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THE OTHERS, THE CINEMA, AND THE CITY: A REVIEW OF THE PURPOSE AND MEANING OF FILMING “VELHO RECIFE NOVO”

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1

About one year ago, in April 2012, “Velho Recife Novo” was launched on the Internet. The film, lasting approximately 16 minutes, displays the following synopsis on its Vimeo page:

Eight experts from various fields (architecture and urban planning, economics, engineering, geography, history, and sociology) speak on the concept of public space in the city of Recife and highlight topics such as the history of public space in the city, the effects of large-impact projects on urban spaces, modes of living in Recife, the relationship between streets and buildings, the quality of public spaces, urban legislation, city administration and public policies, and mobility.

These eight experts are colleagues either in the profession or from the same institution; the directors’ professors or former professors (members of the collective *Contravento*). They have allowed their words to compose the mosaic of confluent ideas towards a critical reflection on the process of the construction and transformation of Recife.

Done in order to be released freely on the Internet, but also shown in some audiovisual festivals, “Velho Recife Novo” has nearly forty thousand viewings and countless shares on social networks, blogs, and websites related (or not) to architecture and urban issues. The film was to be complemented by two more derived short films, *desurbanismos # 1* and *# 2*, which embody the term proposed by Lucas Figueiredo (2010):

[...] de-urbanism, broadly defined, occurs when the built environment and its supporting structures, i.e., transportation systems, among others, prevent or at least restrict the coexistence and meetings of people from different classes or of different walks of life, separating them into segregated or semi-private spaces within a probabilistic system in which these people, in their everyday lives, tend not to frequent or cross the same places.

2

Recife, from the mid-2000s onward, has displayed a state of affairs that is disturbing, for the most sensitive of us, to say the least: after nearly five decades of economic stagnation and alarming violence rates, it resumed a cycle of growth in paradoxical contrast to the global financial crisis that had settled in at that time. In a city with high levels of poverty and widespread

insecurity (it was impossible to walk its streets), the physically vigorous image of a new city, representative of this rebirth, began to take shape.

The real estate market and its marketing, based on the despair experienced by the middle classes, delivered obviously ill-considered and technically irresponsible products, a reproduction of the construction model of vertical walled citadels that protect well-to-do people and their countless automobiles from dirty and mendicant (and presumably violent) surroundings.

The city is not simply a space where individual wills meet or converge to speak. The city cannot be merely that. It is not possible to solve social problems individually; neither can issues be resolved privately. Today, there are segments of the population that dream of buying a car... But it should be checked whether that dream is a projection of the same desire to solve, on a private level, issues that can only be solved on the collective level. It is difficult for people to understand the meaning of the public (excerpt of sociologist Maria Eduarda Rocha's speech in "Velho Recife Novo").

For a long time, this strategy has helped citizens belonging to the middle and upper classes to maintain, to some extent, a relatively stable lifestyle over the years. However, with the increasing aggravation of a host of urban problems, especially those related to mobility conditions and sanitation, individual solutions are no longer effective in maintaining the lifestyle desired by these classes. Buying a car no longer fully enables them to commute to and from work every day. Living in a luxury building no longer immunizes their residents from floods that ravage the city.

Everyone says that traffic is getting worse, traffic is bad, but this feeling... And this criticism is directed to us, middle classes, as well. We've only started talking about it when driving became impractical. In fact, mobility has always been appalling for low-income people but I just don't see [these people] being included in this discussion (excerpt of economist Raul Silveira Neto's speech in "Velho Recife Novo").

Complaining about the city and finding someone to blame for its problems has become a new pastime for those who have been recently affected, since these inconveniences are long-standing if not culturally established for those whose income falls below the purchasing power set by the middle classes. There are those who complain at bar and restaurant tables about spending a lot of time stuck in traffic, in their conveniently air-conditioned cars. But there are also those who choose to complain through audiovisual production.

Still regarding the middle classes, makers of short, medium-length or long films have poured out an astonishing large number, previously unseen at festivals and on the internet, of documentaries and fictions (fictional documentaries or documentary fictions) on the theme of the city, its ills and villains: a voracious market and a silent or complicit city administration.

Some projects launched in the central and historic area of Recife has become the target for that sort of initiatives: two instances of which being the twin forty-floor towers called Maurício de Nassau Pier and Duarte Coelho Pier located on Santa Rita Wharf and a development project called Novo Recife on a 10-acre tract of land bought through an auction from the old railway company. On top, some construction moguls involved in these dealings—in particular the construction company Moura Dubeux—and even the state and the city administrations—have been trying to sell the idea of four new viaducts over Agamemnon Magalhães Avenue. Together, these compose the best illustration of Recife's current situation.

Whether opting for virulent speech or acid humor or plastic experimentation, it is hard to tell how effective this attitude is. It is only natural to complain when faced with problems. However, in order to broaden the discussion, shouldn't we let go of the whiner role to play that of contributor of an intellectual, political, and urban content, since the contribution to ordinary citizens' (neither entrepreneurs nor administrators) knowledge has been so distant and ineffective?

Fernando Mendonça and Rodrigo Almeida (2012), in their article "O cinema pernambucano entre gerações" for the site Filmologia, describe the local audiovisual production at that time as follows:

This collection of films clearly shows that care was taken in showing the cityscape not as a merely visual image, but as something constructed by means of citizens' participation, attitudes, beliefs, social practices, and everyday lives. It is consensual that the areas in question cannot be restricted to the use or enjoyment of a small segment of the population, e.g., Santa Rita Wharf is one of Recife's most beautiful places; it just cannot be privatized. It's no surprise to say that the urban experience is also an aesthetic experience. While more and more people are rallying against the Novo Recife project or the viaducts over Agamemnon Magalhães Avenue, its momentum springs from their determination to see the city as a public space to be enjoyed collectively by everyone. However, some films really fall hostage to a simple-minded demonization of buildings, appropriating the hypocritical logic of "those living in houses are good guys, and those living in apartment buildings are

bad guys,” while others cast a closer glance at spatial reorganization, standardized and lacking in creativity; at first, an aesthetic discussion that obviously cannot escape being political, because it runs the huge risk of accepting a city development project dictated by the interests of large commercial construction companies.

3

Based on Marie-José Mondzain’s (2009) book “Can an Image Kill?,” it is possible to affirm that only people are ultimately capable of acting upon the world. Images and films are things (or, more consensually, lie at the borderline between things and non-things) and, for this reason, are incapable of acting upon the world. However, it is necessary to think about this impossibility of assigning actions to images. Thus, we are faced with the question: what may be the political performance, i.e., the changing power, of an image or a film?

In his book “Letters on Humanism,” Martin Heidegger (2000) deals with the historic dilemma between theory and praxis in an interesting way. In Heidegger’s view, thought, in its radicalism, is capable of restructuring the terms of experience by establishing a critical dimension of reality. Thus, the act of rethinking new possibilities—which are not posed in public discussions or that are not hegemonic in public spaces—constitutes an act upon thought. It is only when thought operates in its radicalism that it is capable of acting.

In this direction, we should take into account the scientific rigor of the urban researchers that speak in “Velho Recife Novo,” as well as their critical dimension of thought to propose a new vision of the city with different modes of occupation and use, thus establishing an alternative and non-hegemonic proposal of the city.

This is, somehow, what Chico Lacerda (2012) believes:

Circumventing certain distrust of expert voices on the part of modern documentary makers, *Contravento* seemed to identify this gap in the discussion about Recife’s urban design, thus inviting them to join in the debate and helping their ideas circulate effectively.

The distrust mentioned by Lacerda has obvious historical reasons. Contemporary documentary making is based on the search for new aesthetic forms based on the denial of buildings and detached from the “voices of authority.” There is wide legitimacy in the incorporation of other

forms of knowledge by deconstructing the rigidity of its extremely oppressive structure and still pervasive in today's substandard television productions.

In this light, it is worth revisiting the issues raised in the post-screening debate of "Velho Recife Novo" at Janela Internacional de Cinema do Recife in November 2012, dimensioning the social implications of the discussion in the long run:

- ... it is very interesting to show this critique in films, but it seems rather naïve ... there is plenty of academic criticism, but it doesn't seem to be capable of transcending this universe ... I have no doubt that the viaducts will be built, Novo Recife will be built ... and then, what's the point in showing this academic discourse when things have already been decided, when people want these projects? (Excerpt of audience member's speech).
- There is no innocence in the movie proposal. The discourse you call 'academic' is not new and is the result of researchers' intense dedication to issues for a long period of time. Those people speaking in the movie have been publishing articles for more than ten or fifteen years, predicting this situation, which only now, through communication or cinema, a larger number of people are beginning to understand and take interest in. One of the urban planning strategies is to foster, create a debate, and establish a critical dimension of the city ... is to provide the population with knowledge about the city so that any other actions or interventions may have something to hold on to. Nobody is so gullible as to believe that the film will prevent the construction of viaducts or skyscrapers now. The film is not naïve because it is considered an act of urban planning, a discipline that depends on time, on thinking, with long deadlines. The film is not an aesthetic daydream or an innocent complaint; it's an act of intentional and strategic planning, irrespective of being done by people outside of government or business (excerpt of audience member's speech).

4

At the time of writing this manuscript, the city of Recife, through its Department of Development and Planning, is going to coordinate the 5th Municipal Conference on May 24, 25, and 26, 2013, an action seeking to align the national guidelines for cities and towns to local issues.

Should there be any improvement over the previous meetings, this must be credited to a greater openness to civil society representatives' participation from the very beginning. And, besides traditional NGOs, community leaders, and housing boards, positions were assigned to a group generated in social networks—especially Facebook—considered a Brazilian cyberactivism

phenomenon because of its over nine thousand participants and their occupations of public spaces linked to some controversy: Direitos Urbanos.

In the text “Autobiografia de um crítico do Novo Recife,” published at the blog *Caderno Recifense*, Lucas Alves (2013)—a teacher and Direitos Urbanos activist—writes:

I have not always been against the Novo Recife project. Like most people living in Recife, I grew up regretting the “Third World” landscape of the city center, reminiscent of neglect and unimportance that contrasted with nostalgic accounts of people who had frequented a formerly prestigious, organized, and clean city center, whither flocked elegant and well-dressed people.

However, explaining his change of posture, due to the unsettling and upsetting Recife cityscape in the beginning of the 2010s, he ponders:

I had, however, concerns about the city, in conjunction with ideas engendered by experiences elsewhere. I’ve witnessed a world different from Recife, cities where people live better lives, and that made me think about what was wrong in my home city from another standpoint.

And he sums it up:

Since then, since October 2012, about three months ago, I’ve been concerned with Recife’s urban problems, such as the question of José Estelita Wharf. It was through Direitos Urbanos that I came in touch with professionals from several fields committed to this cause, and I had the opportunity to learn new things, to review and deconstruct a host of conceptions that had been naturalized. A special mention must be made to “Velho Recife Novo” (if you haven’t watched this video, do it now!), responsible for getting this conceptual demolition underway.

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