

## Love and the Brazilian Imaginary in National Fiction and Popular Cinema: From *O Guarani* to *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo*

Michael Sawyer<sup>1</sup>

---

### ARTICLE INFO

Available Online June 2014

Key words:

Identity formation;  
foundational literature;  
popular cinema.

### ABSTRACT

Brazil's national and cultural self-conception arguably begins with, and was definitely impacted by, the Romantic fictional narratives of José de Alencar, most notably *Iracema* and *O Guarani*. In establishing racial hybridity as a positive and uniquely Brazilian characteristic, Alencar appropriated that most universal of themes, love, as the vehicle by which the Brazilian culture was established and continues to define itself. More than one hundred and fifty years later, the pervasiveness of Alencar's idea, as well as his subversive appropriation of distinctly foreign elements to declare a separate identity, is evident even in artistic narratives that do not explicitly examine questions of national identity. *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo*, a coming-of-age film set in modern-day São Paulo, illustrates the degree to which Alencar's ideas continue to inform the most basic assumptions in individual and collective identity precisely because the movie's narrative presents no conscious meditation on such issues.

---

"National cinema," as numerous critics have noted, is a problematic term, with a variety of popular and critical connotations. For the purposes of this investigation, I refer to Andrew Higson's (2002) second definition of the phenomenon, which he characterizes as not as a differentiation between various national cinemas, but as an internal process of defining cinema "in terms of its relationship to an already existing national, political, economic and cultural identity (in so far as a single coherent identity can be established) and set of traditions". In particular, I use the term to describe films that can be credibly argued to make a meaningful contribution to the collective discourse on the nature and trajectory of national and cultural identity. As regards Brazilian national identity, I am not alone in operating under this definition; Tatiana Signorelli Heise's (2012) recent book, *Remaking Brazil: Contested National Identities in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*, takes a similar approach, wherein there is a clear assumption that the term "national cinema" refers to more to an intra-national dialog on collective identity than to a comparative, international definition.<sup>2</sup> Her comprehensive study convincingly categorizes a number of recent films according to the manner in which they portray the country, and therefore the type of contribution they make to the public dialog (celebration, reform, opposition).

It is by virtue of these contributions that such films are generally acknowledged as "important" to some degree; that is, they are recognized by audiences for providing a particular perspective that spurs the viewers to reflect on their own perceptions of the nation's character. The viewers need not think in such critical terms in order for these cinematic narratives to succeed in helping (re)shape the national imaginary--José Padilha's *Tropa de Elite* (2007) and its sequel, for example, naturally invite speculation on the stark contrast between their portrayals of injustice and popular ideals of how society should function--but they, like many past and contemporary literary narratives, almost always represent conscious attempts on the part of their creators to make a statement about the nation, its peoples, or its trajectory. They might contribute to the communal discourse by portraying people's inherent goodness or resilience, or by providing an idealized vision of how the nation can be. Still others might strive to encapsulate more thorough statements on Brazilian identity: Hector Babenco's *Carandiru* (2003), for example, or Sergio Machado's *Cidade Baixa* (2005), or perhaps Eduardo Coutinho's *Edifício Máster* (2002). All of these films meet the above criteria and can credibly be argued to represent Brazilian national cinema.

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Spanish, Chair, Government, International Studies, and Languages, University of Central Missouri, United States

<sup>2</sup>This is not to say that films exist in a vacuum, but rather that images of Brazilian national character often displayed in other countries result more from, and have more meaning in the context of, an internal national dialog about the state of the nation. Fernando Meirelles' *Cidade de Deus* is a prime example.

Laís Bodanzky's 2010 film, *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo*, however, a coming-of-age story about the trials of adolescence based on the popular book series written by Gilberto Dimenstein and Heloisa Prieto, appears at first glance to fall short of such categorization. Upon its release, many critics praised its deftly realistic and respectful treatment of the tumultuous experience of modern adolescence. All critical discussion, however, seems to begin and end there. Unlike, for example, *Cidade de Deus* (2002), one does not find this film among the titles explored in the multitude of scholarly articles on the rebirth of Brazilian cinema, or as an example of cinematic racial representation. In short, I believe that while few would classify it as an inconsequential "teen flick", most viewers would consider it as simply popular culture. Yet, *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* provides valuable insight into the ways in which some popular films are influenced by the collective discourse on Brazilian identity and end up participating in it, in spite of making no intentional effort to emblemize national character, or, as in this case, in spite of overtly focusing on universal themes. This perspective is best illustrated by considering the film's narrative and suppositions comparatively, not with those of other, more "important" modern films, but instead in the light of a much earlier work of narrative art that played a key role in defining Brazilian national identity: José de Alencar's 1857 novel, *O Guarani*.

In many ways, Alencar's novel and Bodanzky's film could hardly be more dissimilar; the former, a purpose-driven fairy tale about the origins of the nation and the roots of its identity so influential on the national imaginary that Doris Sommer classifies it in her 1993 work *Foundational Fictions* among the most important of the "national romances" of Latin America; the latter, a familiar recounting of the trials faced by adolescents as they navigate their social and nascent romantic lives. Both, however, participate in the collaborative discourse of exploring, questioning and explaining the nature of Brazilian communal identity through their focus on the nature of romantic and familial love; in so doing, both take universal themes and appropriate them into a Brazilian identity, utilizing explicitly foreign models. Both furthermore reveal the basis of the effectiveness of their respective genres in providing primary arenas for discourse both among the audience, and between the audience and the creative artifact. A comparative examination of the two works reveals both the pervasiveness of communally held beliefs that Alencar's work helped to inspire, and an analogous process of identity realization in which the defining other is internal rather than external.

### Love and identity

In *O Guarani*, the author sets out to supply the fledgling nation of Brazil with a historic national past, with a particular emphasis on explaining and embracing the country's genealogical and cultural hybridity. Magalhães Júnior (1977), speaking specifically of *O Guarani*, sees the construction of a national historic past as the prime goal of the novel, and explains the need for it during Alencar's lifetime: Alencar, just as other contemporary writers, was preoccupied by the need to

exumar fatos heróicos e de construir um passado, glorioso, venerável e edificante, para um país que se construirá 34 anos antes de que era, praticamente, uma nação sem história, até 1822, era quase somente a de sua subordinação a Portugal e, por algum tempo, à Espanha.

His success in doing so is undeniable. Renata Wasserman (1984), in his comparative study of Cooper and Alencar, finds his work, along with Alencar's other famous Indianist novel, *Iracema*, to be important because it obviously fulfills one of the defining characteristics of a truly foundational fiction: the characters in the books have become part of the mythology of Brazil and are "independent of his books and occupy their own places in the national imagination". One might expect a novel with such strong ties to national identity to be thoroughly "Brazilian", but in Brazil's case, as will be discussed subsequently, this does not imply the absence of foreign influence in its plot and themes. It is, in many ways, quite romantically formulaic, and Wasserman's comparative approach has proven to be a favorite of many scholars who identify similarities between *O Guarani* and other works from Europe and the Americas. Wasserman himself compares some of the important elements in Alencar's novel with Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, such as the "dark and the blond maidens, the noble Indian, the concerned father, the romantic hero, and the defining role of Christianity." Heitor Martins (1965) identifies further similarities between Alencar and another Romantic writer, Byron, showing that some structural elements and character descriptions in *O Guarani* are present in several of the latter's works, indicating that it was entirely possible that Alencar had read Byron's works, which by that time had appeared in Rio de Janeiro.

The plot centers on the Noble Savage Peri, a Tupí-Guaraní Indian who has abandoned his tribe to follow and serve his mistress, the beautiful, blonde Cecília, and the family/community in which she lives. Dom Antônio de Mariz, a noble Portuguese gentleman, has moved away from the city in protest of the recent Spanish ascension to the throne and has built a fortress-like home in the Brazilian jungle, where he can live out his life in accordance to his traditional and loyalist ideals. His family includes his wife, Dona Lauriana, his daughter Cecília (the object of Peri's devotion), his son Diogo and his "filha natural" Isabel. He also has a following of about forty "aventureiros" who receive lodging in return for a tariff on their hunts. The system is mutually beneficial: they have sworn to honor and obey him in all respects, in return for the protection that his home affords them from wild animals and aggressive Aimoré Indians.

Among the men, however, is a foreign, ex-Capuchin friar, Loredano, who secretly plans to kidnap and rape Cecília. He at first lures and later coerces D. Antônio's men into helping him by sharing with them his other plans, which involve a secret silver mine, the map to which fell into his hands under murderous circumstances. The division of loyalty among D. Antônio's men, which later blossoms into outright rebellion, acquires still more devastating potential by its coincidence with the accidental killing of an Aimoré woman during a hunt by Diogo, which ensures that the tribe will seek vengeance by attacking the fortress. The men's plot is eventually discovered by Peri, who kills the conspirators, but by this time the Aimoré attacks are increasing in frequency and ferocity. In order to save his beloved "Ceci," Peri attacks the tribe alone. Although he kills many of them, his real goal is to be captured and eaten by the cannibalistic Aimoré warriors; he has poisoned himself with curare, and thus his flesh will poison the tribe and eliminate the threat to his mistress and her family. His plot is foiled, however, when a group D. Antônio's men come to rescue him, informing him that they have left Ceci alone in order to do so. He flees to the jungle to find the curare antidote, then rushes back to the fortress, where the attack has redoubled.

It is obvious by now that everyone in the fortress will die, and D. Antônio has chosen to immolate the family rather than subject them to torture at the hands of the Indians; he has placed gunpowder kegs in the barricaded center of the fortress and is ready to ignite them once the majority of the Aimoré warriors have made their way inside. Peri has been the family's protector throughout the novel from both internal and external enemies, and D. Antônio sees the only hope for his daughter's life in placing her under the protection of the Savage. Peri undergoes a Christian baptism, and the two of them escape; as they retreat, the house explodes, taking both the Portuguese and the Aimorés with it. An enormous storm breaks, and the river next to which the fortress stood overflows its boundaries, creating a flood of mythical proportions. Peri and Ceci float away on a palm leaf, and their rapidly growing intimacy heralds them as the progenitors of the future country. The Brazil that is "given birth" (Zilberman, 1988) in the destruction of the two cultures will be a mixture of noble European and indigenous traits, "prefigurando a gênese de umaraca de Americanos, produto dos sangues native e europeu e síntese das virtudes de cadaçara" (Loureiro, 1975). Throughout the novel, Peri's heroism is inspired solely by his love of Cecília; as he himself puts it, "Peri é escravo da senhora".

Peri, then, is defined primarily by his passion, which manifests as an unwaveringly fierce devotion to Ceci, whom he treats as very nearly an idol of worship. In his barbaric simplicity, he embodies all that is good, and his deep connection to the lush new world itself affirms that he draws those qualities from and shares them with that most famous of signifiers of non-European milieu, the Brazilian jungle. Indeed, Luiz Fernando Valente (193), in discussing the role of Nature in the novel, asserts that Alencar was both influenced by and exerted a strong influence upon Brazilian "ufanismo," or pride in all things Brazilian. Peri's selfless passion is his noblest trait of all, and the protagonist that evidences this passion strongly enough that he would give his life for it is by this virtue better than those concerned with material gain, like the foreign predators who sought to destroy Ceci's Portuguese family. Peri's love for Cecilia, then, is patriotic love, and his best qualities become those of the nation and culture he allegorically fathers. Kristin Pitt (1997) best summarizes the idea: "the national novels published during the early years of Latin American independence both explicitly and implicitly encourage a correspondence between romantic love for women and a nationalistic love for country; patriotic heroes demonstrate their commitment to country by committing their hearts to young, voluptuous women". His love is more than simply romantic--the eventual abandoning of chasteness is only hinted at in the novel's closing sentences--; his willingness to sacrifice himself to protect Ceci, and her father's well-founded trust in his ability to do so at the climax of the novel, suggests a fatherly, familial kind of love. Given Doris Sommer's (1993) accurate assessment that *O Guarani* is so familiar to so many Brazilians that they can easily confuse its story and characters with "collective memory," the primary values that they have come to represent also become an integral element

of that memory. The centrality of familial relationships to the Brazilian character, as still taught today to those hoping to do business in that country, is no coincidence.

Neither is it coincidence that romantic and familial love, the vehicles by which cultural and genealogical hybridity are established and maintained, likewise hold privileged positions in the national imaginary; both dispositions stand in at least partial testimony to Alencar's success in establishing racial hybridity as a uniquely positive national characteristic. In discussing the role of the fictionalized historical past in the Brazilian sense of self, Doris Sommer addresses "o mestiçagem" with a rhetorical question: "What could be more Brazilian and proclaim independence from the Old World more clearly than casting the nation's protagonists as Indians and as those first Portuguese who, turning their backs on Europe, chose to unite with the natives?". As she rightly observes, miscegenation has ever since been deemed by the Brazilian population to be one of their defining characteristics; that is why it is the central focus of Gilberto Freyre's (1961) book, *The Portuguese in the Tropics*. So deeply ingrained are these assumptions that modern literary and cinematic narratives need no longer make any special effort at recalling them; such communal ideas simply form a foundational perspective, what Lucien Goldmann (1975) termed the "transindividual subject", a concept expanded upon and applied to national identities in Benedict Anderson's (1991) definition of "imagined communities". No cold analysis of trends in biological reproduction, *O Guarani* instead focuses on the vehicle through which miscegenation occurs: romantic and familial love; his audience, in internalizing the values presented in the novel, likewise hold these relationships as central to the Brazilian national character.

The implicit acceptance of the importance of familial loyalty and love as integral to the Brazilian identity is also overwhelmingly evident in *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo*; it is exactly the disruption of the familial relationship that serves as the primary conflict in the film and places it in a continuum of fictional narratives that appropriate this universal emotion, thereby affirming--intentionally or not--the centrality of love in Brazil's conceptualization of itself. In contrast to the unalterable steadfastness of love found in Alencar's work, familial and romantic love in *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* is marked primarily by uncertainty, and it is this characteristic that reveals the tensions of a nation striving to come to terms with itself as it questions long-held assumptions and ponders its future.

Set in São Paulo with a charming cast of amateur actors, the film centers on fifteen-year-old Mano, who lives with his middle-class parents and brother and who dreams of being a rock star in spite of barely knowing how to play the guitar. As a typical teenager, he is primarily preoccupied with and often perplexed by his social life. In an early scene, Mano's adherence to his own values regarding love versus sex (he is a virgin, a fact that he frets over) is established when he and some friends visit a brothel; he is unwilling to go through with the act and, with the assistance of a prostitute, fools his friends into thinking he did. Returning home, he finds his parents in an argument and his father moving out to be with someone else, citing a lack of passion in their marriage. Mano and his older brother, Pedro, are crushed by this news; Mano says it is as if he no longer has a family, which to him "é a pior coisa do mundo." At school, he focuses unsuccessfully on pursuing a popular girl, and during one class creates a satirical drawing of a classmate that he assumes to be a lesbian to amuse his friends.

Such non-acceptance of alternate sexualities quickly turns against him, however, when he learns that the person for whom his father left his mother is a man, a graduate student named Gustavo. Mano is shocked, and his brother—whose near worship of his girlfriend reveals him to be even more of a traditionalist than Mano—is extremely angry. He only tells one person, his close friend Carol, who says that such a confession from his father is truly brave. Affected by this change in perception, Mano begins to take notice of the bullying that occurs so often in his school, and to which he himself becomes a victim when word gets out that his father is gay.

Meanwhile, though, he continues to practice guitar with the explicit goal of wooing Valéria, the popular girl of whom Carol disapproves. He learns to play *something* by The Beatles; he doesn't play it well, but it is enough to get her attention and to subsequently lose his virginity. He is confused when, shortly after she is also made a victim by having classmate anonymously share some racy photos she took with her phone, she rejects him—in part because having a gay father makes him even more of an outcast than she is. Carol too is victimized a short time later when word gets around that she impulsively kissed her teacher, Artur, on whom she had a crush. She wrongly blames Mano for spreading it, having told no one but him, but he later learns it was his soon-to-be-former friend, Deco, who has a long history of "romantic" conquests. Mano is

shocked when Deco shows him his list of “putas” that he has slept with, and is outraged to see Carol on the list of his current pursuits. Mano gathers a few friends—including a girl whose sexuality he had lampooned earlier—and together they create a “MundoLibre” student group to fight such injustice; he also starts a successful petition to bring back Artur, who has been placed on leave over the incident with Carol.

Pedro, already distraught over his parents’ breakup, spirals into depression when his girlfriend leaves him as well. Eventually, he attempts suicide by overdose, announcing his plans on a personal poetry blog. His father’s lover, Gustavo, has been following the blog with some concern, so it is only through him that Mano is able to track down his brother and get him to the hospital. Mano and his parents visit his brother in the hospital, and Mano plays guitar for him—having been improving considerably—, thereby eliciting a faint hint of a smile, the first from Pedro since his parents’ breakup. He also plays *something* for Carol, this time quite well, who writes in her diary that it was “uma das coisas melhores do mundo.” The film closes with the two of them kissing.

The change in Mano’s perception of what constitutes familial and romantic love, namely the surprise and angst that he and Pedro face when they learn their father is gay, marks the beginning of an identity crisis, one that is allegorical to that of a country facing modern doubts about its own basic self-assumptions. Mano’s friends and family demonstrate adherence to, and confusion about, core cultural values. All of them clearly telegraph their capacity to love, but they struggle to comprehend themselves; in so doing, several of them misdirect their affection and subsequently suffer for their mistakes. Mano’s brother Pedro loses all sense of his own identity when his girlfriend breaks up with him; Carol also misdirects in her love, channeling it into an infatuation with Artur. The resulting uproar of her being seen by Deco kissing her teacher leads to Artur’s firing and a rift between her and Mano, whom she wrongly blames for spreading her secret. In a revealing scene that demonstrates the increasing frequency of such dilemmas, concerned parents meet to discuss the teacher-student scandal; not all of the parents lay the blame on the teacher, telling the others that “as coisas mudaram muito” and that the constant exposure to sexuality in the media has led to a generation of teens that cannot be assumed innocent. It’s an uncomfortable revelation for those who wish to hang on to traditional ideas about love and sexuality, and the clash of opinions between those who recognize new realities and those who do not allegorically represents the larger discourse of a nation coming to grips with its own role and identity in a changing world.

Redemption, however, a return to and reaffirmation of steadfast love, requires only recognition and embracing of the ever-changing present. The world in which the characters live is not what it was three generations ago, much less what it was in the nineteenth century, when Alencar felt the need to invent a national historic past to explain and celebrate the racial hybridity that had already established itself as a defining characteristic of the country. Pedro, recovering in the hospital from his suicide attempt, shows the first hint of recovering his identity only when led to do so by the open display of familial love from Mano and his now-divorced parents. Carol too must face the uncomfortable truths resulting from having lived in a reality built more on her preconceived notions of romantic love than on objective circumstances. When she eventually comprehends and accepts the consequences of having gotten Artur fired, and is disabused of the notion that Mano was to blame for spreading the secret, she is finally able to recognize her romantic feelings toward her friend. Although her circumstances are not what she had planned, her acceptance of the centrality of love to her life signals both an affirmation of her own identity, and the embarkation of a newly shared identity with him. As cultural representatives, both she and Pedro serve to lay bare the crisis of identity of a nation based in traditions trying to navigate modern reality. It is clear that they must adapt to new circumstances while remaining true to core values, just as the nation must.

It is Mano’s experience, however, that most closely emblemizes the modern communal identity crisis and provides a hopeful vision of how the country can reclaim its contested identity by both accommodating the changing world and reaffirming the traditional emphasis on romantic and familial love as central to the Brazilian character. Mano is established early on as representative of the ideal that true love matters more than its sexual expression during his visit to the brothel. The portrayal of the protagonist as both confused and anxious to prove himself, and struggling to adhere to his more innocent and noble nature, endears him to the audience, leading them very quickly through Murray Smith’s (1995) phases of Recognition, Alignment, then Allegiance, and allowing them to participate vicariously in his soul searching. Perspectives aligned, the audience is privy to his development of a concrete self-identity, arrived at by a kind of Lacanian mirroring; Mano does not understand himself or his own values until he is confronted with his other, in the form of his soon-to-be-former friend, Deco (whose role as foil to Mano mirrors that of Álvaro to Peri in *O Guarani*). It is no coincidence that Deco is the only true antagonist in the film; his eschewing of love in favor of sexual

relations and manipulation marks him as a traitor to that cultural touchstone. Mano's defining characteristic, then, becomes the depth to which he bases his thoughts and actions on romantic and familial love; the audience is therefore led to recognize that abandoning this shared value is tantamount to losing one's identity, be it individual or collective, and this agreement of perspective reinforces the importance of love in the popular imaginary of what constitutes the Brazilian character.

The shared identity of the new couple, which is only intimated near the close of the film, can likewise be seen as emblematic. Earlier in the story, Carol attempts to dissuade Mano from pursuing Valéria, a popular, pretty girl with a reputation for promiscuity; she tells him, "elanão tem nada a ver com você, elanão é o seutipo", since valuing sexuality over love is in disaccord with Mano's inherently good character. It takes time for them both to recognize and embrace the vital nature of this value to their identities, and to assert it even in the face of discomforting, changing circumstances, but in so doing they form and agreement of perspective and take the first step to a shared identity, one with which the audience can vicariously participate. Perhaps most important is the implication that the individuals must understand themselves before they can participate in a loving relationship and the shared identity that comes of it; the nation, as an aggregate entity, must similarly understand and come to terms with the disparate, sometimes contradictory elements that compose its whole. Only in doing this can identity remain whole, and wholly adaptable. Mano's primary problem is not who he is, but the doubt that assails him and makes him hesitant to accept his own nature; when the doubt vanishes, the positive identity surges forward. So it could be for the nation, if it could only come to terms with its own doubts and accept societal characteristics as they are, rather than how they should be. Once again, romantic and familial love remain the only constant of this ever-changing Brazilian reality.

It's worth noting that Mano's father, Horácio, and his lover, Gustavo, do not misdirect their love, as do other characters in the film, and therein lays the actual conflict in the story. The consequences of his decision to leave his wife for his graduate assistant disrupt the old order by contesting traditional identity assumptions. His sons are mocked and assaulted by some classmates when one of their classmate's parents is indiscreet about their mother's "shameful" secret. Mano, however, begins to embrace his situation, declaring openly that the hostility of his classmates, not just toward him but toward anyone who does not fit the preconceived notions of normality, is the actual problem. He embraces his own assertions when he comes to understand and respect his father's new life and partner, and thus he lays the foundation for his individual and shared identities. If his experience is emblematic, then the film's contribution to the ongoing popular dialog about the nature and direction of the country is a declaration that the nation must likewise come to understand and accept its individual elements--to love itself, as it were--before it can likewise claim a distinct identity in the world. The disruption of the traditional relationship is portrayed first as a threat to the group identity; when the characters become uncertain of this basic value, they become uncertain of their own identities. Yet, when they come to embrace these changes/nontraditional elements, the doubts regarding their individual identities begin to melt away, and their group identity is reforged and ultimately made stronger—a process not coincidentally similar to the cultural acceptance of hybridity as a positive national characteristic; both also require reliance on romantic and familial love. Adapting to these new internal forces is therefore not a threat to identity but a key to its salvation. Like Mano and his family, the larger society can therefore not only maintain but strengthen its identity in the modern world by coming to terms with its changing internal elements.

### **Appropriating the foreign and the universal**

In emphasizing romantic and familial love as a key to identity realization, *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* continues a long Brazilian tradition--one arguably begun by Alencar himself, and later expanded upon in Oswald de Andrade's (1928) *Manifesto Antropófago*-- of appropriating both explicitly foreign and universal elements to declare a separate identity, and establishing said identity, and establishing this identity in contrast to an internal, previous Other, rather than an external one. Love itself has been one of the most obviously universal themes in art since time immemorial, but in Brazil it holds a particular importance in the conceptualization of social and national identity. Alencar, in emphasizing this universal theme as a core characteristic of the nation's imaginary forefather, takes an explicitly foreign vehicle; *O Guarani* is in many ways a bog-standard imitation of European Romanticism, and yet his success in using this external model to declare a separate Brazilian identity is undeniable. Mano, whose identity crisis can be seen allegorical to that of the nation, also utilizes a distinctly foreign vehicle to pursue love: "Something", by The Beatles. He

admits to his guitar tutor that he wants to learn to play the song in order to get a girl, Valéria. He plays poorly at first, but well enough to briefly gain her favor, and his success is an important lesson for him, since it becomes clear to him very quickly that sex and love are, in fact, not the same thing. Toward the end of the film, however, he has improved, has become himself, and during this process he has appropriated the song and made it his own. Carol says that Mano playing it "ficou em segundo lugar na minha lista das melhores coisas do mundo"; finally finding a romantic partner will naturally be number one. Mano's improvement in playing it mirrors his understanding and acceptance that love is primary, and accepting this national value goes hand in hand with his self-realization and therefore self-love. This declaration of love as central to the identity, and the intimation that this identity can be declared by appropriating foreign and universal elements, recalls Doris Sommer's (1993) observation about Alencar's perspective on the country. She could just as easily have been referring to Mano's realization: "Brazilian society is special, not because of heroic resistance but because of romantic surrender. In portraying this process, the film itself appropriates the universal themes of adolescence and angst and uses them to reflect on the changing nature of Brazilian life, offering, in the end, the vision of reclaimed identity through acceptance.

Brazil's cannibalistic appropriation of the external and the universal effectively negates the traditional role of the foreign other, the foil against which so many former colonies establish their identity. In making Peri the progenitor of the new nation and, therefore, its symbol, Alencar again appropriates a foreign idea for patriotic purposes. Like Chateaubriand's Indian, Peri is exotic, a symbol of the other. He is not representative of either of the binary oppositions, which are wiped out in the end. Therefore, his offspring, intended as the ancestors of the audience, also fall outside that European-born classification system. The European other has become the patriotic self through logical implication, but in failing to meet the definitions of that classification system, he avoids being marginalized by the European hegemony. The cultural identity that is proclaimed, then, refuses to subject itself to Old World definitions, a very subversive feat considering that it stems directly from fidelity to European notions of the Noble Savage.

Having therefore internalized those external elements, Brazil must find its defining other not in the contrast of Brazil and non-Brazil, but rather in how it handles this accumulation of elements. Brazil's ongoing reinvention of itself therefore finds its other in its own past, and in the declaration of an identity that separates it from that past. Alencar repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the role of the past as a key to understanding the present. Taken in its entirety, the novel itself becomes another example of this same technique; Alencar's contemporary Brazil in the outcome, and he presents the reader with a "clarification" of how the current state was created. By doing this, he implies that his contemporary Brazil is a cohesive and comprehensible entity, already possessing an identity which is a result of, but is separate from, its colonial past. In accepting the union of Cecília and Peri as the symbolic founding of the nation, the readers of *O Guarani* "othered" themselves and simultaneously became their own other. This realization functioned as a mirror, allowing the recognition of a common situation and therefore a group identity; this identity was still a new product, just arrived at in a different way than is often the case in such national novels, where the other is European. Alencar's contemporary readers, by accepting this allegorical perspective, participated in the process of group identity formation, in which they agreed that they were separate from, though influenced by, their previous Other.

Likewise, Mano's realization of identity comes only when he is able to define himself against traditional stereotypes and his own past (mis) assumptions regarding the nature of love. The newly shared perspective and group identity that Mano finds with Carol and with his family finds its Other in their previous acceptance of the nature of romantic and familial love, one that no longer fits modern society. If the audience accepts Mano's perspective, then the larger discourse can move in the same direction; once again, Brazilians can redefine themselves against their own past, in which they recognize and accept that the old conceptions of what constitutes Brazilianness are no longer sufficient to encompass such a complex, mature country. There is no divorce from that past, but rather a consumption of the previous other that validates Oswald de Andrade's (1928) assertion that Brazilian culture is cannibalistic in nature. The result is a paradoxical sense of selfhood that must be considered valid to the degree that it is accepted as such by the Brazilian people. Brazil can continue to lay claim to love as a defining cultural value, but only through accepting these new complications, and therefore the country's modern, complex self. In short, communal identity and happiness come from this realization, just as Mano allegorically finds himself, commenting, "Não é impossível ser feliz depois que a gente cresce. Só é mais complicado".

## Conclusion

In both Alencar's foundational novel that sought to explicate a national identity and this modern film that clearly strives only to entertain, love, be it romantic or familiar, plays a primary role in individual and communal self-conceptualization, and the desire to love and be loved can be seen as metonymic of the desire to exist in the eyes of the Other. But since Brazil has become both its self-defining other and self-marginalizing other, these narratives turn out to be exercises in self-justification. Peri's allegorical freedom to unite with Ceci provides the audience with the freedom to look forward, just like Mano's self-realization and freedom to unite with Carole leaves the audience free to look forward, having shared in his declaration of identity through their shared perspective. Both narratives reveal that the only ones who need proof that Brazil has a separate and evolving cultural and national identity are the Brazilians themselves. The medium of visual narrative has to a degree supplanted the novel and will continue to play a crucial role in the communal dialog regarding the nation's values and identity for the foreseeable future. Many films take on the question of national identity as directly and as consciously as Alencar's novel did. *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo*, on the other hand, is a piece of popular art that reveals precisely in its clear attempt to present a universal story the depth to which the acceptance of these ideas regarding identity has taken root in the cultural/national psyche. *O Guarani* establishes familial and romantic love as core national values; *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* examines and questions the nature of that love. Alencar sought to convince his contemporaries that Brazil did indeed have a unique, concrete identity, and he did so successfully by creating a fictional national historic past that emphasized hybridity and utilized the universal theme of love as its establishing vehicle. The persistence of these notions in a popular film like *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* reveals democratization of national identity discourse; it's part of popular media, no longer driven by the educated elite. For this reason, much of the discussion occurs in the cinematic space, which has partly displaced the novel as the primary arena for discourse on the nature of society.<sup>3</sup> It is only natural, then, that the contemporary dialog has moved away from that simplistic assertion and toward a questioning, not of whether or not Brazil has a national identity, but as to what the nature of that identity has become, and what it might be in the future. The exploration and eventual reconciliation of love's role in Mano's self and family identity is therefore arguably as important an artifact of the continual popular discourse regarding the national imaginary as are the films that explicitly explore such questions.

## References

- Alencar, J. (1960). *O Guarani*. São Paulo: Edições Melhoramentos. (Original work published 1857)
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London, UK: Verso.
- Andrade, O. (1928). Manifesto antropófago. *Revista de Antropofagia*, 1(1). 3-7.
- Bodanzky, L. (Director). (2010). *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* [Motion Picture]. Brazil: Gullane Filmes.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). Epic and Novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (pp. 3-40). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Goldmann, L. (1975). *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*. New York, NY: Tavistock Publications.
- Freyre, G. (1961). *The Portuguese and the Tropics*. Lisbon, Portugal: International Congress of the History of the Discoveries.
- Higson, A. The Concept of National Cinema. In A. Williams (Ed.), *Film and nationalism* (pp. 52-68). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002. 52-68.

---

<sup>3</sup> The agreement of perspective between a film's protagonists and the audience is at least as influential as it is in the novel. M.M. Bakhtin's essay "Epic and Novel" posits that the novel is the medium that best captures how we see the world, with language as our primary filter for interpretation. Since our continual experience is grounded in the ever-evolving, inconclusive present, readers connect deeply with novelistic art, which is also an evolving form, grounded in the narration of a constantly unfolding present time.



- Loureiro, C. (1975). *O Último dos Mohicanos e O Guaraní: Duas Visões Paralelas do Novo Mundo*. *Revista Letras*, 24. 111-120.
- Magalhães Júnior, R. (1977). *José de Alencar e sua época*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Civilização Brasileira.
- Martins, H. (1965). Byron e *O Guaraní*. *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 2. 69-74.
- Pitt, K. (1997). National Bodies: Woman as Nation in Latin American Narrative. *Sincronía: A Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(3). 18-26.
- Signorelli Heise, T. (2012). *Remaking Brazil: Contested National Identities in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*. Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press.
- Smith, M. (1995). *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sommer, D. (1993). *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Valente, L.F. (1993). Alencar's Flawed Blueprints. *Homenagem Alexandrino Severino: Essays on the Portuguese-speaking World* (pp. 148-66). Austin, TX: Host Publications.
- Wasserman, R. (1984). Re-inventing the New World: Cooper and Alencar. *Comparative Literature*, 36.130-145.
- Zilberman, R. (1988). Myth and Brazilian Literature. *Literary Anthropology: A New Interdisciplinary Approach to People, Signs, and Literature*, (pp. 141-59). Philadelphia, PA: J. Benjamins Publishing.