

## Trans&Trash—about the “movement” of Brazilian cinema

French director Jean Rouch, who passed away in February 2004, is famous as one of the most influential directors of pre-Nouvelle Vague, and he once proposed a very important concept called cine-trance, which refers to a situation in which everyone involved in the filming of a film, whether fiction or documentary, and even the viewers of the film, become as enthusiastic as if they were participating in a ritual, and in some cases fall into madness. This concept, which is said to be derived from the influence of Rouch's own film *The Mad Priests* (*Les maîtres fous*, 1953–54) and Marcel Griaule's *Surrealism*, expresses the primitive joy of the people who make and view the images, but at the same time, it suggests a very dangerous situation for us today, living in an age of image overload, and exposed to the manipulation and incitement of information through images. In other words, in this case, the ritual is a kind of fiction, and Rouch himself has gradually shifted toward fictional works in his later films, but on the other hand, the current situation of visual images in general, which are becoming increasingly spectacular, is that they take in real wars and killings as fiction, recycle them, and sometimes involve people who are supposed to be the audience in the cycle. In the horrific photographs of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, which reminded many of Pasolini's last film *Salo* (1975), when the performance of the "ritual" in front of the camera of the play based on Pasolini's film and Sade's text is repeated in front of the camera as an act of abuse in reality, the difference between the two images of film and abuse will eventually be left to the gaze and intellect of the individual who sees it over time. In other words, abusive images, when they are someday used and connected to the consumer market, will once again generate huge amounts of money as "spectacular images". In other words, we are entering an era in which an audience can quickly feed off the images of the horrific deaths of other audiences and their loved ones in order to enjoy life. As horrible and ridiculous as it is, we live in an age where we can barely find a way out of the horror, not by the antiquated act of banning images, but only by analyzing how the spectacle is produced and distributed.

By the way, the Brazilian filmmaker Grauber Rocha is probably one of the filmmakers who most embodied and defended the primitive and crazy joy of cine-trans filmmaking. In the history of Brazilian cinema in the first half of the twentieth century, Rocha appreciated the silent film *Limite* (1933), the only work by the heretical Mario Peixoto, more than his contemporaries Humberto Mauro and the exiled Alberto Cavalcanti. *Limite*, which tells the story of three men and a woman who row out of a harbor in a boat and reminisce about their past, has the same repetitive montage, preoccupation with water, and extensive use of elevation shots that can be seen in the world cinema of Jean Vigo, Eisenstein, and Manoel de Oliveira's contemporaries *Douro*, *Faina Fluvial* (1929), is strong, yet technically unrefined. This immaturity, primitiveness, and

roughness, which are not found in professional works, can be found as a characteristic of Rocha's works, in sympathy with the works of Rouch, who refused to be refined throughout his life and continued to make 16mm handheld camerawork, too.

*Terra em Transe* (1966), one of Rocha's masterpieces, depicts the frustration of a journalist who works as a propagandist for one side behind a presidential election between two candidates in the fictional country of El Dorado. The wild montage of cut-back illusions, jump cuts and hand-held camerawork in moving shots are more aesthetically inherited from Peixoto's work than from the sophistication of Mauro and Cavalcanti. Rocha had criticized Veracruz Studio's body of work as "not our film," despite having Cavalcanti, then working in England in the 1950s, as its director. It is ironic that after Cavalcanti, a communist, defected to Europe, probably because he sensed Brazil's shift to the right, he collaborated with Brecht, who had been a great influence on Rocha, to make a film called "Puntilla Mentor and Servant Matti."

After the military regime was established, Rocha moved to Europe to continue production and met Carmelo Bene in Italy. He is a native of Lecce in southern Italy and one of the leading Italian theater director=actor and filmmakers of the latter half of the 20th century, known for his book "Superpositions," co-written with Gilles Deleuze. Bene died in 2002. In an interview in his later years, he said, "Antonio das Mortes" was not all at the level of perfection, but there were at least 20 minutes of true moments" (1). (1) Rocha welcomed Bene as an actor in *Claro* (1976), and it is quite possible that he was influenced by Bene's work during this period. In Bene's films, as in his masterpiece *Salome* (1971), the action of the characters, shot with five cameras, and the multiple voices are constantly changing and polytonal (Christ and Salome's mother, for example, are double-cast), intertwined in a violent montage, and thrust forward. It is a "performance" of the play in front of the camera. In his last film *Otello* (1979, completed in 2002), Bene later moved toward a simpler style with fixed camerawork. On the other hand, in Rocha's posthumous film, *A Idade da Terra* (1981), shot back in his homeland, we can see echoes of his encounter with Bene's films in the composition and radicalized montage of a theatrical performance in which multiple Christians appear all over Brazil and shout revolutionary agitation. Furthermore, in this posthumous work, Rocha films the cries of fictional characters against the backdrop of carnival, Copacabana, jungle, and street documentaries, incorporating the voices and figures of himself and his film crew as subjects. In other words, in the words of Manoel de Oliveira, "the film comes after and fixes (records) everything." It can be likened to a mouth that sucks in everything. Rocha's *Tropicarismo* seems to have been a ritual practice of the fiction of cinematography, passing through Rocha's cine-trans.

Rocha's *Cancer* (1966) was shot in three days and took several years to edit, and was never released to the general public, even in its home country. The film is considered to be the forerunner of "Udigrudi" (Underground) and *Cinema Marginal*. At the time when *Cinema Novo* was in decline under the repression of the military regime, Brazil had its own independent filmmakers, such as José Modica Marins, a.k.a. Coffin Joe, who later had a cult following

comparable to Russ Meyer and Exploitation Cinema in U.S., and his protégé, Ivan Cardoso. Later on, two of the leading representatives of these marginal filmmakers, Hegerio Sganzerla and Julio Bressane, founded the Belair production company with Elena Ignez, who was also the actress in Glauber Rocha's *Patio* (1959). After the military regime forced them into exile, they continued to make films in Europe. *O Bande da Luz Vermelha* (1968), Sganzerla's first feature film, is a mixture of the influences of Jean-Luc Godard, Orson Welles, Samuel Fuller, Glauber Rocha, and *Coffin Joe*, the realities of the streets of São Paulo, and chanchada cinema. This jumble film, which closes with a mixture of images of Ultraman, women dancing in a garbage dump, and quotations from the soundtrack of *Land of the Rising Sun*, is a guideline for Brazilian cinephiles. In other words, the "trash aesthetic" became a spiritual pillar for the young Brazilian filmmakers of the time, who were under the repression of the military regime and the substructure of Hollywood.

While Sganzerla went on to make a series of films that took footage from *It's All True*, an unfinished film by Welles (who, needless to say, was also an exile from United States, making low-budget films in marginal circumstances), which included his reflections on Brazil in his later years, and examined and analyzed it, Julio Bressane has been making fictional biopics since *Tabú* (1982), starring Caetano Veloso. *Sermões— Historia de Antonio Vieira* (1989), about Antonio Vieira, a priest who advocated the emancipation of slaves in Brazil; *Mandarin* (1995), about Mario Hayes, a composer in the early 20th century; and *São Jeronimo* (1997), about St. Hieronymus, and *Dias de Nietzsche em Turim* (2001), about Nietzsche. Mario Peixoto is again referenced and Bressane combines them with current cinema, reviving the aesthetics and techniques of modernism. For example, when Gal Costa, Gilberto Gil, and Sico Buarchi play and sing other historical musicians in *The Mandarin*, Bressane also shows that it is their own documentary in front of the camera (only Caetano Veloso, a long-time collaborator of Bressane's films, plays himself). At the same time, the collage of raw sounds and sounds includes a quote from Wells' *Citizen Kane* and fragments of before and after shots of the crew, indicating that the film is a fictional work of free imagination from the point of view of Bressane. Bressane's approach to this dual aspect of fiction and documentary, and his sensitivity to framing, color, and sound, make him one of the most important contemporary Brazilian filmmakers.

This attitude of Bressane sets up an interesting cinematic encounter with a contemporary Portuguese filmmaker in 2000. Manoel de Oliveira shot on location in Brazil that year and completed *Palavra e Utopia*, a film about Antonio Vieira, which was screened at the São Paulo Film Festival in October of the same year. This fictional film, in which young, middle-aged, and old are played by three actors with completely different looks and voices, including the Brazilian actor Lima Duarte, is also, as usual with Oliveira's films, a documentary of the powerful performances of the three actors reciting Vieira's texts. In this respect, it has similarities with the aesthetically very different works of Bressane. It is interesting to note that in France, the *Libération* newspaper called Oliveira's work avant-

garde, while in Brazil, as Lima Duarte said, some critics considered Bressane's work more avant-garde and Oliveira's more classical. While Bressani admired Oliveira's work, he feared that the master's fame would make him the definitive image of Vieira's truth in academia (2). In Portugal, however, *Palavra e Utopia* was also criticized by Catholic academics as "untrue". (3) Yes, like Bressane's film, it is a fiction produced from a personal perspective. We should not forget that Oliveira was also a marginal filmmaker who produced independently, shooting and editing alone under the Salazar military regime in Portugal, like *O Acto da Primavera* (1963). Oliveira raises the question, "How can we approach the truth without passing through fiction?" It is a question that needs to be urgently considered because it threatens us more and more in this age of media inundation.

And the same is true of documentary, which cannot approach the truth without passing through fiction. *Edifício Master* (2003) by Eduardo Coutinho, one of the most important documentarists of the post-Cinema Novo era, is a collection of interviews with various people who seem to be living a middle-class life in a huge apartment building in Copacabana. For example, when a girl who raises her children and works as a prostitute says, "I'm a liar, but what I told you today is true," we have no way of confirming it. The same is true of *Santo Forte* (1999), a collection of interviews with people in Rio's favelas who live by faith. The film leaves the individual viewer to judge the truth of it, passing through a discourse, or what I would call fiction, created through Coutinho's skillful work of directing and editing while maintaining the continuity of words, their context and rhythm. Coutinho himself makes himself and his film crew appear as subjects in order to clarify how the film was shot, and this has been the most effective propaganda tool for the start of the 1991 Gulf War, since Hill & Knowlton's video in which the Kuwaiti ambassador's daughter played a nurse and testified to the massacre of babies by Iraqi soldiers. It is now common knowledge that this method of "testimony" is no longer considered an easy guarantee of truth. In this flood of images and information, filmmakers are now challenged to find a more complex path to "truth. And this is something that everyone who is heavily influenced by images in their daily lives (even those who have never been exposed to film can be influenced by sound and images) must urgently pay attention to.

Artur Omar, a marginal filmmaker who emerged after Bressane and Sganzerla, is better known abroad as a multimedia artist than as a filmmaker, with an exhibition at MOMA. The only 35mm feature film he has made is *Triste Tropic* (1976), a fiction disguised as a documentary about a cannibalism and witchcraft researcher exiled in Paris, but just as he is a boundary-crossing filmmaker, he also made a short film, *Tesouro da Juventude* (1977), a tribute to Alberto Cavalcanti. (1977). He has also made two videos on the filmmaker Raúl Ruiz, who was forced to leave his native Chile after the military coup in Pinochet, and has been working in Europe since 1974,

becoming one of the leading filmmakers in Latin America. *Castelo Resiste* (1995) and *O Livro de Raul* (1999), the former is an interview and the latter accompanies Ruiz on his homecoming. The title of the former comes from the castle, a motif that appears frequently in Ruiz's own works, and from the experience of the protagonist in *Calderón de la Barca's Life is a Dream*, in which his castle is transformed into a prison. It may also coincide with Ruiz's own original experience of being suddenly forced to leave his homeland. Perhaps it is a fiction, a documentary of an encounter between two people who cannot belong anywhere, filmed by someone who crosses all boundaries. In *Ressurreiçao* (1989), a short film that explores the origins of Mannerism through photographs of murdered people, Omar attempts to revive a great number of forgotten people by staring at what their abandoned bodies are saying before they disappear. It is a work that tries to resist the system of consumption and oblivion of the dead that we base our lives on. Thus, it can be said that excellent Brazilian filmmakers have consistently rejected perfection, and have repeatedly encountered various ways of absorbing and establishing all aspects of the world, which is the nature of film, while departing from genres, systems, and countries and starting from marginal environments such as trash films. This is the nature of cinema. This is a history of cinema that should be added to the new era in which it will become increasingly meaningless to talk about the visual history of a single country.

#### Note

(1) [www.close-up.it/skene-up/focuson/speciale/04-02/carmelobene\\_fasoli.html](http://www.close-up.it/skene-up/focuson/speciale/04-02/carmelobene_fasoli.html)

(2) *Estado de Sao Paulo*, 10/12/2000

(3) "O jesuita e O professor veen o film de Oliveira "par Antonio Marujo, *Publico*, 10/12/2000

(This is my lecture given on July 11, 2004 at "Brazilian Body Nostalgia" held at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.)

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