal and aesthetic references for tropicalism, in the late 1960s.

Tropicalism revolutionized Brazilian popular music and contributed significantly to the subsequent development of international music styles, as for example what later became known as World Music: a mixture of sounds from different ethnocultural origins. For the protagonists themselves it is difficult to clearly define the goals that motivated their actions at that time – as they themselves say, many gestures were spontaneous and not forcibly rational – yet today the consequences of those gestures are clearly observable. For the tropicalist musicians, it was not only about composing beautiful songs; they believed in the power of music to change society, the artist’s responsibility vis-à-vis society. *Tropicália* brought with it an attitude, an open way of seeing life and liberal values, influenced by the students’ and workers’ movements in Europe and the United States, but also confirmed by the growing discomfort with a local model of society that was unsuited to its reality even in terms of its dress code. Bossa nova introduced a new musical aesthetics, a style of composing, arranging and interpreting music. *Tropicália* represented a new, critical and fertile attitude, comprising a wide range of styles.

The term *tropicália* was born as a concept with Hélio Oiticica's *penetrável* [penetrable] in 1967, and expanded conceptually to other fields of art. Tropicália do not arise as a defined form or style of tropicalism, but was launched as a series of ideas that would configure the first aesthetic concept to arise in a “peripheral” and tropical country, that is, as an alternative to the “Western” model of the so-called First World. This alternative model displays a characteristic dynamicism and high degree of flexibility. Years before, upon his return from an official visit to Rio de Janeiro, General Charles de Gaulle had made what turned out to be an emblematic statement: “Le Brésil n'est pas un pays sérieux” [Brazil is not a serious country]. The rigorous general, not recognizing the tropical logic, simply ignored that at that time France was still emerging from the debacle of World War II, the greatest of the modern human barbarities, and had a system of government bordering on dictatorship that tortured and assassinated its opponents – hardly a situation worthy of a *Grande Nation*.

Before tropicalism, bossa nova had already proposed a notion of the “pleasant imperfection,” of an imperfect humanity (“Desafinado”), which associated it with similar attitudes in the visual arts. Neoconcretism arose as a reaction to a perception that art was being dehumanized by the concretist precepts,<sup>5</sup> as a rejection of the mechanization and depersonalization of artistic production, and therefore of the mechanistic notion of perfection represented by the constructivist project. This mechanistic conception of perfection, of the aesthetic pleasure of sight vis-à-vis the “lack of flaws” – of Purity – was the outgrowth of the European ideas of the Industrial Era, in which the human hand was declared imperfect and weak insofar as it was inferior to the mechanical arm. This positivist-mechanistic worldview was to become an essential factor for all “Western” idiosyncrasies. It was the touchstone of reality, the linchpin of mechanistic logic, which defined the human being in terms of that person's productive role; the imperative criteria which, according to Marcuse, makes all pleasure and desire contingent on production, reducing the human being to the highly specialized “unidimensional man.” In this system there is no place for error or imprecision, nor for the unforeseen or incidental. The tropics resist this logic, and propose another one, consisting of improvisations and incidents that occur along the way, by means of which pleasure and desire tend to preempt reasoned judgment. But it is not reasoned judgment that generally makes humanity shine, and the path of existence has always been lined with a good portion of the incidental.

In a recent interview,<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard spoke of the eventual possibility of submitting Brazil to the reality principle, which conforms to what he calls the hyperreality of the hyperdeveloped countries like Japan. In Brazil, he says, “it seems that there is no basic definition of reality. It is more of a kind of

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<sup>5</sup> Ronaldo Brito. “Neoconcretism arises from the need of some artists to remobilize the geometric languages... against which they supposed was the sterilization of concrete art...” In *Neoconcretismo: vértice e ruptura do projeto construtivo brasileiro*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify Edições, 1999, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> “Brasil é o império das ilusões” [Brazilian Is the Empire of Illusions]. Interview of Jean Baudrillard by Katia Maciel, *Folha On Line*, 11 March 2007.

fictional country, but not the fiction of transparency. It is not the country of semiology or semiotics. I don't know, but I have the impression that Brazil is closer to the game of illusion, of the seduction of this dual but confused relation... and that there is nothing of this form of abstraction that equates to hyperreality..."<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note the philosopher's own hesitation in trying to describe this "confused" thing, as though the outlines of the tropical giant were quite difficult to draw.

This indefiniteness of limits and outlines is a characteristic proper to the tropics. It does not result from the absence of limits, but is a sensation brought on by the fact that everything is dynamic, flexible and unforeseeable, making it appear as though there were no limits, which do exist however – it's just that their positions are constantly shifting. Most likely, it is this continuous vibration that conveys to the French philosopher the sensation of a "confused duality." Where the conqueror perceives confusion there is, in reality, a dynamic order under constant transformation; a dynamic territorialization of meaning, to use a Guattarian vocabulary.

In the fiction that Baudrillard speaks of, the subject might appear amorphous, but in reality he/she is "metamorphous," in continuous metamorphosis in his/her relation with a real that is also undergoing constant redefinition. The best image of this subject is Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*, whose updated form is given by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's masterful film adaptation of the original rhapsody. The "characterless hero" is not Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (man without characteristics) who takes "a year's vacation from life," or Max Frisch's *Homo faber* who finds himself lost well outside the radar scope of reality. *Macunaíma* does not have any character because he has all possible characters, changing his condition and reality at all times. And he is always within reality, he swims in it. The Real that surrounds *Macunaíma* is drenched with meaning, made entirely of colors and symbols. The narrative does not follow a functional logic: the events are ordered by conjunctions of layered and coded meanings. In the movie, Mário de Andrade's character does not think when reflecting on his next step, but rather "imagines:" "Macunaíma imagined, imagined, imagined..." The original text itself is so open to possibilities of reading and interpretation that when describing the process of adapting it as a screenplay the filmmaker tells how he made two adaptations, in the first trying to "tame the book," but nothing worked, while in the second he adopted the point of view that "Macunaíma is a Brazilian who was eaten by Brazil" and then, he says, "things became more coherent."<sup>8</sup> With this he keeps the outlines of the book mobile and manages to synthesize a narrative that can be filmed in linear sequence. This is not surrealism, in the same way that Tarsila do Amaral's oeuvre involves the formalization of a reality, and not an under- or over-reality. The artist reproduces the formal universe around her, consisting of rounded hills, the lassitude of bodies sweltering in the heat, the sensation of "languor" as felt on a muggy tropical summer day, the softness of a breeze at the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Text by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade in the first press book for the film, 1969.

end of the afternoon, the tropical lighting. In a letter written to Tarsila when she was in Paris, Mário de Andrade writes: “Tarsila, Tarsila, come back to within your own self. Abandon Gris and Lothe, with their decrepit criticisms and decadent aesthesias! Abandon Paris, come back to the virgin forests, where there is no african art, nor gentle streams.”<sup>9</sup> In the same way that Corot and the impressionists questioned the canon of academic depiction by going out to paint in the open air – making direct contact with reality and depicting it according to the perception of their senses, ignoring the precepts of academia – Tarsila depicts reality as she feels it; and it is a sensation visibly shared with the Tupinambás or with Gauguin and the Tahitians, for the expression of which she created a new formal vocabulary, fundamentally questioning the artistic conception of her time.

Roberto DaMatta shows us how Brazilian society (our example of the “tropical” in this case) is largely determined by an interplay of relations between individuals within a hierarchical structure of complex and contradictory values bereft of productive logic, ironically typified in the phrase, “Do you know who you are talking to?”<sup>10</sup> This motto is far from Rousseau’s “social contract” based on productive relations. The constitution of the social body depends on the nature of the personal relationships, which are volatile and subject to frequent changes. In the absence of a contract, every situation can be questioned and reviewed at any moment, even retrospectively.

This volatility in the social relations (which is evinced by the erratic social mobility in Brazil) poses a problem if one ignores this mode of functioning and expects that things work according to the Anglo-Saxon reality principle.

A system’s dynamicism and flexibility can become problematic in the context of foresight and planning applied on a long-term basis. Such a context held in Europe, at a time when Western hegemony allowed the rich countries to exert a firm control over the world situation, making foresight viable. With the redistribution of roles brought about by the process of globalization and the growing economic importance of the Third World countries (including some tropical ones, such as India, Vietnam, and a good part of Africa), global control has become increasingly impracticable, and the future evermore unpredictable. In reality, the problem today is the lack of flexibility and adaptability. Even in space exploration, the ability for improvisation can be decisive. In the movie *Apollo 13*, the crew is saved when they manage to reconstruct their damaged, highly complex ventilation system using odds and ends they have onboard, effecting a makeshift but highly workable solution. The power of improvisation is a prerequisite for survival within a context of constant transformation.

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in the text by Carlos Zílio. *A querela do Brasil*. 2ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1997, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Roberto DaMatta. *Carnavais, malandros e heróis*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocco, 1994.

What happens with the “project” under these conditions? The unforeseeability in no wise prevents the project, it merely entails other modes of functioning, other mechanisms to ensure the project’s continuity. There are recurring characteristics (tropes) in a part of Brazilian artistic production that appear to be well suited to the mobility and dynamicism of a reality undergoing rapid and boundless change. This particularity is expressed by a particular relation with space, with the object, with the body, and with a surprising formal liberty. The confrontation with the real is much more physical, immediate and violent, and the incidental is a constant.

More than “styles,” the recent history of Brazilian art has given rise to concepts, as described above for the case of *tropicália*. Oiticica’s *metaesquemas* [metaschemes] are an articulated disorder within the constructivist order. His subsequent work arose in the interstices of the planes that dance on the surface of the *metaesquemas*. These interstices already contained the *Conceitos espaciais* [Spatial Concepts], *Penetráveis* and *Parangolés*. They are the escape hatch from the planar surface, the emergency exit to the autophagic and voluntarily deterministic space of concretism, opening the door to the clash with the world, to the great omniphagic explosion of neoconcretism and a large part of what has been done in Brazil since the beginning of the 1990s. The interstices are the visual sign of the destabilization of the constructive ideal: of Mondrian’s horizon and Malevich’s cross. These nearly kinetic forms in negative (the term “nonform” also applies, since they are the “residue” from the interplay of planes) are an expression of the reaction also evoked by the constructive and minimalist project’s ideal of purity. The greatest barbarities in history have been committed in the name of some concept of “purity;” the pure implies isolation, rigidity, and tends toward sterility. Remarkably often, the Brazilian contribution to the arts involves the introduction of a contradiction to a previous system: whether it be Oscar Niemeyer with his rather nonmodernist curves, certain neoconcrete artists who introduced illusionist elements in the geometric-minimalist scheme, the influence of popular “low culture” in Oiticica’s oeuvre, or the realist baroque in the work by Aleijadinho. As is written in the *Tropicália* installation itself: “a Pureza é um mito” [Purity is a myth]. Art critic and curator Noemi Smolik demonstrates how the historiographical analysis of the developmental history of the “peripheries” has always been submitted to the historical interests of the dominant countries, giving little attention to the genealogical analysis of artistic development, a genealogy that should be extended to the artist’s living conditions at the moment of production. An analysis of the history of the creative process that arrived at these results makes it clear that the developments both in Moscow at the beginning of the 20th century and in Rio de Janeiro during the 1960s each followed their own project and aspirations, based on a local tradition and reality (for Malevitch, the tradition of the icon in Russia; for Oiticica, popular culture), and that they were not times of “adaptation” to the Western

modern project,<sup>11</sup> as these events are often still considered in the absence of careful reflection. This type of correction of the historical reading is being favored by the profound structural changes currently taking place across the world, contributing to the further breakdown of the Western modernist model.

With this it becomes clear that the problem of the tropical is not its manner of being, but rather the lack of awareness concerning its own forces and qualities. The elites of the former colonies persisted in an imported paradigm that was advantageous to them, since it disqualified the autochthonous or non-Caucasian populations for “not being very well suited for modernity.” This was the prevailing attitude in Brazil up until nearly the current time, when finally the term “tropical” has taken on a positive, liberating and inspiring dimension. Consistent with nature itself, the term “tropical” continues to be apparently as vague and indefinable as all that it describes. *Apparently*, because, as previously stated, it is a mistake to think that what is in a constant state of transformation, what is flexible, does not have a form. The success of human societies has always occurred at a conjunction of culture and science; the great moments of civilizations are eras when these two cognitive systems are “in phase.” One need only think of the Egypt of the great pharaohs, the European Renaissance, or the Moorish kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula while Europe was still engaged in the disastrous scientific/religious conflict of the Middle Ages. The tropical model is much closer to the current scientific models for describing Reality (such as quantum physics), and is therefore more suited to the challenges of the globalized present and near future than is the 20th-century modernist aesthetic and functional model. Quantum mechanics shows us that we can never precisely predict the position of a particle, we may only determine probabilities – at any given moment there is one position that is more probable than the others. That is, the future consists in countless possibilities, and a successful project will be that which can encompass this dynamics of manifold possible futures. The tropical identity, inherited as it is from the European collective imagination, has wound up bearing a *Weltanschauung* (worldview) that can be effectively counterposed to the Western model, indicating, if not defining, an alternative for a cultural, social and economic development appropriate for societies undergoing continuous change.

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<sup>11</sup> Noemi Smolik “Performative identity – or, how Malevich slapped modernism in the face.” University of Hamburg, 2004: “In order to show artistic events in these places as performative acts that, adapting Butler’s concept of gender identity, can lead to the creation of cultural identity, I am presupposing a critical discussion that Michel Foucault, following Nietzsche, called genealogy. The genealogical critique is not satisfied with searching for the origins of categories; moreover, it raises the question about which interests in cultural and political power are at stake when categories are labeled as origin and cause even though in reality they are the effect of institutions, procedures and discourses. Following from this, I am able to uncover modernism, used in art history as the originating category to define events in Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, and, in certain ways, even in Mexico City, as the effect of Western epistemological procedures. Furthermore, I am also able to decentralize and finally lay bare those methodological tracks along which Western modern historical writing establishes the mislabeling of facts and brought (and still brings) them into circulation.”

Last year, I read in the German press that a committee of technicians from Volkswagen's headquarters in Wolfsburg had taken a trip to São Paulo to get firsthand knowledge about a new fuel technology, developed over the last few years entirely in Brazil and ignored in Europe – which up to then had not prioritized the development of biofuel technologies, even though they constitute a viable means to lower our dependence on petroleum. This particular technology allowed for motors to be powered by both gasoline and/or alcohol, being able to switch from the one fuel to the other (or any blend of them) at any time. In Brazil, this new fuel system was given the suggestive name “TotalFlex.” And even though São Paulo is not, geographically speaking, tropical, it was the scene of the seminal Week of '22; the city is close enough to the Tropic of Capricorn and Rio de Janeiro – the world capital of the unforeseeable contradictions inherent to the tropical condition – to be cited in this context.