

# AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

## 'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' an experiment in non-linear, non-hierarchical approaches to film history

This essay is one of the outcomes of the *IntermIdia* project (2015–19). *IntermIdia* was jointly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) and involved a team of researchers working between the University of Reading in the UK and the Federal University of São Carlos in Brazil. As the full title of the project indicates – Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method – the aim was to investigate the potential of intermedial approaches for film history within and beyond Brazilian cinema. The project pursued this goal in a number of ways: publications and conferences, a season of *Tropicália* films at Tate Modern, a Brazilian music film season at Reading Film Theatre and the staging, in São Paulo and Reading, of two silent movie prologues – live dramatic and / or musical performances which were presented as a prelude to feature films – originally performed in Rio de Janeiro in 1926.

Audiovisual essays weren't among the proposed outputs for the project but they quickly became important, with six members of the team collaborating or working individually to produce research in this form. One of the reasons audiovisual essays proved attractive is that they have intermedial

qualities themselves and researchers on the project have explored this potential in various ways. One *video essay* looked at Brazilian musicians' appearances as supporting players in Hollywood movies. *Another* reflects on the relationship between photographs, freeze frames and the moving image in Brazilian cinema.

'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' explores the potential of intermedial methods to offer non-linear and non-hierarchical approaches to film history. It moves between film, popular music, histories of dance and cinema exhibition practice, looking at relationships between different historical periods and national cinemas afresh. The argument is itself expressed intermedially, drawing on photography, film, theatrical performance, music, voice-over and on-screen caption. The essay draws on many of the aspects of cultural history which the *IntermIdia* project has explored: silent movie prologues, *Tropicália*, the musical exchanges of the Good Neighbor policy, and a range of different art forms. In doing so, it moves away from the evolutionary chronologies of more traditional histories, and the old oppositions between classical and modern, centre and periphery, Hollywood and everyone else.

Being able to work with the material features of the films and other media, and to employ some of the formal qualities of film (and video) in shaping the essay's argument, enables the connections which the essay seeks to explore to come to life in unexpected and revealing ways: drawing on the abrasiveness of a cut to emphasise a challenge and jump to a very different production context (as between *Footlight Parade* and *Macunaíma*); split screen to emphasise an overlooked a connection (between 'Sittin' On A Backyard Fence' and 'Cat's Meow'); the opportunity to rewind, pause and replay providing new ways of thinking, for instance, about the back-projected settings of *Notorious* and what they might reveal about different dialogues between Brazil and Hollywood.

The motif of a mind map offers a direct way of establishing the non-linear connections which are integral to the research. A mind map charts journeys and relationships which are neither geographical nor chronological. This map was not created for the video: I chose to use the notebook page on which I had jotted down the different

connections as they revealed themselves. In turn, the informal map acts as an image in which the research journey is introduced as one of the structuring elements of the video. It also indicates a number of potential reference points, not all of which are exhausted, finding a form which captures the open-endedness of a non-linear, non-hierarchical history and contributing to ways in which the essay opens up further areas for enquiry and research.

### JOHN GIBBS

John Gibbs is Professor of Film at the University of Reading. His publications include *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (2002), *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017, co-edited with Douglas Pye) and a number of *audiovisual essays*.

Watch 'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' here:

<https://vimeo.com/335268992>



Cinelândia is the area of Rio where marquee cinemas were constructed in the 1920s