

Introduction

XUXAMANIA

IN 1980, CARLOS DIEGUES made a movie called *Bye Bye Brazil*. In the film, a tiny band of circus performers travel deep into the Amazon in search of a town or even a village that television has not yet reached. They discover that not a single corner of the nation remains untouched by television. *Bye Bye Brazil* commemorates a kind of turning, or no-turning-back, point in Brazilian history by acknowledging the presence of television as a permanent and pervasive feature of cultural discourse. In Brazil, as in the United States, the shapes that flicker on the television screen, and those missing from it, increasingly describe the form and meaning of the world. In the ongoing debate over the significance of the penetration of that medium in contemporary culture, the case of a young woman named Xuxa (shoo-sha) is instructive.

Blond sex symbol Maria da Graça Meneghel, universally known as Xuxa, emerged in the 1980s as a mass media figure of unprecedented dimension in Brazil. By

the end of the decade, she had become the undisputed *rainha* (queen) of mass culture, "the national megastar."¹ Backed by Brazil's TV Globo, the fourth-largest commercial network in the world, Xuxa has built an empire around a television program that is aimed at children but informs the culture at large about ways of being in society. The ideological impact of the entertainment Xuxa provides is all the more powerful for being projected by the sophisticated Globo network at a population more likely to have a television set than a refrigerator or running water.²

Brazil may be unique in the world today in its peculiar combination of a highly developed mass communications industry and an undereducated, needy population that nevertheless watches a lot of television. Brazilians, in fact, are said to watch more television than any other people of the third world.³ Xuxa's television program, saturated with the confining fictions of the status quo, constitutes what one observer called the "cultural diet of over ten million young television viewers, day after day."⁴ The numbers are much higher today than they were when that comment was made in 1989. The "Xou da Xuxa" (Xuxa Show), until very recently a five-hour-a-day, six-day-a-week affair in Brazil, where it first aired in July 1986 on TV Globo, is now broadcast in Latin America in sixteen countries as well as in the United States (on the Spanish-language network Univisión). The English-language version of the program is scheduled to air in the United States in 1993.

Xuxa arouses endless fascination, sometimes awe, and occasionally hostility. Rarely is she viewed with indifference. The star's presence can be so commanding that people burst into tears at the sight of her. Xuxa tells

of miracles that have occurred on the "Xou": a paralyzed child suddenly clapped his hands, and a mute burst out singing.⁵ These stories contribute to the cultlike expressions of devotion the star inspires. When she makes her exit at the end of her television show each day, standing at the door to her spaceship throwing kisses and promising to return soon, a plea rises from the crowd below: "*Volta! Volta!*" (Come back! Come back!). As the spaceship begins its ascent, the huge stage model of the famous Christ the Redeemer statue on top of Corcovado Hill in Rio de Janeiro comes into view on the television screen. The two images compete for the small viewing space until gradually the spaceship shrinks and the Christ grows larger. Finally, all that remains is the familiar religious (and touristic) icon, with one small alteration: two pink neon Xuxa hearts on Christ's chest glow in the stage lights. The iconographic figures of Xuxa and the Christ of Corcovado are thus joined in a joyful, moving, transcendent spectacle. The scene not only indicates Xuxa's stature in Brazilian culture but also illustrates the careful manufacture of the star's image. This kind of seemingly transgressive narrative is consistent with Xuxa's irreverent, permissive style, which, examined more closely, reveals a broad strategy to divert attention from her delivery of a set of messages about control.

In his book *Stars*, Richard Dyer points out that celebrity figures are generally considered politically insignificant since they do not wield any real institutional power. "Because of this belief," the author writes, "the ideological significance of stars is masked and discounted. Just because it is so masked," he argues, "its real political power is all the greater for being less easily resisted."⁶ Xuxa's image, carefully cultivated to serve the interests

of a sponsored medium, is embedded with representations of gender and race as heavily compromised as are her displays of culture and modernity. Xuxa is the embodiment of some of Brazil's deepest contradictions. She also stands for some of its most treasured beliefs and desires. People call Xuxa a Midas, a Sleeping Beauty, a Snow White, a princess, a saint, an idol, a goddess, and a fairy godmother. Her most familiar title is "Rainha dos Baixinhos," or "Queen of Kids," using her special word for children (pronounced by-SHEEN-use). Suspended in a pastiche of labels and associations, Xuxa's image conveys a variety of powerful messages wrapped up in an appealing cloud of sex and drama and fun and money.

According to the *Washington Post*, Xuxa has remarked, "There are children who haven't learned to say 'mommy' or 'daddy' yet, but they know how to say 'Xuxa.' It makes me very happy."⁷ Xuxa's huge success, whether measured by such anecdotal evidence or by the numbers, reveals an unusual mass appeal. The rewards of the public's devotion to Xuxa are not inconsiderable. One article calls her "Our Lady of the Industrial Era, saint of the business community," referring to the profits rendered by an array of enterprises spinning off from the "Xou."⁸ Xuxa's LPs routinely top the sales charts in Brazil (despite the fact that she admits to possessing little musical talent), her films attract huge audiences, and her name on such items as bicycles, surfboards, toys, thirteen types of Xuxa dolls, a monthly magazine with a circulation of 700,000, clothes, shoes, shampoo, cosmetics, jewelry, school supplies, soup, yogurt, and cookies earns her millions of dollars. For live performances, the star receives the highest fees of any Brazilian entertainer. Xuxa owns a chain of clothing shops, a travel agency, a modeling

school, a cattle ranch, a limousine service, and real estate in Latin America and the United States.

The star also shares in the profits earned by the Paquitas—teenaged, blond, Xuxa lookalikes who work as helpers on the show. Now there are also Paquitos, male versions, with their own products. Xuxa's messages are perpetuated through these and other clonelike figures who constitute a text of the future. The fortune she accumulated in just a few years earned her thirty-seventh place on the 1991 *Forbes* list of the world's highest-paid entertainers, accompanied by names like Michael Jackson and Madonna. Xuxa was the first Latin American ever to appear on the list. Only five of the forty *Forbes* slots in 1991 were filled by women. Xuxa's wealth endorses a success myth that contributes to the creation of a larger-than-life figure whose authority in the media marketplace is undisputed in Brazil and whose cultural resonance fills and stretches the imagination.

The clues to deciphering Xuxa's extraordinary projection reside in her image as it is constructed by a variety of media texts. Dyer's discussion of the range of materials involved in the production of film star images applies equally well to Xuxa:

The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and "private" life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage

of everyday speech. . . . Star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual.⁹

Materials such as those that Dyer lists are the kinds of sources used for this study. It is through these texts that Xuxa's image is created—by its consumers as well as its producers—and translated into a narrative of remarkable authority.

Xuxa's image is powerful because it effects a reconciliation of contradictory and incongruous views as it affirms the familiar configurations of the status quo. The Xuxa phenomenon constitutes a tightly controlled, narrowly circumscribed universe of values and attitudes. The star functions as an agent of transcendence, who performs a magic healing of fissures in Brazilian culture by reinforcing a variety of conflicting views of the dominant society, especially those regarding gender and race. Through Xuxa, the public achieves a sense of relaxation of the tensions generated by the gradual but real and public questioning of traditional gender roles, by the deeply troubling and largely denied racism in Brazil, and by the disjunctive experience of inhabiting a society in which the first and the third worlds exist side by side in discordant competition.

Just as in the United States Madonna "raids the image bank of American femininity," Xuxa's stardom draws on reserves of sentiment about gender roles.¹⁰ Her sexually provocative style on television seems at odds with the context of a children's program. Yet the expression of overt sexuality in precisely such a context is fundamental to the star's powerful representation of women in society. Xuxa's mass audiences are drawn to a figure who is able to reconcile views of women that are cher-

ished but as improbable as they are incompatible. The star affirms both the erotic and the domestic roles. Xuxa is the embodiment of the ideal woman, fully dedicated to courting male interest through behavior designed to be sexually stimulating, and at the same time deeply devoted to the task of caring for children. Her caretaker role is enacted literally on the television screen, where she is shown surrounded by adoring children, and symbolically in her role as "Queen of Kids" and national spokesperson for the Brazilian child. Xuxa's erotic performance on children's television maintains the sex symbol image she developed earlier in her days as a *Playboy* model and soft-porn movie actress. By stressing the elements of aggressive eroticism and compliant domesticity, Xuxa's narrative affirms dominant views of gender roles. Her representation of femininity serves the interests of the social hierarchy, perpetuating inequality by working to naturalize the myth of beauty and other mechanisms of disenfranchisement and marginalization.

Xuxa's persistent emphasis on a blond model of beauty is also fundamental to her appeal to mass audiences. She asserts the superiority of whiteness through her own image and its many manifestations, including the blond imitation Xuxas, the Paquitas, who are the envy of virtually every Brazilian girl at one time or another. Blondness is a norm of attractiveness that is inaccessible to most people in Brazil, the country with the world's second-largest number of people of African descent. Yet Xuxa's representation of an all-white aesthetic is symptomatic, not prescriptive. The star's promotion of the white ideal functions only with the complicity of an audience eager to view blond beauty. Xuxa helps Brazilians resolve the conflicting feelings that are naturally aroused by this

predilection by continually asserting her Brazilian identity as she celebrates the blond ideal of beauty. Xuxa's six-year, very public relationship with the most famous black man in Brazil, soccer champion Pelé, is also important to the way her image functions to legitimize what is known as the myth of racial democracy. That myth, which dispenses with racism by means of blanket denial, governs attitudes in Brazil despite evidence of profound and widespread racial discrimination. Xuxa is able to endorse the myth of racial democracy in part by continually reminding the public of the symbolic coupling of black and white that her affair with Pelé represents. In her celebration of whiteness, Xuxa not only taps deep and jealously guarded feelings among Brazilians about race but also asserts the validity of a nearly universal ideological construction wherein the blond female is presented as "the most prized possession of white patriarchy."¹¹

The consumerism promoted on the "Xou" is another seemingly paradoxical feature of the Xuxa phenomenon, given the realities of life in a country where, as one observer put it, "differences in economic capital are among the greatest in the world."¹² Over 70 percent of working people in Brazil earn 250 dollars a month or less; by the end of elementary school 82 percent of students have dropped out; and the poorest 50 percent of Brazilians share only 2.5 percent of the country's national income.¹³ Yet the intensity of the feelings Xuxa arouses is channeled into a first world model of consumption. With its constant and thinly disguised barrage of sales pitches, her program fuels the dream of a profoundly consumer-oriented lifestyle. The central question about television—not What's on? but rather What's not on?—has particularly critical significance in circumstances

such as those in which the advertising-saturated "Xou" operates. One of the important functions of television in Brazil is to supplement or replace the formal education unavailable to the thousands who belong, nonetheless, to the "plugged-in classes."¹⁴

Xuxa's image registers a history of attitudes about gender and race that are not unique to Brazil. These attitudes find expression the world over in a variety of manifestations. In the United States, for example, the Barbie doll, originally a sex toy for adult men, echoes in the imaginations of generations of children.¹⁵ The typical Barbie look is blond and white. The doll's proportions, blown up to human size, would be an anatomically improbable 39-21-33. Yet that representation of ideal femininity, like Xuxa's, has thrived in the promotional environment of consumer culture. Cy Schneider, the man responsible for launching Barbie's ad campaign on television, understood how the doll worked: "Little girls saw Barbie as the young woman they wanted to be someday."¹⁶ The ideals Barbie and Xuxa project, of course, are so far beyond reach that the fundamental lesson learned is about not measuring up. Barbie and Xuxa are icons that play on and feed back a social definition of feminine beauty and perfection. Through television's relentless marketing, Barbie became "the most popular toy in history," and Xuxa emerged as Brazil's "Queen of Kids."¹⁷

There is some resistance in the United States to Barbie's function as a fashion icon selling images of femininity in the form of commodities and sexualizing the body in the interests of marketability.¹⁸ Susan Faludi tells of a young feminist, for example, who defines herself with the slogan "I am not a Barbie doll."¹⁹ By contrast, the ubiquitous image of Xuxa is rarely challenged in pub-

lic discourse in Brazil. The consensus of approval of Xuxa expressed among the general public is one of the most striking aspects of the phenomenon. Some seemingly unlikely endorsements suggest that the desire for consensus itself may govern the appreciation of Xuxa and her version of Brazil. A scene captured by David Byrne and included on his video "Ilé-Ayé: The House of Life" (1989), illustrates the case. The video documentary about African religious practices is set in Salvador, Bahia, the center of African-Brazilian culture. The scene in question takes place inside a community based on the model of African village life and organized around a spiritual center called a *terreiro*. The camera follows a small boy as he enters the walled community. He rounds a corner, and we see a group of about twenty young children. There is music playing and the kids are singing and dancing enthusiastically. The music is a Xuxa song.

The juxtaposition of the sounds of Xuxa in the temple of devotion to Africa is strange and puzzling. What the scene means to the members of the *terreiro* and what kinds of inflections other audiences may bring to their readings of the Xuxa phenomenon are questions that deserve consideration. This study attempts to explore the significance of such a scene by approaching the meaning and authority of Xuxa's image in sociological and semiotic terms. The assumption is that, because Xuxa is a star of unsurpassed magnitude in contemporary Brazilian culture, her image is important in relation to the attitudes and values of the society that grants her stature and yields her capital. This analysis examines aspects of Brazilian culture that are reflected in the defining features of Xuxa's stardom: her representation of femininity, her exclusive white aesthetic, and the promotion of an

idea of culture and modernity predicated on consumerism. These elements of Xuxa's image are the basis for her acceptance as well as the rare rejection, delineating the preferred reading of her narrative as well as the critical one. Since Xuxa shares a symbolic history with blond sex symbols around the world, her story sheds light on patterns of thinking and feeling in other cultures as well, including that of the United States.

The chapters that follow begin with a look at the origins of Xuxa's image. Chapter One shows how, by a combination of chance and calculation, Xuxa emerged in 1983 ready for television with a set of associations that cater to the ideological configurations of dominant attitudes about gender and race in Brazil. Through her modeling career and her six-year relationship with Pelé, Xuxa's image acquired specific features crucial to the iconographic authority that would later prove so appealing and communicate so effectively to mass audiences on television. Chapter Two examines Xuxa on television. Starting with her program on the Manchete network (1983–1986) and continuing after 1986 in ever more produced and penetrating forms on the "Xou da Xuxa" on Globo, the star's image has saturated Brazil with an insistent narrative reinforcing the attitudes and values of the status quo. The nature of the television show formula, its mechanisms and its Xuxacentric design, are discussed in terms of culture, ideology, and profit. Xuxa's flourishing business empire is the subject of Chapter Three. A product of the intense cultivation of allegiance to the star and her encouragement of consumerism as the fundamental expression of that devotion, the empire markets the same messages as the "Xou." Through Xuxa's records, movies, and many other products, her

followers absorb the lessons that inform her projected view of Brazil. Chapter Four examines the "cloning" of the star and places the Xuxa phenomenon in different perspectives to assess some of the possible figurative and substantive meanings it holds for the future of a Brazil now indelibly inscribed with that media-driven model of culture. Finally, Chapter Five considers a critical event in the star's history—the alleged attempt in 1991 to kidnap Xuxa and one of the Paquitas. A turning point in Xuxa's narrative, the episode illustrates the sensitivity of her image as a register of social tensions. The threat to the stability of that beloved and seemingly benevolent sign triggered a national debate about Brazil's idea of itself and hastened the expansion of Xuxa's empire beyond Brazil.