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The Modern and the Contemporary: Two Representations of the Metropolis in Film

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São Paulo, even before it was the largest Brazilian metropolis, was the inspiration for cinematographic representations that strove diligently to exalt its urban dynamic as a sign of progress, the progress of the country in the midst of modernity. In the 1920s and 1930s, through representation of the city, and by virtue of the very fact that films were being made, filmmakers sought to affirm the presence of new values in a Brazil marked by the stigma of socio-economic backwardness. However, even though there was a desire in early documentary films to show the machines, the speed of the city, and the new challenges brought by the experience of shock as lived in the streets, these films, with their peculiar appeal to the senses, were routine newsreels that were affected very little by these values. The same can be said of feature films, which were, in general, melodramas preoccupied with the moral depths of their stories, representations that focused on the specificity of the urban world in order to praise the

discipline of work. This exaltation of labor was seen as a sign of progress and the sure path toward civilization.

In the cultural sphere of São Paulo before 1930, the closest realization of an ideal modernist aesthetic occurred, in part, in the 1929 film *São Paulo, a sinfonia da metrópole* (*São Paulo, a Metropolitan Symphony*), by Adalberto Kemeny and Rodolpho Lustig. I say “in part” because although it has sequences that dialogue with Walter Ruttmann’s modernist *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* by (a landmark of staging associated with the concept of simultaneity in urban life), the film, produced in São Paulo, ends by conforming to the usual parameters of the Brazilian documentary of the time. It is in large part conventional, with many sequences that were propaganda for local mechanisms associated with progress and civilization—e.g., the penitentiary and the school system. In the film, the explanatory word and the illustrative image combine to present a boastful discourse that idealizes institutions and fawns on the state. The film does not concentrate on the actual social experiences of the citizens of São Paulo, whether they be associated with new forms of relating to time and space, or tied to the material conditions of life among the various social classes.

What we see in in this film and in other similar productions from the 1920s and ’30s is a desire for progress, a vision of the world of machines as a solution to problems, as long as the ideals of economic advancement do not conflict with the conservation of moral standards proper to a patriarchy of the time—one founded on the rural and familial bases of Brazilian society.¹ What was unique to São Paulo as an emblem of this ethos was the idea that exalting industriousness against rascality was a form of distinction, a rational attitude that favored progress. The dreams of easy fortune, the taking advantage of others through small or great thefts were condemned in these films as traces of behavior incompatible with the new influences of industrial life.

Later, when the owners of Companhia Vera Cruz (1949–1954) transferred the industrial dream of São Paulo to the sphere of film production itself, they emphasized the same moral issues. Hoping to make Vera Cruz into a large-scale studio, they produced conventional films that alternated between melodramas about the rich and popular comedies, giving priority to genre films whose trademark was a preoccupation with characters that were not themselves the agents of industrial progress. The characters in the films were not progressive bourgeois like the Vera Cruz’s owners, the Zamparis, Italian immigrants who saw themselves as “captains of industry” and agents of progress. This cinematographic undertaking began representing the decadence of the coffee barons or other similar experiences that did not relate to São Paulo’s industrial dynamic. Not by chance, the films focused on the passions of private life and the extravagant spending of wealth, as in *Terra é sempre terra* (Tom Payne, 1950). The dramatic axis was always the degeneration of moral life,

1. For an analysis of *São Paulo, a sinfonia da metrópole* and the melodrama *Fragmentos da vida* (1929; *Fragments of Life*), by José Medina, see Rubens Machado, *São Paulo em movimento: a representação cinematográfica da metrópole nos anos 20*, Master’s thesis, School of Communications and Arts—USP, 1989. For a vision of São Paulo culture immersed in the ethos of progress, and for an analysis of the Modernists’ posture in the context of the city, see Nicolau Sevcenko, *Orfeu estático na metrópole: São Paulo, sociedade e cultura nos frementes anos 20* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992).

be it through the failure of the poor to maintain the “simplicity and innocence” of the countryside, or through the decadence of the heirs of wealth.

We find in the critical cinema of the 1960s in São Paulo, contemporary with the New Cinema of Rio de Janeiro and Bahia, a more mature reflection with greater interest in the experience of the city, foregrounding industrialization and the anxieties typical of urban life. In 1958, Roberto Santos brought to the screen a spirited chronicle of the daily life of workers in the Eastern Zone of the city, in a representation inspired by Italian neo-realism (*O grande momento*; *The Great Moment*). But the great leap toward a vision capable of creating a totalizing metaphor of the city happened in 1965 with *São Paulo S/A* (*São Paulo, Anonymous Society*) (Figure 1), by Luiz Sérgio Person. The film focuses on the new industrial push of the “JK” years (those of President Juscelino Kubitschek, 1956–60), observed from an angle that highlights the relationship between the small local manufacturers and the multinationals of the automobile sector. The film allows for a deeper examination of the theme of the city whose self-image depends on work and competition as it pulverizes its inhabitants in its own gears. These features make *São Paulo S/A* the greatest emblem of modern realist film about São Paulo.

From another watershed moment of the 1960s, I highlight an additional emblematic film, *O bandido da luz vermelha* (1968; *The Red Light Bandit*), by Rogério Sganzerla, a work that belongs to Brazilian modern art, particularly during its pop phase. Departing from the detective film genre, *O bandido* constructs an ironic representation of the experience of the urban criminal, at once discarding the realist framework that had been preoccupied with the social roots of crime and attacking the political allegories of New Cinema (whose greatest exponent was Glauber Rocha) in its broad examination of the country. Sganzerla’s film explores how, metaphorically, the urban machinery crushes the individual, but its real focus is the media, the construction of images, the crisis of a subject whose identity is assembled from the “discourse of others,” much in the same way that the film itself is made up of quotations, parodies, and incorporations of the most varied of styles, most notably, *film noir*.

The urban imaginary associated with *film noir* would be taken up again in films from São Paulo produced at different moments, with tonalities specific to each time period, forming a counterpoint to the realist tendency as a way of approaching modern urban experience. In the 1980s, filmmakers wholeheartedly embraced fiction in the style of *film noir*—the imaginary city *par excellence*. We see these qualities in the so-called night trilogy.² This trend, however, did not impede the continuation of the realist tendency in *Noites paraguaias* (Aloysio Raulino, 1981; *Paraguay Nights*), *A hora da estrela* (Suzana Amaral, 1985; *The Hour of the Star*), and *Anjos de arrabalde* (Carlos Reichenbach, 1989; *Angels from the Outskirts*).

2. *Cidade oculta* (Chico Botelho, 1986; *Hidden City*), *Anjos da noite* (Wilson Barros, 1987; *Night Angels*), and *A dama do cine Shangai* (Guilherme de Almeida Prado, 1987; *The Lady from the Shanghai Cinema*).

In the 1990s we see once again a confluence of styles including examples of the realist tradition, such as Tata Amaral's *Um céu de estrelas* (1996; *A Sky of Stars*), which focuses on the neighborhood experience of the Eastern Zone, as does the setting of *O grande momento* (1958; *The Grand Moment*), but the former is more steeped in violence and disenchantment. The dominant overtone in the 1990s works, however, is that of *film noir*, illustrating a dialogue with detective fiction, in which writers such as Rubem Fonseca, Patrícia Melo and Marçal Aquino use a hard-boiled thriller style to paint panoramas of violence in contemporary Brazil. *O invasor* (2001; *The Invader*) (Figure 2), directed by Beto Brant, is the most successful example of dialogue with *film noir*, a serious-dramatic representation of crime that moves away from the pop and modernist dimension of Rogério Sganzerla.

O invasor is the third film that resulted from the partnership between Marçal Aquino and Beto Brant. This time, the objective was to construct a theorem, a schematization of the characteristic problems of the city in a plot centered on intrigue in the business world, which invites a comparison with *São Paulo S/A*. We have in these two films a common dramatic axis: the relationship among industrial activity, illegal actions, and personal anguish. They are, therefore, two ideal works to compare for their respective constructions of the image of São Paulo.

Filmmaker Beto Brant is not alone in representing São Paulo as an urban space that reveals itself as a high-risk zone, a universe of shadows dominated by the exploration of the disorientation of a common man, a man who, passing a certain threshold, sees his world collapse, as happens with the protagonist of *São Paulo S/A*, albeit in other terms. The common ground of these experiences highlights the differences between the Brazil of the 1960s, in which one sees a representation of social experience identified with national-developmentism, and the Brazil of today, characterized by the fragility of the nation-state, stalemates regarding the public debt, and relative economic stagnation and hegemony of financial capitalism.

Two Case Studies

The exploration of symmetry and difference in *O invasor* and *São Paulo S/A*, two pictures that depict crucial moments in the country's history, forty years apart, helps elucidate Brazil's process of modernization, one that uses São Paulo as a point of departure. Contrasting these two moments in history helps one understand why, in one case, the search for a realist style produced the metaphor of the *city-machine* that has as a reference the process of accelerated industrial expansion of the country at the end of the 1950s. And why, in the case of Beto Brant, we have the metaphor of the *archipelago-city*, that is, the figuration of the city as a fragmented territory where the individual's experience of feeling encircled and



Figure 1. Still from *São Paulo S/A*, directed by Luiz Sérgio Person (image of actor Walmor Chagas). Courtesy of the Brazilian Cinematheque and the family of Luiz Sérgio Person.

persecuted is not a delusion, given the expansion of organized crime as a model of management of power relations in 2000.

Cohesion of the *City-Machine*

In *São Paulo S/A*, Carlos, the protagonist, is a technical worker in the automobile industry who is employed by Arturo Carrari, an Italian immigrant proud of having become a “captain of industry.” The film shows the narrow-minded nature of the latter and his business: he is the happy bourgeois who runs his company and plays with corruption; his company grows and his family prospers in an innocent domestic space. Carlos, although an accomplice to Carrari’s swindlings and efficient at his job, experiences the undefined indisposition of someone who knows that his social role is a corrupt one, yet he lacks the energy to change his life. A bitter man, he is aggressive with women and tends to disdain whomever he is with, be it a call-girl or his own wife, Luciana. When confronted by the intellectual woman with whom he is having an affair, he becomes disconcerted, incapable of understanding her afflictions. She is the representation of uneasiness in *São Paulo S/A*, feeling discomfort and vulnerability in the face of urban oppression that drive her, in a moment of depression, to suicide. (Visually speaking, her apartment in the center of the city is the symbolic space that the film exploits in its creation of the emblematic image of solitude in an anonymous society.) Carlos detests the mediocre world in which he has achieved success, but he cannot manage to go deeper in his self-searching than channeling his deep dissatisfaction into a feeling of uneasiness that blames others and sours his relationships. Throughout the film, his tensions worsen, reaching an unbearable point.

São Paulo S/A opens with a scene of Carlos’s final crisis and moves back in time in a flashback. While this explosive scene relates to domestic life, it

also—just as occurs throughout the movie—reflects on and refers to the city as the larger matrix of experience. The couple's fight is shot from outside the apartment; we barely hear what is said. Their gestures are juxtaposed with images of buildings reflected on the glass, conveying the presence of the outside in the inside, and revealing the multiplicity of common fates or dramas lived in the city. The recurrent aspect of this experience is reaffirmed in the images that punctuate the film's credits: e.g., the view of the buildings observed from the street, filmed in a low-angle shot to highlight the verticality and power of the city in its monumental aspect. Or, in contrast, we see aerial views of the city, forming a sequence that reinforces our sense of the simultaneous movement of the crowds in different locations. There are contrasts—the luxury condominiums and the modest dwellings, the architecture of the banks and that of the *favela*—but everything seems to comprise a connected whole through which people and vehicles circulate.

We see this effect again at the end of the film, when the flashback is completed and we return to the initial scene. From the beginning, the urban setting has prominence in the perspective of the pedestrian, as when we see Carlos walking after abandoning his wife. He appears in voiceover, and his narrative now mixes with the sounds of the city. Throughout the film, the Chá viaduct is a symbolic space representing the city that works like a machine. There are many other scenes of the downtown area that help to configure a sense of a united space endowed with energy, an expression of the very dynamics of the city and of the country. If downtown is the area most frequently focused upon, the other zones are spaces to be conquered by this new order of industrialization. The town's outskirts become the locus of industrial expansion: poor children play in ample open spaces, but these spaces carry a promise of occupation by workers and machines.

Carlos's discomfort permeates all of his actions and spaces, but it finds its best expression in the protagonist's relation to the universe of work and in the general collective experience expressed in outdoor scenes, more so than in sequences of more private events. His discomfort reaches a paroxysm in the middle of the film, just before his decision to marry Luciana. The scene is emblematic. It takes place in the Viaduto do Chá, a symbolic point of confluence. The parallel staging establishes the connections among the city, the people on the street, and the movement of gears in a factory, in a classic metaphor of industrial work as a dehumanizing force. Taking the human-machine relation as a paradigm, life in the city is seen as the center of anguish. Carlos and the other atomized, anonymous inhabitants in the film share the public space that is portrayed as an assembly line, a totalizing mechanical movement. What is decisive here is the reference to the time on the clock, to the repetition of the cycles of daily work. Time is the nightmare, just as we have seen in the tradition of the city-machine beginning with Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*,



Figure 2. Still from *O Invasor*, directed by Beto Brant (image of actor Marco Ricca). Courtesy of Beto Brant.

which emblemized the clock as torture in such expressionist tones. *São Paulo S/A*, being a realist film, does not use the theme of robotization *ad nauseam*, but it insists on the effects of exceeding one's limits, and on the pain of industrial work and its management, an experience that contaminates all aspects of life.

The Corrosion of the Archipelago-City

If in *São Paulo S/A*, the periphery-center relationship is mediated by the industry whose logic is projected throughout the city, the opposite occurs in the films of the 1990s. Downtown becomes a station of hell, a concentration camp of the excluded—a mass of people already living in a more radical state of alienation than Luis Sérgio Person's passers-by do. Other places shown in the film also exhibit a melancholic scene of decomposition. In *O Invasor*, in particular, the focus shifts away from the old downtown area of the city. Here, the old downtown is just a point of passage cut by tunnels and viaducts, torn apart by lifeless avenues, a place one passes through by car, if possible at high speed, on top of or below the area itself, without sharing anything with anyone there. In the films of the 1990s, the relationship between downtown and the outskirts has a different logic, and its mediation is different both in terms of characters and dramatic situation, as the half-century leap brings about an encounter with an entirely new class of businessmen. This time around the business at stake is the construction industry, not the factory. We find ourselves in a new socio-economic sector whose interests are related to the history of great Brazilian cities and their deterioration, centers of financial specula-

tion and the illegal occupation of land made possible only in terms of a promiscuous relationship with power.

The protagonist, Ivan, is the junior partner—similar to Carlos of *São Paulo S/A*—who has left his well-paid position as an accomplice-technician and has accepted a co-responsibility that he'd previously rejected. Led by Gilberto, his old friend and partner, Ivan agrees to participate in a scheme to kill the other associate, who is a senior partner in the construction company and is opposed to a crooked deal. Like Carrari of *São Paulo S/A*, Gilberto is the happy and good-humored partner, an exemplary father, a master in the art of adapting to new times, always more comfortable than Ivan with moving from minor corruptions to serious crimes.

Carrari represents the petty universe of small corruption, how the state has turned a blind eye to the illegal actions that have guaranteed the survival of small national businesses within an industrial landscape dominated by multinationals. The bribe to the tax collector is a comic moment that reveals the precarious side of what has seemed so monumental. Carrari is unsophisticated, opportunistic, dishonest—but not a killer. This time, crime is a more efficient way of doing business and relating to others. We reach a “lower” paradigm of dehumanization, let us say, than what is evidenced by the city-machine. Urban space becomes the scene of the hunt and of solitary, clandestine death, as the end of *O invasor* highlights. Very early on, the partners have to find a killer, someone who can do the job.

In the beginning, there are a few elements that explain Ivan's passage into crime. The film's strategy is to avoid a realist style. Ivan's crisis is reflected in a gallery of characters and spaces constituted out of a gothic, expressionist code, as if this moral dimension needed visible correlations that signaled Evil, a phantasmagoria that focuses on the figure of Anísio. The realist code of *São Paulo S/A* is substituted by a tradition that developed out of German Expressionism into *film noir*, but it also contains an additional element introduced by the codes of a different agency—the killer's. He has been recruited in the outskirts, a world where he reigns supreme, to complete a task on this side of the city and to then return to where he came from. However, instead of vanishing, he unexpectedly invades the day-to-day of the business world. And this invasion exposes the reciprocal contamination of these worlds that are isolated from each other by a symbolic border. This gesture also does away with a dichotomy of center and periphery seen as a spatial code signifying the separation between order and disorder, law and crime, civilization and barbarism. Here, in terms of figuration, there is a “common code” that unites the two poles in such a way that the business world is portrayed as Evil in an iconography that confers a diabolical dimension on the agent who seeks power.³

3. In this reference to Anísio as a/the figure of Evil, full of associations in the gothic style, I take as inspiration the analysis of the character done by Lúcia Nagib in a chapter of her book, *A utopia no cinema brasileiro: matrizes, nostalgia, distopias* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2006.)

There are two moments of invasion in the film. In the first, the killer appears as if he were a security guard who works for the construction company. In the second, he wins over Marina, goes to her house, gives her presents, and takes her for a walk in the Southern Zone, his territory. This sequence changes the register of the film and shows us an image of the outskirts as one of heterogeneity, a meeting point for the precarious—of the unfinished, because of poverty—and of that which wants to be distinctive, but is already in ruins, a project for a middle-class neighborhood made unviable. The result is this heterogeneity, the mixture of shacks and two-storey homes, a type of condensed and multi-colored image of the city from which the wealthy neighborhoods with their landscaped homogeneity are excluded. Despite all of this, life goes on but the rapper talks about his difficult daily life, the promises and deception of the authorities; he alludes to drug-addicted street urchins, dirty money, oppressed people, humiliation, and repeated disappointment.

Anísio's "invasion" divides the film into two parts: the first is marked by the strict logic of the plot, with the narrative advancing in classic terms of cause and effect, quickly, dramatically. When he appears, a bifurcation occurs: a parallelism is constructed within which the question of space, and its distribution in the city, are reinforced by the images of the outskirts and of hip-hop culture, a world dominated by Anísio's slang, the voice of the rapper Sabotage and his charismatic presence. The soundtrack adds another point of view and addresses the mutual estrangement of the two worlds. Anísio becomes the secure and able tour guide of an excursion that interrupts the narrative flux (time) and emphasizes the exploration of space. Meanwhile, Ivan's personal crisis gets worse: he purchases a gun and ends up assuming the role of the hunted. He abandons his house. He begins an affair with a call girl who is hired to spy on him in a plot engineered by the partner. Almost invisibly, all ties are dissolved. Ivan remains unbound, deterritorialized. Previously, a moral crisis, now fear. The rotten side of life (or, alternatively, of the city) shows that he, in the end, is the foreign figure, a backward invader whose modicum of moral conscience costs him dearly.

Ivan's wandering reinforces the sense of an urban space as permanent threat. An aggressive landscape emerges, grotesque in its corrosion of the environment, the sign of a new cycle of the city's endless reconstruction. The final moment of catharsis, when Ivan, just like Carlos in *São Paulo S/A*, takes the wheel of the car for an unplanned escape, effectively condenses the new face of the city, those flat zones in which proletarian neighborhoods were torn apart to make room for avenues, creating premature ruins and tracts of deserted land.

The setting of Ivan's final flight exposes a grotesque landscape—the asphalt and the crude wooden shacks of the demolished *favela*. Here is revealed, in this juxtaposition, the visible face of a dynamic of interests that crushes populations without integrating them, creating the archipe-

4. The expression “city of walls” is a central reference in Teresa Pires Caldeira’s book, *Cidade de muros: crime, segregação e cidadania em São Paulo* (São Paulo: Editora 34/Ed. USP, 2000).

lago-city, or the city of walls, with its islands of unstable civility and territories where the absence of the state, of law, of citizenship is made obvious.⁴ This is because there exists in this separation of territories a presumption that the film wishes to deconstruct: the assumption that they are stagnant worlds, unconnected except by occasional incidents such as the assault. *O invasor* wants to suggest a different, more systematic link in this play of powers and strategies, not just to contrast poor zones with rich zones, i.e., to demarcate the territory of the lawful state with that of underground life. It wants to expose what secures effective relations between contractors and those with whom they do business.

In its intimate confrontation with this experience of wandering and violence, *O invasor* is noteworthy within the constellation of contemporary films that deal with the dissolution of values in a context in which financial roulette and tactics of survival are the only plans for the future. This is the picture that *O invasor* presents at the beginning of this century, in sharp contrast with the moment in which Person produced *São Paulo S/A*. In Person’s film, the critical vision of city experience highlights the effects of a modernization that, although observed in its problematic aspects, preserved in its horizon the weaving of a more cohesive social fabric. In the last few decades, the deterioration of the quality of life and of the ethical pattern prevalent in the city led filmmakers to act as a sign of warning against barbarism, presenting the image of incumbent dissolutions and mapping the symptoms of an acute crisis that is not exclusive to the metropolis of São Paulo. The proliferation of criminal networks and illegal business is most visible in those enclaves of permanent belligerence and personal reign, where the law of gangs prevails. Yet, the question is deeper and involves society in its entirety, as Brant’s film suggests rather well: the idea of São Paulo as an anonymous society now acquires another meaning.