

# Book Review

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**Schneider, Nina.** *Brazilian Propaganda: Legitimizing an Authoritarian Regime*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2014. Print.

Nina Schneider offers a history of official propaganda produced in Brazil under the military dictatorship that provocatively unsettles the genre even as it provides a useful accounting of its different organs, agencies, content and production. Under military rule from 1964-1985, Brazil experienced economic growth, modernization, censorship, violence and political oppression. Throughout its rule, the regime struggled to maintain a democratic facade to legitimize their coup as a “defense of democracy” (14). Though militant and aggressive, Schneider argues, “the military regime did not maintain power by force alone but employed subtler mechanisms for manufacturing consent” (16). Exploring the work of two official organs of propaganda, the Special Public Relations Consultancy (AERP, 1968-1974) led by Octávio Costa and its eventual successor, the Public Relations Consultancy (ARP, 1976-1979) led by Toledo Camargo, Schneider reveals a crisis of legitimacy that entangled public, private and government actors while provoking an aesthetic approach to propaganda that eschewed heavy-handed slogans and violent imagery for the utopian, optimistic and affective representations of the people.

Through an archive of small films and other ad campaigns, as well as interviews and a look at reception, Schneider traces how the preoccupation with appearances filtered down to the organs of propaganda, from their structure, “deliberately small and employing an indirect production procedure,” to content that rejected the aggressive and jingoist tactics favored by newsreels and government agencies and organizations (16). Proposing an analytical framework to contend with the “complex category” of propaganda, Schneider marks three primary types: subliminal propaganda attempts to win “general support” for the regime indirectly, while refusing to “intimidate, threaten, construct enemies, or justify violence;” blunt propaganda offers more direct support and praise for the regime; and aggressive propaganda “glorifies the regime by promoting violence,

clearly constructing enemies, creating a personality cult around military leaders, and praising organs of repression” (11-12).

Schneider’s look at the more successful work of the AERP and ARP in chapter two reveals how they turned the camera away from the dictatorship and onto the people, casting Brazilians in utopian, optimistic and socially-conscious campaigns as bodies of influence made complicit in provoking pro-regime sentiment. The AERP and ARP engaged the public through representations of quotidian life, scripting consensus as “everyday subjects that people could relate to, such as family, work, and patriotism,” replacing militant rhetoric with “images and music” (16). Familiar motifs of Brazilian culture are also present, such as the animated *filmete* where an indigenous woman is the embodied Pindorama (a Tupi word for the Brazilian coastal regions), awaiting with anticipation the approaching Portuguese caravels, alluding to Gilberto Freyre’s Lusotropicalist miscegenation (43-45). Another *filmete* recasts the racial democracy myth as a “cross-class and multicultural” orchestra made up of members of different professions (54). Most striking are the *filmetes* that do not rely on national lore, yet resonate through their intense and intimate focus on the body, their use of sensual and sensory experience, and their socially-conscious themes, while new techniques showcased modernization and progress. A pedestrian safety film shows only a red light, while viewers hear the sounds of an accident taking place (48); helicopter shots capture grand frames of the landscape and of young Brazilians climbing a mountain together (34); an animated short shows a son taking his dad to be vaccinated (46); while another *filmete* focuses intently on the sweat of furrowed brows of men to convey the work required for order and progress (57).

Chapter three details other state and private agents of propaganda, from press and advertising agencies to television and radio. Schneider also touches on popular culture, and provocatively notes that “the most repressive years often produced the greatest creative output” (73). Indeed, it is under authoritarian rule that countercultural movements *Tropicália* and *Cinema Novo* emerge. Roberto Schwarz characterized *Tropicália* as “um absurdo” and “um segredo familiar trazido à rua, uma traição de classe” (*As Ideias fora do Lugar*, São Paulo: Penguin, 2014: 24). Christopher Dunn notes *Cinema Novo*’s “caustic and despairing” allegories while *Tropicália* often exhibited “carnavalesque exuberance” (*Brutality Garden*, U North Carolina P, 2001: 86, 88). Despairing,

celebratory, absurd, and revealing, allegory emerges in these countercultural movements as an ambiguous creative distancing from direct criticism. Performers were celebrated and criticized for participating in mass media and mixing foreign elements with Brazilian traditions at a time when preferences for samba or rock music served as proxy for pro or anti-regime sentiments. Considering the growth of the entertainment industry during this time, its substantial state subsidies, and the success of its stars (and under Schneider's rubric of propaganda), ambiguity slips between resistance and complicity.

By bringing the aesthetic of official propaganda into closer view and alongside mass media and countercultural movements, Schneider opens each to the other's critique, from the complicity of subliminal propaganda to its aesthetic ambiguity as possible site of resistance. Interviews with Costa and Camargo reference their own "balancing act" and "suffering" (100). Though in turning toward utopian sentiments they disguised the violence and oppression of the regime, they insist that an aesthetic of optimism and hope was an attempt at resisting from within, claiming to have "wanted a regime in which violence played no part" (103). Schneider allows us to reflect on how a censored, controlled and even complicit people may resist in the every-day and how even within oppressive institutions there are shifting lines of complicity and critique. Recalling Lauren Berlant, optimism may also be cruel and violent, as we make attachments to "compromised conditions of possibility" (*Cruel Optimism*, Duke UP, 2011: 24). When music, cinema and official propaganda provoke such attachments, while the conditions for life remain tied to systems that are obstacles to its flourishing, this history reminds us of the political power of aesthetic forms and affective experience, even as clarity of position may slip away.

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