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The Global Sixties

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1960

"Today a new man is being born, fraught with all the fears, terrors and stammering that are associated with a period of gestation."

Michelangelo Antonioni
on the occasion of the viewing of his film *L'avventura*
in Cannes in May 1960 (1)

Brasília – the capital of hope

It was of course a crazy plan: to build a new city in the heart of the virgin, virtually uninhabited interior of Brazil. Yet the idea was almost as old as the country itself. As long ago as 9 October 1821, just before Brazil split away from Portugal, José Bonifacio da Andrade de Silva, the patriarch of the country's independence, spoke of building a capital in the inner centre of the country, which would be linked to all ports and provinces by a network of newly built roads. (2) The name was first suggested in an epilogue to what was to become the country's Constitution: "Brasília or something similar".3 Ceremonious speeches, commissions and expeditions followed and, when Brazil became a republic in 1891, article 3 of the new Constitution decreed that the new capital in the country's centre now had to be built. For many decades, however, Brasília seemed doomed to remain a distant dream, despite there being excellent reasons for carrying out the plan. If Brazil ever wanted to be anything other than a belt of rich coastal cities and an interior that remained underdeveloped in so many respects, that interior would have to become genuinely integrated in the economic, administrative and cultural fabric of the country. Its natural resources could be exploited and its vast space developed to house the many extra millions of inhabitants the country would undoubtedly have to accommodate. It would also send out an unmistakable signal to the rest of the world: as a beacon of modernity and progress, the new Brazilian capital would prove that, even in apparently inaccessible areas, humankind could create whole new regions that promised to substantially improve the living conditions of millions of poor people. For a country that – given its size and cultural riches – felt it should be a leading nation, building Brasília was the ideal vehicle to finally fulfil that ambition. The only problem was that no one seemed to have the political will to ensure that Brazil lived up to its own Constitution. No one, that is, until a leader emerged who was as megalomaniac and visionary as the plan itself. As mayor of Belo Horizonte, Juscelino Kubitschek

-a Francophone bookworm of Czech origin - had shown that he possessed enormous energy, together with above average administrative skills and a conspicuous taste for the modern. In the early 1940s, together with architect Oscar Niemeyer, he had completed a series of projects in the Pampulha district of the city, which were considered innovative, to put it mildly. The building of the new capital was, however, not part of the programme for his presidential campaign in 1955. In the still politically and administratively unstable Brazil, he hoped to be elected by promising to strictly enforce all rules and laws. During a campaign visit to the remote town of Jataí, one sharp listener asked if that also meant that he would respect the article in the Constitution that called for a new capital to be built on the Brazilian plateau, more or less on the spot where the honourable candidate was then standing.4 Completely surprised by the question, Kubitschek could do little else than reply that all provisions in the Constitution were equally important. Hardly having recovered from what he had promised, the extremely opportunistic politician realised that Brasília would be the perfect showpiece for his ambition to put the country on the map. 'Fifty years progress in five years' was his campaign slogan and, if the capital could be built during his term of office, he would have fulfilled that promise. To express that progressive ideal architecturally, he would ask his old friend Niemeyer to design the most prominent buildings. On 19 September 1956, less than eight months after he had been sworn in as president, the Brazilian parliament approved Kubitschek's plan to move the country's capital from Rio de Janeiro. Before the month was out, a competition was announced to determine which design would be executed for the new city of Brasília.

[...]

The city was to be modern and functional – each social sector would have its own district and administrative and residential areas were to be strictly separated. Above all, it was to be a social city. All income groups must be welcome there and – unlike the rest of the country – slums were to be avoided at all costs. The latter in particular soon proved easier said than done. Even before his plan had been selected, thousands of workers had converged on the intended building site. While Costa was elaborating his plan and Niemeyer was still perfecting his designs, a *Cidade Livre* (Free City) arose in the area. It lived up to its name; the Wild West atmosphere was the complete opposite of the planned world that had been envisaged in the new Brasília. Niemeyer himself visited *Cidade Livre* regularly, as though he, too, realised that pure formalism in life was not enough. That realisation was, however, hardly reflected in the new city. Niemeyer's architecture may have been somewhat less Spartan than other modernistic projects, but no one who saw it would call it spontaneous or a cosy place to spend one's time. Admittedly, the government buildings in the centre were wonders of poetry and elegance, as light and imposing as Niemeyer's visionary client had imagined. The buildings were modern through and through, but the curved lines he used everywhere made them just as refined and opulent as Brazilian colonial architecture had been. The spirit of Le Corbusier may have inspired Niemeyer and Costa, but those directly involved did not see Brasília as a European project at all, but as a local one, expressing steadily growing Brazilian self-awareness.

[...]

Not every building could be given the same attention. Kubitschek knew that the move from Rio would have to be irreversibly set in motion before his term of office ended, so the work went ahead at an insane pace. Some buildings were completed in less than fifteen days. Enormous lighting systems were installed to allow the work to continue at night. Schools, office buildings and churches rose up from the ground. The president made regular visits to check on progress and spur the workers on. In December 1959, he had a heart attack but, only a fortnight later, was back on the

job. And the unbelievable came true: on 21 April 1960, exactly on schedule, Brasília was officially inaugurated. (5)

Footnotes

(1) http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/100-l-avventura-cannes-statement
(2) This passage is based on Eskelund 1960, Kievid 1960, Nelson 1960, Sodré 1960, Sutton 1961, Augelli 1963, Skidmore 1967:163-186, Holston 1989, Altman (no date), and especially Arnau 1961, Shoumatoff 1987 and Alexander 1991.
(3) Shoumatoff 1987:18.
(4) The Constitution did not specifically state that the city should be located in Goiás, the state where Kubitschek was campaigning at that moment, but ground studies during the search for a suitable site in the *Planalto Central* (the central highlands of Brazil) pointed very strongly in that direction.
(5) Of course, the city was far from finished, but the buildings for the president, parliament, the supreme court, eleven ministries, more than 3,000 houses, a hospital, a series of schools and churches, and a hotel were ready and the basis had been laid for the national theatre and the cathedral.

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Beats, *Nozems* and *Halbstarken*

In these years, the vigour and energy of the Third World contrasted sharply with the self-doubt of the First. Even countries that were not having to deal with the loss of empire seemed to be weighed down by a burden that was not in keeping with the self-image of scientific progress, economic prosperity and moral superiority that the West – even after Auschwitz and Hiroshima – took for granted. The most difficult years of post-war reconstruction had passed quietly into history and the words of the British Conservative Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in 1957 – that most people "had never had it so good" – were true in large parts of Europe, the United States and Australia. (6) But that rapidly increasing prosperity did not initially lead to a widely held faith in the future. Officially, in the late 1950s, the rhetoric of progress rattled on unabated, but the way in which the mass media and the mainstream cinema portrayed the younger generation sometimes tended towards self-loathing. Complaints about 'the young people of today' were, of course, nothing new but the persistent, almost cultivated moral panic that held Western societies in its grip went much further. Were young people really a threat to civilisation or was civilisation indeed bankrupt and only the young dared to say it out loud?

The focus of all attention and energy were young people who flagrantly refused to toe the line. Many of them came from the working class, making it even more confrontational for the elite: with their deliberately anti-social and extravagant behaviour, those who were supposed to be taking the lead in the process of reconstruction were sticking their middle finger up to society. In the 1950s, practically every country and language in the First and Second World devised a term for these groups. In Britain, they were known as teddy boys, in French as *blousons noirs* or *tricheurs*, in German as *Halbstarken*, in Swedish as *raggare*, in Australia as bodgies, in South Africa as ducktails or *eendsterte*, in Japan as *taiyo zoku*, in Poland as *chuligans* (hooligans), in Russia as *stilyagi*, and in Dutch as *nozems*. (7)

As with practically everything else after 1945, this problem seemed to come from the United States. There, they were called 'juvenile delinquents', though their behaviour was by no means always criminal in the legal sense. But these youngsters – also called 'greasers' because of their heavily

oiled quiffs – were certainly seen as an unacceptable threat to respectable society. Take Johnny Strabler, the leading figure in the 1953 film *The Wild One*. Johnny creates a disturbance wherever he goes. He drifts from one fight to another and openly robs stores, not for what he can steal, but just for kicks. He is a tearaway, who understands that there is no easier way to stand out in the crowd than to misbehave. All he seems to care about is his motorbike. Not to ride anywhere in particular, just to cruise around with his gang and to see what happens. Their jackets bear the letters 'BRMC', for Black Rebels Motorcycle Club. When a woman asks him what they are rebelling against, he replies, 'Whadda you got?' The actor who uttered this classic phrase, Marlon Brando, became one of the greatest post-war icons, and was considered the ultimate embodiment of cool, especially in his younger years. That applied even more, if possible, to James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), a title that pretty much summed up the syndrome. What drove these young people? And how did it get this far?

In the 1950s in the United States, these questions led to hearings in the Senate. Although the senators were obviously not able to interrogate these fictional heroes, they did call on the help of a wide variety of specialists to investigate the role played by comic strips, films and other expressions of popular culture in creating a climate in which excesses could not only occur, but were actually embraced by a large proportion of young people. (8) Similar studies were conducted elsewhere in the world and, by 1960, there was clearly space for more nuanced arguments. A year earlier, at a Home Office conference in Great Britain, there had been calls for the reintroduction of corporal punishment, but now the Albemarle Report – commissioned by the government – concluded that, though crime and violence among young people had certainly increased, it had to be seen as a response to the rapid changes in society. The problem was not caused by the intrinsic badness of individual youngsters, but was "deeply rooted in the soil of a disturbed modern world". (9) When UNESCO called together specialists from all over the world in the summer of 1960 to discuss the issue, similar voices were raised.

The representative from India reported that the problem was unknown in his country and wondered whether it was typically one that occurred in more prosperous societies? The question was its own answer. The Polish delegate tended to agree, saying "Our country is industrialising very rapidly and this is the toll we are paying for it. In less than a decade, five million young people have migrated from the countryside to the cities and industrial centres. Families and neighbourhoods have been torn apart. That is the cause of this crisis of values." (10) In an extensive report in early December, *Paris Match* blew hot and cold. It spoke of "one of the greatest problems of our times", "spreading like a cancer", adding that it was most certainly a "sickness of youth", yet at the same time it believed that the majority of young people could still be "saved" for society; they were bored, felt themselves misunderstood, and could rarely find work that gave them any kind of satisfaction. According to the magazine, these were all problems that society as a whole had to address. "Apart from the social aspects," it said, "the problem of the *blousons noirs* especially raises questions about our civilisation itself." (11)

After an extensive study of the international literature, Louis Paul Boon came to a similar conclusion in his 1960 book *Op zoek naar nozems* (Looking for Nozems). In his guise as 'Boontje', the chronicler of the socialist paper *Vooruit*, he claimed that older people who just carried on working and talking regardless also sometimes had the feeling that "the engine is running aimlessly somewhere in empty space" but that they tried to suppress the demons this called up; young people, on the other hand, had given up trying.12 From his perspective, too, the *nozems* were symptoms of a broader moral crisis.

Boon also identified a crucial cultural aspect. These teenagers were now rich enough to form a separate target group for the culture industry, which tried to sell them all kinds of new gadgets, clothes and musical hypes. The 'youth problem' was also deliberately exploited in films, in the knowledge that young people like nothing better than to look at other young people. The result was that this behaviour was presented as a cultural norm – this is what the young people of today are like – which did not necessarily have to correspond to reality, but which easily influenced youngsters might imitate. (13)

[...]

And perhaps, if Dutch singer Wim Bitter is to be believed, their fathers had got over the worst initial shock. On a little known B-side of a 1960 single, entitled *Teenager muziek*, Bitter sang "*De vaders maakten zich eerst kwaad en zeiden allemaal / We komen in een kliniek terecht door dit barbaars kabaal / Maar heel gauw zijn ze omgezwaaid en vinden Presley fijn / En denken als Paul Anka zingt weer teenager te zijn.*"(The fathers first got angry and all said / We'll end up in a clinic with this infernal row / But they soon changed their tune and like Presley now / and feel like teenagers again when they hear Paul Anka sing).14 By 1960, the music was indeed no longer considered infernal. And why should it have been? Anyone who mentions Elvis and Paul Anka in the same breath – not at all unusual in those days – has little to fear from this music. In 1960, Paul Anka had a major hit with *Puppy Love* and Elvis, just back from his army service in Germany, with *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*. If rock music was supposed to be about expressing sexual energy in rhythm and ruthlessly dismissing anyone who was old or square, there was little left of that in the songs that were popular in that year. Very few of them even qualified as rock songs. The greatest hit of the year in the Netherlands was *Milord*, which had been recorded not only by Edith Piaf, but also by Dutch artists Corry Brokken and the Dutch Swing College Band. In West Germany, music fans bought *Banjo Boy* by the Danish brothers Jan & Kjeld *en masse*, while Norway was under the spell of Rocco Granata's *Marina*. In the United States, Brian Bryland's summer hit *Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polkadot Bikini* was considered daring, while in England, the widely popular *Please don't Tease* by Cliff Richard was equally unlikely to provoke unacceptable behaviour. "Oh, please don't tease me," Cliff crooned. "You know it hurts so much / Come on and squeeze me / You know I need your tender touch". (15) Whatever next? Teddy boys crying?

[...]

As far as the film industry was concerned, however, Boon certainly had a point. After all, young people rarely, if at all, went to see films together with their parents, so for a long time there was hardly any control on exploitation of the theme of rebellious youth. Parents – or more precisely, the censorship authorities – did of course still have to approve the portrayal of extravagant and often criminal behaviour. The solution was simple, and was used for films like *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and the German film *Die Halbstarken* (1956): during the opening scenes a message was shown stating that what followed did indeed highlight a serious social problem, but one that could only be combated through greater public awareness. The films were thus presented as moral warnings for those youngsters who, fortunately, were still on the right path and showed them what might happen if they strayed away from it. The deviant behaviour that followed, however, was often presented as spectacularly and attractively as possible, as an inevitable response to the other-worldliness of parents and society as a whole.

Of the long list of films on this theme that came out in 1960 [see: 10 films from 1960 about the youth problem], the British *Beat Girl* and the American drama *The Wild Ride* are perhaps the best examples. The beat girl in question not only loves dancing and beat music (by John Barry, who was

later to compose the soundtrack for James Bond), but also becomes fascinated by striptease and dangerous games in which she and her friends must above all not appear to be cowards: they nearly kill each other with fast cars and – even better – put their heads on the rails when a train is coming and see who dares to leave it there the longest. This desire to see who is the biggest 'chicken' is also a central theme in *The Wild Ride*. In both films, the protagonists eventually come to their senses, but that has little impact on their friends. And why should it? The lives of these youngsters are far too exciting and those of the people around them far too 'square'. This is how the Beat Girl and Bardot-lookalike sees her own father – who, as a visionary architect designing a completely new, Brasília-like city, is himself a beacon of modernity. The point is clear: this new generation flirts with death as a reaction to their parents' blind and, in their eyes, blinding faith in progress.

In Andrzej Wajda's Polish contribution to the genre, *Niewinni czarodzieje* (released in English as *Innocent Sorcerers*), Bohemian youngsters are so aware of the sociological clichés doing the rounds about them that they devise mock-serious dialogues analysing them: "Old people say that we, the young, only have eyes and ears for ourselves. That may be true. But how could we be any different? Our generation has no illusions. It is clear to us that we know nothing at all of the world in which we live... That is the reason for our fears, for our rebellion against the establishment. We know that we are alone and lost." The message was not appreciated by the authorities or the Polish Catholic church, but touched a nerve at the beginning of the new decade which resonated far beyond solely the 'problem of youth'. (16)

Footnotes

(6) For the context of MacMillan 'quote, see Sandbrook 2005:79-80.
(7) There were also similar groups in the Third World. See, for example, Plageman 2012:167-168 on the 'Tokyo Joes' in Ghana, a phenomenon that the authorities put down to an unhealthy obsession with rock 'n' roll, a style of music that, in their opinion, had nothing to do with the culture of Ghana.
(8) The standard work on this controversy is Gilbert 1986.
(9) Sandbrook 2005:448. A report from the British Home Office, also from 1960, equally emphasised the fundamental and disorienting uncertainty facing young people on so many fronts (idem: 453).
(10) Jean Cau, '*Les enfants du siècle*'. *L'Express*, 9 June 1960, 31-32.
(11) Jean Maquet, '*Nous sommes des blousons noirs. Pourquoi?*' *Paris Match* nr. 608 3 December 1960, 92-97.
(12) Boontje 1960:8.
(13) Idem:35-36.
(14) Quoted in Meijer 2003:160.
(15) Information on the Dutch pop charts comes from Bouwman 1994; American information from Billboard and/or http://www.bobborst.com/popculture/number-one-songs-by-year, which also has information on the Australian and British charts; for Germany and Norway, see http://www.chartsurfer.de/musik/uebersicht/jahrescharts/single/1960.html
16 Information on the film's reception in Poland from Michal Oleszczyk, 'The Best of Youth: Andrzej Wajda's Innocent Sorcerers', booklet accompanying the Second Run DVD issue of the film in 2012.

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10 films from 1960 about the youth problem

- Harvey Berman, *The Wild Ride*: a young Jack Nicholson plays a charismatic and yet insufferable gang leader who always gets the better of the cops and finally ends up with the death of a friend on his conscience. When the law finally catches up with him and he

realises the error of his ways, his successor is already there in the wings waiting to take over.

- Marcel Carné, *Terrain Vague* (Wasteland): this sociological study, beautifully filmed by veteran Marcel Carné, was dismissed by the left-wing film media as fake and a caricature but watched by almost two million French cinema-goers. Other than most films of this genre, it focuses not on the misconduct of bored middle-class youngsters, but on the problems and social mores of young workers who live in the new Paris suburbs and hang around empty factories destined for demolition and on the wasteland around them.
- Henri-Georges Clouzot, *La vérité* (The Truth): Brigitte Bardot's best role in a courtroom drama about a young woman who idolises Marlon Brando and kills a respectable music student. Controversial, but a box office success and nominated for an Oscar, it shows BB as amoral and sensual as always, but the way in which her character acts within and outside the courtroom is also a clever comment on her own public image.
- Jean-Luc Godard, *À bout de souffle* (Breathless): innovative in style and awarded the Silver Bear in Berlin, this film depicts the amoral behaviour and senseless violence practised by a young man who goes into hiding with a young American girl who sells newspapers. An unexpected hit with the public and a breakthrough for Jean-Paul Belmondo, it is considered one of the great classic films of the decade.
- Edmond T. Greville, *Beat Girl* (released in the USA as *Wild for Kicks*): British exploitation film about an art student who is jealous of her strikingly young stepmother and who is only looking for kicks in a world that seems doomed to blow itself apart.
- Philip Leacock, *Take a Giant Step*: for a change, this unique American drama features a rebel *with* a cause. A young black boy is expelled from school and tries, despite the flagrant discrimination in their white neighbourhood, to embrace the middle-class values of his parents. Premiered in America in December 1959, but was distributed more widely in 1960.
- Nagasi Oshima, *Taiyō no Hakaba* (The Sun's Burial): a shocking portrait of nihilistic and extremely violent youth gangs in Osaka. The land of the rising sun has become the land of the setting sun, wrenched loose from its own culture and traditions. In this same year, Oshima made two more films on the same theme. In Cruel Story of Youth, young outcasts who think they are smarter than everyone else discover to their shame that there are always people who are more violent and determined. The older generation has lost all control as a consequence of its moral redundancy after defeat in the war and because it can do nothing to stop the march of liberal materialism.
- Fons Rademakers, *Makkers staakt uw wild geraas* (That Joyous Eve): the storyline of delinquents in Amsterdam refusing to celebrate the Dutch tradition of St. Nicholas with their parents suggests unjustly that the Dutch contribution to this genre is far from exciting. The scene in which the mother and a girlfriend look for the son's favourite jazz record in a record shop and finally find the answer from St. Nicholas remains irresistible.
- Gordon Vorster, *Die vlugteling* (The Runaway): reactionary drama about South African youngsters who exchange the natural order of the countryside for the city and become embroiled in a life of money, violence and cheap entertainment, and who provoke respectable Afrikaner society by using English words. The police restore public order and, after a Bible reading, the 'ducktail' who survives it all finally sees the error of his ways.
- Andrzej Wajda, *Niewinni czarodzieje* (Innocent Sorcerers): this was Wajda's first film after the Second World War trilogy that had brought him worldwide fame. It addresses a contemporary issue, the young generation in Poland, with a mixture of irony, cynicism and existentialism. There is jazz (by the great Krzysztof Komeda) and strip poker, but no goal, no meaning, no Creation of an Ideal Socialist State and no Progress.

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10 songs from 1960

- African Jazz, ‘Table Ronde’
- Bob Azzam, ‘Ya Mustapha’
- La Vern Baker, ‘Saved’
- Eddie Cochran, ‘Three Steps to Heaven’
- The Crickets, ‘I Fought the Law’
- João Gilberto, ‘Samba De Uma Nota Só’
- Johnny Kidd & The Pirates, ‘Shaking all over’
- Babatunde Olatunji, ‘Kiyakiya’
- Mongo Santamaria, ‘Cha Cha Rock’