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Transforming Brazilian Speech into Popular Song: An Interview with Luiz Tatit

Tamara Courage and Albert Elduque



Figure 1: Luiz Tatit. Image: Gal Oppido.

In this interview, Luiz Tatit explores some specificities of Brazilian popular song which may explain the considerable success of music documentaries in the country. Such specificities include the connection between popular song and daily speech, its ties with Brazilian national identity and its complex relationship with foreign music styles. The interview was held telephonically on 9 April 2020.

Luiz Tatit (São Paulo, 1951) is a Professor in the Department of Linguistics at the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences at the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP). For decades his research, which interweaves semiotics and musicology, has been focused on the structure and the style of Brazilian popular song. Books such as *Semiótica da canção: Melodia e letra* (*Semiotics of the Song: Melody and Lyrics*, 1994), *O cancionista: Composição de canções no Brasil* (*The Song Composer: Composition of Songs in Brazil*, 1996) and *O século da canção* (*The Century of Song*, 2004) include an innovative close reading of song lyrics,

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but also reflect critically on the evolution of music styles, thus providing a complete and multifaceted analysis on twentieth-century Brazilian musical traditions.

Tatit has also consolidated a career as a distinguished singer and songwriter, both as a founding member of Grupo Rumo (1974–), which played a key role in São Paulo's avantgarde musical scene in the 1970s and 1980s (Vanguarda Paulista), and as a solo artist from the late 1990s onwards. His musical work provides an excellent complement to his academic publications, because both are equally concerned with the relationship between speech and song and with Brazilian musical traditions.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: For the past twenty years, there have been many documentaries produced on the topic of Brazilian music. Indeed, you participated as an interviewee for Helena Solberg's documentary film *Palavra (en)cantada* (*Enchanted Word*, 2008). Do these types of films appeal to you?

TATIT: Indeed, as a researcher I have a deep interest in films about songs, or about songwriters, and sometimes I watch them more than once. I concentrate on those moments in which the artists, for some reason, drop some insights into their creative process. Even banal facts in relation to a song: whether a composer creates the melody or the lyrics, whether they know how to play or not and so on. For example, Chico Buarque made very valuable statements in *Palavra (en)cantada* such as the fact that he differentiates poems from song lyrics, and that he doesn't consider himself to be a poet, even if the audience believes that he is. The latter revelation is beautiful, it could be the birth of a new research idea! Since I am not in touch with Chico Buarque personally, I use the documentaries to access that information. However, do not assume that I believe everything songwriters say. Sometimes they say they did one specific thing in their creative process, but when you research a song, you realise that they did something else altogether. I like to explore that perspectival difference between the creator and researcher.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: On a national level, Brazilian films about music have been tremendously successful. Biopics such as *Dois filhos de Francisco: A história de Zezé di Camargo & Luciano* (*Two Sons of Francisco*, Breno Silveira, 2005) and *Cazuza: O tempo não pára* (*Cazuza: Time Doesn't Stop*, Walter Carvalho and Sandra Werneck, 2004) were large box office successes, and *Vinicius* (Miguel Faria Jr., 2005), which was focused on Vinicius de Moraes, is the Brazilian documentary with the best national box office returns so far. Why do you think contemporary audiences are so interested in these films?

TATIT: I think that general audiences are more interested in the films' stories than in the music itself. In the case of *Dois filhos de Francisco*, it was a matter of how those artists, facing a lot of problems, succeeded in album sales and public recognition. In the case of Vinicius de Moraes, his life may at first be more appealing to a general audience than his work: he carried out very different activities, from diplomacy to poetry to song writing; he married nine times, and the songs he wrote were always linked to a specific love story… In other cases, we find artists who suffered a lot, for example Cazuza, who had AIDS. Their work is interesting, but what really brings the audience to the screenings are the characters' personal lives. It is always a matter of storytelling.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: You are obviously familiar with In-Edit, the International Music Documentary Film Festival. It originated in Barcelona in 2003 and since then has been exported to other countries, Chile and Brazil being the ones where it has consolidated over the years. According to Cristian Pascual, who used to be the director of In-Edit, the Brazilian edition

celebrates its national section the most, which is evidenced by the large number of film screenings, its enhanced promotion and its subsequent widespread public popularity. In the context of Brazilian In-Edit, Brazilian films are the most relevant, something which is impossible to imagine either in Spain or in Chile. Why do you think the Brazilian In-Edit has this peculiarity?

TATIT: I think this national interest is related to Portuguese language. We are linguistically isolated in Latin America and out of Brazil, Portuguese is only spoken in Portugal, which is a small, somehow peripheral country within Europe, and in some African and Asian countries with no relevance in the international scene. Portuguese is a language with no universality. Vinicius de Moraes used to say that São Paulo was the grave of samba, and we could say that Portuguese is somehow the grave of languages! Brazil is the largest, more influential area in which Portuguese is spoken, and I think this is the reason why Brazilian music has been able to beat foreign music in the national market. For example, in the 1970s American music burst onto the international media scene in a very aggressive way. It was becoming more likely that Brazilian music would disappear in twenty years' time and that all Brazilian listeners would connect with English music or American music genres only. However, at the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, in addition to some Brazilian rock bands, new Brazilian styles emerged, such as *música sertaneja* and *axé*, the latter we associate with big stars such as Daniela Mercury, Ivete Sangalo and Luiz Caldas. At that moment, all you could hear in shows and festivals was that music, which was sung in Portuguese, and US music nearly vanished from radio and TV.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Another peculiarity from Brazil is the great respect shown for music tradition. Many Brazilian singers make versions of old songs, and young people often appreciate music styles from the 1930s and 40s. It feels as though both artists and the audience in Brazil are deeply rooted in music tradition, in such a way that is not immediately apparent in other countries. Even rock singers such as Cazuza have a strong connection with songs from the past. Do you think this is a Brazilian specificity?

TATIT: It may be. In fact, the history of popular song, both in Brazil and abroad, is very brief, because it is limited to the twentieth century. Before that, there were no recordings, only folkloric songs which had mostly been forgotten. The invention of recording technology in the 1920s marks the starting point for Brazilian popular song. Our national specificity may be that during the twentieth century most of the country's population were unable to read or write, with a substantially low literacy rate until the 1970s and 80s. This was not the case for Argentina, which neighbours Brazil but held an 80–90% literacy rate. In such a context, in the 1930s the only artistic manifestation available for the whole population were popular songs aired on the radio, which were easily accessible because all you needed was to own a radio receptor.

In general terms, Brazil had very little high-brow literature, very little classical music (just half a dozen important classical composers), and so popular song became the centre of interest for Brazilians. It became a kind of great language which our culture cultivated, to the point that in the 1950s a person such as Vinicius de Moraes, who had already built a prestigious career as a poet, moved to song writing and never returned to literature. In fact, Brazilian songwriters have articulated a very deep reflection, even a philosophical one, on Brazilian culture. This is a rare quality in artists from other countries. At most, there's Bob Dylan, but even if he is a great composer of beautiful songs, his lyrics do not contain the same conscience and discourse as Caetano Veloso, Chico Buarque and Gilberto Gil. Caetano's book *Verdade*

tropical (*Tropical Truth*), for example, was written with the pretext of being his autobiography, but instead reflects his thoughts of Brazil following his Tropicalist project. The depth of this understanding positions him at the same level as intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, who invented Brazil as an object to reflect upon. Just imagine an author who produces such an impressive amount of songs and at the same time has this kind of intellectual reflection. It doesn't exist outside of Brazil!

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: We can then infer a correlation between this reflection and a song's strong connection to identity issues, including an attempt to define Brazilian culture. There is a link between song and national identity in Caetano's Tropicalist project that you just mentioned, but also in institutional endeavours, such as the one by Getúlio Vargas' government which in the 1930s turned samba into Brazilian music par excellence. In fact, samba, Bossa Nova and Tropicália were considered music styles which could represent Brazil as a whole, even standing for a cohesive nation, which is unfair because Brazil is huge and there exists a wide diversity of music styles across the country. Why do you think this is the case?

TATIT: The evolutionary line from samba to Bossa Nova and Tropicália is very clear, but we must say that it was based on the musical production from the largest Brazilian capital cities, first Rio de Janeiro and then São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Porto Alegre, Salvador da Bahia… Cultural activities which were divulgated by media were occurring in the metropolises. Across the country you can obviously find a lot of small rural towns with their own folkloric activities, but they had no national expression, distribution or evolution. A composer such as Heitor Villa-Lobos loved that kind of static folklore, and so did intellectuals such as Mário de Andrade. They both had prejudices against music in radio because they felt that it had lost its original identity. I don't agree. I think music is more interesting when it can develop itself and evolve into something else.

In the case of samba, it consolidated in Rio de Janeiro in the 1930s in a very centralised way: to make songs at that time was to make samba. Samba became the most important music style for Brazilian people because of the way in which it is linked to our daily speech. What I mean is that samba only has one requirement for its author: he or she must know how to talk, that is, to modulate voice and say things, just as we are doing now. Then, as everybody can do that, everybody can write songs, and samba is the genre which best represents that because of the way that melody and lyrics are coupled. In samba you aren't required to follow a strict rhythm based on strong beats, as you do in Renaissance music, for example, or even rock music. Conversely, samba is syncopated, and it plays along more frequently with weak beats than with strong beats, and the same happens in our daily speech. When we speak, we don't care about strong beats, we just speak and that's all! Samba is very prominent in Brazilian culture because it is the musical organisation of the daily speech.

Light samba from the 1920s and 30s incorporated everyday life situations, jokes and fashions, and was used to celebrate the slums, the city, the bars, the *mulatas*, or the rhythm itself. Then it started to slow its pace in order to talk about love, affection and deep-felt topics, and it turned into *samba-canção*, which was strongly influenced by boleros and was a major trend in the 1940s and 50s. And later a new generation of young university students realised that they wanted to express their love stories, but not in the schmaltzy, shed-tears, baroque way of *samba-canções*; rather, by talking about softness and lightness, "the smile, the love and the flower", as João Gilberto would say. This was the birth of Bossa Nova, which brought a lot of formal changes as well. Bossa Nova melodies are simple, you don't find great inflexions between high-pitched and low-pitched notes, but instead notes which are very close. Variation

happens more in the chords than in melodies. It was a process of what I call "selection" because it removed all the excesses of Brazilian music at that time and resulted in a deconstructed and simplified music form. Consequently, music became very much linked to perfection. Indeed, João Gilberto is himself the symbol of perfection. It is a music without a single defect, very finely composed and performed.

In response, the 1960s Tropicália trend claimed that Brazilian music could not be simply that. Instead, it had to mix itself with international music, with music from the past, with underrated music… It could sing in other languages and mix rock with samba. Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil suggested that Brazilian artists required all dictions and influences to create their music. Tropicália is always connected with mixture, which is the opposite of selection, and this is still the dominant gesture in Brazilian music production today, even in *música sertaneja* and *axé*, which as I said almost removed US music from the media. Contemporary young artists identify themselves with the Tropicalist gesture: "I mix rock with rap with samba with *pagode*…"

Now everything is scattered across the Internet, but the evolutionary line that starts with samba and its relationship with daily speech, then proceeds to Bossa Nova which focuses on the essentials, and then to Tropicália with its mixed aesthetics, is very clear in the history of Brazilian popular song. As I said before, this was the line of evolution that derived from the cultural centres of the big cities, because the music produced there was the one which was broadcasted by the media all over the country.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Brazilian popular songs were divulgated not only in the radio and recordings, but also in *teatro de revista* and cinema, for example *chanchadas* from the 1930s to the 1950s, Cinema Novo in the 1960s… Do you think that the circulation of music across other media enhanced that mixture and mutation?

TATIT: I have no doubt about it. For example, I think that the influence of jazz and American music on Brazilian composers and singers in the Bossa Nova period came through cinema. Dick Farney, Johnny Alf and other authors, who even changed their original names into English, were more influenced by music playing in American movies than by jazz music from New Orleans. They didn't follow great jazz musicians; rather, they followed songs by Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, who were both working in Hollywood. In the case of cinema produced in Brazil, it gave artists the opportunity to be seen by the public, because before the 1920s and 30s musicians and singers were not seen, only listened to, in radio and recordings.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Indeed, you find many singers performing in films in the 1930s. A curious case is that you rarely find moving images that feature Noel Rosa—he didn't perform in a single film before his death in 1937.

TATIT: This is because singers were considered more often than songwriters at the time, such as Noel Rosa. The only archival moving image with Noel Rosa that exists is in a short film in which Almirante sings a song and Rosa forms as part of the band while playing the guitar. In that context, *teatro de revista* was of crucial relevance; it preceded the emergence of radio. People such as Ary Barroso and Lamartine Babo released their songs in the *teatro de revista*, then the audience learnt the songs which then became popular hits. This occurred in big cities such as Rio de Janeiro. On the contrary, the function of cinema was to showcase singers who were already successful. It was used as bait for the film and enabled the public to view performances which had previously been restricted to those who could attend live shows and

performances at night clubs. The majority of the population would recognise artists by their voices rather than by visual appearance.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: You have done extensive research on the relationship between lyrics and melody. What are your thoughts on the visual side of music performance, that is, the way a singer performs in front of an audience? To what extent is the visuality of performance important for Brazilian music?

TATIT: Bossa Nova did not concern itself at all with visual style. At all! Singers appeared onstage as if they had recently left the office or written the song, with a pen in a shirt pocket… Vinicius and Tom Jobim performed a lot of shows in which they displayed that informality, just drinking whisky and playing and singing. In the USA, it was never like this. There is a very well-written article by Lorenzo Mammì in which he compares the Bossa Nova players with the American jazz players. He shows that in the USA everything is prepared as a big, professional show, while here in Brazil, Bossa Nova artists preferred to highlight the fact that music was part of their daily lives.

In the case of Tropicália, there was an ideological side to the performance. If they carried something from American culture, it was injected with irony or mixed with disparate influences. People such as Gilberto Gil and Tom Zé never sought to present a polished or finished product. Instead they aimed to create contrasts and unexpected mixtures, for example between a beautiful song and a provocative way of singing and presenting it. Their shows presented a sort of ugliness, even in the way they danced. This was during the dictatorship era, so the shows became a kind of challenge to the status quo and to the morals promoted by the government.

Later, in the 1990s, *axé* added an unexpected visual approach. Music became completely vulgar, unsophisticated, unpretentious. Dancing had been inspired by North-Eastern traditions (especially from Bahia) and it was tremendously erotic, in the sense that it was extremely communicative and absorbing, something that people in the audience could participate in. This was extremely original for that historical moment and heavily influenced the emerging music video industry. The *axé* music videos featured Brazilian dances, which were very basic but very absorbing, and appealed strongly to the public. They had nothing to do with imported music videos and this became the model. At a moment in which vastly popular music videos by Michael Jackson and Madonna were succeeding in the international scene, Brazilian music imposed itself on the sound and in the images created within it.

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Tamara Courage recently completed a postdoc at the University of Reading for the project *Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method*. Here, she expanded on the notion of intermediality in world cinema by investigating how it is used as a strategic tool in contemporary Chinese independent cinema to highlight issues regarding marginalised citizens who have been impacted by major socioeconomic transformations since the death of Communist leader Mao Zedong. Her current research interests examine the filmmaker’s role in imagining and representing realities for the historically peripheral subject through diverse and original modes of interventions that include performance, self-portraits, re-enactment and participatory methods.

Albert Elduque has recently completed a postdoc at the University of Reading, where he was part of the project *Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method*. His PhD dissertation, presented in Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona) in 2014, dealt with the concepts of hunger, consumption and vomit in modern political cinema. His current research is on contemporary Brazilian films on music, focusing on the representation of the musical traditions of the country in recent fictions and documentaries. He is coeditor of the journal *Comparative Cinema*, published by Pompeu Fabra University.