

## **“Black Orpheus” (1959). Director: Marcel Camus (Francia).**

“Black Orpheus” was produced during the years of the so-called Populist Republic, during Juscelino Kubitschek’s government. Elected by direct popular vote, Kubitschek governed until 1961; for many, this was a period of modernization, trust, economic development and political stability.

Even though “Black Orpheus” finds an important source in the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the film is largely based on the play “Orfeu da Conceição” by Vinícius de Moraes (who also composed “A Felicidade” and “O Nosso Amor” for Camus’ adaptation). Both “Orfeu da Conceição” (1940’s) and “Black Orpheus” (1950’s) are works created to be represented entirely by black actors.

“Black Orpheus” takes place in the *favelas* and streets of Rio de Janeiro, amidst its poor residents and black majority. The world of the rich appears only at a distance, included as background in the panoramic shots of the bay. Generally speaking, the film celebrates Brazilian popular culture; the optimism and humor of its people, despite the poverty in which they live.

In order to fully appreciate “Black Orpheus” it is important to understand the notion of *carnival*, a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin (Rabelais and His World). This popular festivity offers an opportunity for the reversal of hierarchies (the oppressed become kings), for laughter, dance, food, drink, sex, life, and death. Rio’s carnival signifies a way out of repression and officialdom. Likewise, the carnival in “Black Orpheus” is constructed as a temporary liberation through street theater, with everyone joining in a simultaneous performance. It is within this context of happiness, exuberance, movement and color that Camus finds, paradoxically, an apt setting for tragedy.