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CINEMA AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL Arthur Autran

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One of the richest yet insufficiently analysed aspects in Brazilian cinema today is the resurgence of politics as a key issue in many aesthetically relevant films which, at the same time, contribute to the broadening of the country's political debate. Unlike what can imagine the inattentive viewer, *Aquarius* (Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2016) is not an isolated case, although it is certainly the most significant. For various reasons: for its great quality, for what it proposes to discuss, and also because the moment of its release coincided with the strong political crisis characterized by the rise of the illegitimate government of Michel Temer.

As I see it, good news in such difficult times are the fact that some directors be willing to discuss political issues in many different ways. It appears that after the omnipresence of politics in the Brazilian *auteur* cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the films of directors connected to the "Cinema Novo"¹ [New Cinema] and the "Cinema Marginal"² [Marginal Cinema], there has been a search for other topics from the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s, with policy being seen as something minor and, at best, as a background.

My proposal of periodization makes a parallel to the one exposed by Ismail Xavier to delimit the modern Brazilian cinema, especially by placing its ending mark in the mid-1980s. During this period, are released the seminal *Memoirs of Prison* (*Memórias do Cárcere*, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1984) and Twenty years later (*Cabra marcado para morrer*, Eduardo Coutinho, 1984). Adapted from the Graciliano Ramos' book and released in the beginning of political *détente*, *Memoirs of Prison* is understood by Ismail Xavier as an allegory of the dictatorship's years. Xavier describes the documentary *Twenty years later* as a "film-synthesis", since it "recapitulates a whole process of debate in Brazilian films with the national political life" (Xavier, 2001, p.36).

My hypothesis, to be confirmed by a more accurate survey, is that the picture begins to change again in the 2000s for reasons yet to be analyzed. In this period, four documentaries played an important role by unveiling different aspects of Brazilian politics: *Entreatos*³ (João Moreira Salles, 2004), *Peões*⁴ (Eduardo Coutinho, 2004), *Vocação do poder*⁵ (Eduardo Escorel and José Joffily, 2005) and *Obywatel Boilesen* (*Cidadão Boilesen*, Chaim Litewski, 2009).

The first one accompanies the presidential campaign of Lula in 2002 and, among other things, reveals an extremely charismatic leader and the central role played by marketing issues in elections campaigns. The second one addresses diverse trajectories of workers who campaigned with Lula in the workers' strikes of the late 1970s. The third one accompanies some candidates for city councilor in Rio de Janeiro in 2004, demonstrating the diversity of profiles of politicians (rather than their ideological differences) in contrast to the political apathy, extreme poverty and the persistence of various forms of clientelism. Finally, the fourth film deals with the participation of an important businessman in repression and torture of political prisoners in the years of dictatorship, revealing a face little discussed of the relationship between civilians and the military in that period.

Also worthy of mention is the fiction *Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within* (*Tropa de Elite 2: o inimigo agora é outro*, José Padilha, 2010), the biggest blockbuster in the history of Brazilian cinema, with more than 11 million tickets sold. This film, one of the few that deals with the links between institutional politics and organized crime in Brazil, seems to me insufficiently analyzed, as critics have made a very straightforward translation of the the central character positions, the famous Captain Nascimento (personage of Wagner Moura) for what would be the ideology of the movie and even the director himself. The other side they did not realize is that Captain Nascimento resumes an extremely significant journey. With his violence, megalomania and intolerance, he has become one of the most remarkable characters with these characteristics for the Brazilian film's audience, integrating a lineage in which align Antônio das Mortes (lionized by Maurício do Valle, from Glauber Rocha's films *Black God*, *White Devil* and *Antonio das Mortes*) and Coffin Joe (created and played by the brilliant José Mojica Marins in several films). They also feature the same characteristics previously listed. All three are distressed and seek through violence to change everything, having a kind of tragic awareness of the need for change and the difficulty to change something in Brazil. All three characters are also truly intolerant, especially with the manifestations of a people's behavior they think is wrong.

Due to the space available for this discussion and also the time it had to prepare this article, I set somewhat arbitrarily, but not so much, the year of 2013 as the initial timeframe for the debate I would like to propose. Namely, how the current Brazilian cinema has been presenting the discussion on politics - understood here in a narrower sense, ie involving professional politicians, parties, unions, social movements, elections, guerrilla, political repression, etc..⁶ The year of 2013 as a mark arises from outside the field of cinema and refers, of course, to the street demonstrations of June. These seemed to announce a more autonomous and active participation of people in political life, but this proved unfounded or at least had no organic continuity, as it is clear that this move was somehow appropriate by right wing groups and parties.

In 2013, the most significant film in terms of representation of political experience was *Tattoo (Tatuagem)*, of Hilton Lacerda. Through artistic activities of the *Chão de Estrelas* group in Recife, in the late 1970s, this fiction draws up a generous frame of sex, loving, aesthetics and political liberation within the Brazilian repressive context those years. The story of Fininha (played by Jesuíta Barbosa), who even being a soldier in the army finds out the possibility of a freer life through loving and intellectual contact with the leader of the group, Clécio (personage of Irandhir Santos), is an index that things can change and even the most heinous repression can fully suppress the desire that everyone carries with him.

It is interesting that in the following year, two films of different genres, although both wishing to reach the general public, addressed directly political issues: the comedy *O candidato honesto*⁷ (Roberto Santucci), and the historical drama *Getúlio*⁸ (João Jardim). On the first movie, starred by Leandro Hassum and that has reached more than two million viewers, I believe, as Jean-Claude Bernardet (1978) when analyzing chanchadas⁹ and Mazzaropi¹⁰ comedies, that one cannot simply disregard the discussion around films considered as folksy. Although naive and moralistic most of the time, Santucci film draws attention to the charismatic aspect present in some political leaders to get adhesion of the most different types of supporters and voters. It emphasizes also the belief in the family as the irreducible instance of morality, with which even the worst individuals have commitments. After all, it is through the curse put by the grandmother that the politician played by Leandro Hassum goes to tell only the truth. Despite the tragic appeal of the story of Getulio Vargas, the production efforts and the good work of Tony Ramos in the leading role, the second film is a melodrama that reduces to personal issues all the complex political network that brought that leader to suicide. This is somehow indicative of Brazilian political culture. The film, however, does not criticize this feature, it rather ratifies it as is structured dramatically based on this kind of relationship.

But not everything comes down to commercial cinema in 2014: the documentary *Retratos de Identificação*¹¹, of Anita Leandro, and the experimental *Avanti Popolo* (Michael Wahrmann) went through other paths. By means of depth research, Anita Leandro's film features photographs of political prisoners tortured by agents of the military dictatorship. There are even pictures of people before being arrested and after the torture sessions, demonstrating a whole orchestration of barbarism. Without falling into any kind of emotional complacency, the work shows great rigor and brings to the center of the discussion the crimes committed by the military dictatorship, its form of organization and the fact that the torturers went unpunished, although people have died in torture sessions or as a result of the serious consequences arising therefrom. The main form of resistance is now the memory, its construction, so that the crimes committed by agents of the State on behalf of fighting communism are not vanished. *Avanti Popolo* also works with the issue of memory and the difficulty of its constitution. In the film, an old father - played by Carlos Reichenbach - misses his son, emigrated to the Soviet Union, but at the same time, he cannot interact with his other son, who stayed in Brazil, played by André Gatti. Revolution is then nothing but songs with left-wing content featured on a nostalgic radio show and old images from the Soviet Union. Youngsters - and, who knows, the director himself? - cannot fully understand what is happening between the two older generations. At most they film, but it is not easy to understand this house in ruins in which father and son imprison themselves - would it

be the socialist utopia or the very idea of Brazilian cinema linked to a national liberation conception?

In 2015, I highlight two films by two young filmmakers rooted outside the Rio-São Paulo axis: *Depois da chuva*¹² (by Claudio Marques and Marília Hughes) and *White Out, Black In* (*Branco sai, preto fica*, by Adirley Queirós). The first one is a Bahian production in which young people who are completing high school live the climate of political turmoil due to the possibilities opened by the movement for "Direct Elections Now". It is a moment of irremediable decay of the dictatorship, which leaves its mark on the clear conventionalism of the school where Caio studies - this is the central character, played by Pedro Maia. It is interesting to see how the film associates the maturing of Caio - or the beginning of his passage to adulthood - with the country's re-democratization process, especially as, in an elegant way, drawing attention to the problems of this transition, which was, ultimately, more than mitigated. After all, neither Brazil marked by the tradition of political accommodation, nor the middle class young Caio, leave any room for "extremism". Again, it is in the family - the mother - that Caio literally finds a lap for his troubles.

The Adirley Queirós' movie is anchored in a real fact: the invasion of a ball by policemen in Ceilândia, in the 1980s, which left two young black men - who appear in the film - with consequences for life. One of them became paraplegic and the other, lost a leg. But to tell us this, we have a science fiction narrative: the Cravalanças character - played by Dilmar Durães - comes from the future to collect evidence against the Brazilian State for having perpetrated this crime. A DJ chronicles what happened at the ball, and who plays this character is the paraplegic boy, Marquim do Tropa. Directed by a Ceilândia director, the film makes the case against the Brazilian State for murdering African-Brazilian youth, judging it and condemning it, without any remission. This is perhaps the most radical film among all analyzed in this text, both in political terms, since in its final, Brasília is attacked, as in formal terms, given the mix of seemingly irreconcilable genres such as documentary and science fiction, and also its disjunctive narrative.

Also in 2015, the documentary *Tudo por amor ao cinema*¹³ by Aurélio Michiles merits attention. This is a biography of Cosme Alves Neto, who led for many years, the Cinematheque of the Museum of Modern Art, in Rio de Janeiro, having been persecuted by the dictatorship because of his political militancy. Lyrically, the documentary portrays a personality who abdicated of bourgeois life, choosing to dive into the passion for cinema and politics. In other words, Cosme figure totally odds with exacerbated individualism and reactionary political discourse that characterize our times, making him an example of other ways of living and thinking.

This year, two films present very consistently the political discussion: Unfortunate young people, or a man screaming is not a dancing bear (*Jovens infelizes, ou um homem que grita não é um urso que dança*) by Thiago B. Mendonça, and *Aquarius*, by Kleber Mendonça Filho. In an inventive way, and through a complex use of flashback that chains scenes somewhat independent of each other, Unfortunate young people recounts the misadventures of an anti-capitalist youth community that violates conventional social rules. Its members open up for diverse sexual and loving experiences, for invention in the artistic field, but also for open confrontation with supposed order keepers such as traditional politicians and the police itself. Here, the

formal experiment combines with the social experiment that the film wants to narrate generating a strength that few Brazilian films have presented in recent years. It is exemplary the scene in which members of the group, after escaping from the police in the street demonstrations of 2013, enter an old cinema that exhibits *Buccaneer Soul* (*Alma Corsária*, Carlos Reichenbach, 1993) and they stand watching one of the most beautiful moments of this masterpiece. As the film critic Jairo Ferreira would say, it is all about "intergalactic tuning" (2000, p. 182-183).

Aquarius, on the other hand, proposes an eloquent allegory on the Brazilian transition to democracy and its heavy heritage in the present time. Let's see: the film is divided into two moments. Its first part is set in the year 1980, and we learn in it that Clara (played in this part by Barbara Colen) and her family went through difficult times the year before. In the second part, which takes place today and occupies the largest portion of the film, we find that the journalist Clara (now played by Sônia Braga) had breast cancer in 1979, is already retired, her husband died and her children are adults. She remains, however, very active doing physical exercises, going out with friends and writing. Her apartment, already seen in the first part of the film, faces the Praia do Pina, located in the city of Recife. It is very important in her life as besides sheltering books and discs, it keeps a strong memory. It happens that an estate company bought the other apartments of the building and starts to press Clara, in all legal and illicit ways, wanting her to sell her residence as well. In the end, discovering that even termites were introduced into the building by the company, Clara goes to the firm's office and throws a termite nest on the boardroom table.

My personal reading of *Aquarius* tends to interpret it as an allegory, and in that sense the reference to 1979 is central. As we know, this was the year of the Amnesty Law and, at the diegetic level, is the year Clara contracted cancer. She resisted the disease but its marks stayed on her body and make her suffer. This excised cancer does not seem to have completely disappeared: it "returns" in the form of termites that gradually destroy the building. Clara does not know what is happening until some workers tell her the truth. It is as if the cancer reappears, no longer in her body but in the house she loves so much, but with the same destructive voracity - Clara's speech at the end of the film links cancer to termites. If, on the one hand, the Amnesty Law allowed persecuted politicians to return to the country, to leave prisons and to resume political activities, it has been, on the other hand, a safe conduct so that those who committed crimes in the name of the State did not suffer any kind of punishment. It is as if the impunity that characterized and compromised the transition to democracy in Brazil - incidentally, unlike other countries in the Southern Cone that faced dictatorships, such as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay - returned now. It is perceived in the majority of the population's forgetfulness of the crimes committed by the dictatorship, as well as in the speech and actions of a right wing that resurfaces with an unexpected force. But, just like Clara, we have to face and denounce this resurgence, which has a deep connection with the way the amnesty was implemented in our country.

This very panoramic analysis of contemporary Brazilian films dealing with politics makes possible to point out some truly significant resurgences. They are the intricate relations between public and private via the intrusion of the family in the political space, as in *O Candidato Honesto* and *Getúlio*, the artistic production as locus of resistance, as in *Tattoo*, *Tudo por amor ao cinema* and "Unfortunate young people or a

man who screams is not a dancing bear", and difficulties to reconstitute the memory and of how this memory is central to understand the country, as in *Avanti popolo*, *White out*, *Black in*, *Retratos de Identificação* and *Aquarius*. Finally, attention is drawn to the fact that armed actions against the State are so present in today's cinema, either by guerrillas in the past, communities in the present or a justice from the future. But what this means only the unfolding of national life can illuminate, as well as an analytical melee denser with these works.

Notes

¹Translators' note: Cinema movement noted for emphasis on social and political issues and aesthetical experimentalism; as key directors can be cited Glauber Rocha, Paulo César Saraceni, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and others.

²Translators' note: Cinema movement noted for its subversion of film language and harsh themes; as main directors can be cited Rogério Sganzerla, Julio Bressane and Ozualdo Candeias.

³ Translators' note: The officially translated titles can be found in the text. *Entreatos* does not have an official name in English available at IMDB. It can be freely translated as *Entr'actes*.

⁴ Translators' note: Factory workers, free translation.

⁵ Translators' note: Vocation of Power, tree translation.

⁶ Due to a lack of space and time, this article does not discuss short films, but there are several relevant examples such as the documentary "Between images: gaps" (*Entre Imagens*, by André Fratti Costa and Reinaldo Cardenuto, 2016). It addresses the story of Antonio Benetazzo, an artist and political activist who was murdered by agents of the military dictatorship.

⁷ Translators' note: The honest candidate, free translation.

⁸ Translators' note: no official translation available in English. The title refers to Getúlio Vargas, former president of Brazil during 1930-1945 and 1951-1954.

⁹ Translators' note: Chanchadas were a film genre in which prevailed a burlesque and naïve humor, in a popular style. Its themes can be related to daily problems, carnival and romance. Its narrative was simple, usually with musical moments. They were very common during the 1940s to 1960s.

¹⁰ Translators' note: Mazaropi was a famous producer, director and actor, whose comedies generally addressed the ingenuity and simplicity of countrymen, but also reinforces stereotypes such as stupidity and laziness.

¹¹ Translators' note: Identification Portraits, free translation.

¹² Translators' note: After the rain, free translation.

¹³ Translators' note: All for the love to cinema, free translation.

References

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Xavier, I., 2001. O cinema brasileiro moderno. In: *O cinema brasileiro moderno*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra. pp. 9-50.



Filmography

Aquarius. 2016. [film] Directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho. Pernambuco: CinemaScópio. 2h 25min.

Avanti popolo. 2014. [film] Directed by Michael Wahrmann. São Paulo: Dezenove Filmes, Sancho Filmes. 1h 12min.

Branco sai, preto fica. 2015. [film] Directed by Adirley Queirós. Brasília: Cinco da Norte.

Cabra marcado para morrer. 1984. Directed by Eduardo Coutinho. Rio de Janeiro: Mapa Filmes. 1h 59min.

Cidadão Boilesen. 2009. [film] Directed by Chaim Litewski. Rio de Janeiro: Palmares Produções e Jornalismo. 1h 32min.

Depois da chuva. 2015. [film] Directed and produced by Claudio Marques e Marilia Hughes. Brasil. 1h 30min.

Entre imagens. 2016. [film] Directed and produced by André Fratti Costa de Reinaldo Cardenuto. São Paulo.

Entreatos. 2004. [film] Directed by João Moreira Salles. Rio de Janeiro: VideoFilmes. 1h 57min.

Getúlio. 2014. [film] Directed by João Jardim. Rio de Janeiro: Copacabana Filmes. 1h 40min.

Jovens infelizes ou um homem que grita não é um urso que dança. 2016. [film] Directed by Thiago B. Mendonça. Brazil. 2h 05min.

Memórias do cárcere. 1984. [film] Directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos. Rio de Janeiro: LC Barreto Filmes. 2h 53min.

O candidato honesto. 2014. [film] Directed by Roberto Santucci. Rio de Janeiro: Camisa Listrada. 1h 50min.

Peões. 2004. [film] Directed by Eduardo Coutinho. Rio de Janeiro: VideoFilmes. 1h 25min.

Retratos de identificação. 2014. [film] Directed by Anita Leandro. Brasil: Pojó Filmes. 1h 11min.

Tatuagem. 2013. [film] Directed by Hilton Lacerda. Recife: Rec Produções Associados. 1h 50min.



Tropa de elite 2: O inimigo agora é outro. 2010. [film] Directed by José Padilha. Rio de Janeiro: Globo Filmes. 1h 55min.

Tudo por amor ao cinema. 2015. [film] Directed by Aurélio Michiles. Rio de Janeiro: Aurora Cinematográfica. 1h 37min.

Vocação do poder. 2005. [film] Directed by Eduardo Escorel e José Joffily. Rio de Janeiro: Cine Filmes. 1h 47min.