

The Aesthetics of Hunger¹

Glauber Rocha²

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- 1 MARQUES, Pedro Neves (ed.). **The Forest & The School**. Berlin: Archive Books, 2015, pp. 202-209. Transcribed by V. S. Conttren, February 2020.
 - 2 Brazilian film director Glauber Rocha marks, in this book, the rediscovery of the modernist Antropofagia in the 1960s. "The Aesthetics of Hunger" is Rocha's iconic manifesto for a Third World Cinema, defining a negative mode of production to industrial cinema (and, consequently, a refusal of Western colonizing forms) but also an epistemology of the oppressed. Six years later, however, Rocha's attitude had phased into a full scope critique of modern "oppressive" reason, to which he contrasted the praise of unreason as the ingredient for the magic and dream of revolution.

Dispensing with the informative introduction that has become characteristic of discussions about Latin America, I prefer to examine the reactions between our culture and civilized culture in broader terms than those which characterize the analysis of the European observer. Thus, while Latin America laments its general misery, the foreign observer cultivates a taste for that misery, not as a tragic symptom but merely as a formal element within his field of interest. The Latin American neither communicates his real misery to the civilized man, nor does the civilized man truly comprehend the misery of the Latin American.

Fundamentally, this is the situation of the arts in Brazil: to this day, only distortions of the truth (a formal exoticism that vulgarizes social problems) have been widely communicated, provoking a series of misunderstandings which go beyond the arts and contaminate the political domain.

For the European observer, the processes of artistic creation in the underdeveloped world are of interest only in so far as they satisfy his nostalgia for primitivism, and this primitivism is generally presented as a hybrid, disguised under the belated heritage of the civilized world and poorly understood since it is imposed by colonial conditioning.

Latin America remains a colony. What distinguishes yesterday's colonialism from that of today is merely the more refined form of the colonizer, and those who are preparing for future domination.

Internationally, the problem facing Latin America is still that of merely exchanging colonizers. Therefore, any possible liberation will probably come in the form of a new dependency.

This economic and political conditioning has led us to philosophical undernourishment and to impotence, which produces sterility when conscious, and hysteria when unconscious.

The sterility: all that abundance of works found in our arts where the author castrates himself with formal exercises, but which, nonetheless, never really attain control over form. The frustrated dream of universality: artists who never wake from an adolescent aesthetic ideal. Therefore, we see hundreds of paintings, dusty and forgotten, in the galleries; books of short stories and poems; theatre plays, films (which, most of all in São Paulo, even caused bankruptcies)... The institutional world in charge of the arts produced carnivalesque exhibitions in many festivals and biennials, fabricated conferences, easy formulas for success, cocktails across the world, alongside a few monsters of official culture, academics in Literature and the Arts, painting juries, and cultural parades across the country. University monstrosities: the famous literary magazines, the contests, the titles.

The hysteria: a rather more complex topic. Social indignation provokes passionate speeches. The first symptom is the anarchism found, to this day, in young poetry (and painting). The second is the political reduction of an art that practices bad politics due to its excess of sectarianism. The third, and more effective, is the search for a systematization of folk art. The problem is that, rather than resulting from an organic body, the possibility of equilibrium comes as a consequence of a titanic and self-devastating effort to surpass our impotency; as such, we remain frustrated and at the margins of the colonizer, and if he understands us it isn't because of the lucidity of our discourse but rather because of the humanism that we inspire in him. Once more paternalism

is the epistemic method set against a language of tears or mute suffering.

This is why the hunger of Latin America is not simply an alarming symptom; it is the essence of our society. Herein lies the tragic originality of Cinema Novo in relation to World Cinema: our originality is our hunger, and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood.

From *Aruanda to Vidas Secas*, Cinema Novo narrated, described, poetized, discoursed, analyzed, aroused the themes of hunger: characters eating earth, characters eating roots, characters stealing for food, characters killing for food, characters running away in search of food, ugly characters, dirty, ravaged, inhabiting ugly houses, dark and dirty; such was the gallery of famished people that identified Cinema Novo with a miserabilism condemned by the Government, by a critique that serves anti-nationalist interests, by the producers and by the public—the latter being incapable of facing the images of poverty. The miserabilism of Cinema Novo opposes an ameliorating tendency represented by the critic of Guanabara, Carlos Lacerda; films of rich people, in beautiful houses, driving luxury cars; joyful films, comical, fast, contentless, of strict industrial objectives. These are films against hunger, as if, in the glasshouses and luxury condominiums, filmmakers could hide the moral misery of a characterless and fragile bourgeoisie, or as if material and scenographic techniques could hide the hunger that is rooted in our uncivilization. As if, above all, in this apparatus of tropical landscapes, the mental indigence of the filmmakers behind these films could ever be disguised. What has made Cinema Novo a phenomenon of international relevance is, precisely, its deep engagement with the truth; its miserabilism, which, having been written by the literature of the 1930s is now photographed by the cinema of the 1960s. And if before it was written as a social

denunciation, now it is discussed as a political issue. The several stages of our cinematic miserabilism are internally evolutionary. Thus, as Gustavo Dahl says, it goes from the phenomenological (*Porto das Caixas*) to the social (*Vidas Secas*), the political (*Deus e o Diabo*), the poetic (*Ganga Zumba*), the demagogic (*Cinco Vezes Favela*), the documentary (*Garrincha, Alegria do Povo*), the comedy (*Os Mendigos*), distinct experiences, either frustrated or successful, that compose, after three years, an historical portrait which, not incidentally, will characterize the Jânio-Jango period: the period of great existential crisis and of rebellion, of agitation and revolution, which ended in the April Coup.³ And so it was, from April on, that the thesis of an ameliorating cinema grew in Brazil, systematically threatening Cinema Novo.

We understand this hunger that Europeans and the majority of Brazilians have failed to understand. For the European, it is a strange tropical surrealism. For the Brazilian, it is a national shame. He does not eat but is ashamed to say so; and yet, he does not know where this hunger comes from. We know—since we made these ugly, sad films, these screaming, desperate films in which reason has not always prevailed—that this hunger will not be cured by moderate government reforms, and that the cloak of technicolor cannot hide but rather aggravate its tumors. Therefore, only a culture of hunger, by undermining and destroying its own structures, can qualitatively surpass itself. The most noble cultural manifestation of hunger is violence.

3 This is the period of the presidencies of Jânio Quadros (1961) and João Goulart (1961–64), the latter of which defended a wide agricultural, educational and constitutional reform, including a democratic redistribution of land, a dialogue with unions, the extension of voting rights, and the legalization of the Brazilian Communist Party. The period ended with the 1964 military coup, supported by the USA.—Ed.

Mendicancy, a tradition implanted by the redemptive colonial piety, has been a cause of political mystification and of a boastful cultural lie. The official reports of hunger demand money from the colonial countries in order to build schools without ever worrying about the teachers, to build houses without worrying about work, to teach labor without the alphabet. Diplomacy demands, economists demand, politicians demand. Cinema Novo, on the international level, demanded nothing; it fought the violence of its images and sounds in twenty-two international festivals.

Cinema Novo reveals that violence is the normal behaviour of the starving, and that the violence of the starving is not primitive. Is Fabiano primitive? Is Antão primitive? Is Corisco primitive?⁴ Is the woman in *Porto das Caixas* primitive?

Cinema Novo teaches us that an aesthetics of violence— before being primitive—is revolutionary. It is the moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized: only when confronted with the sole possibility of expression of the colonized, violence, can the colonizer understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits. As long as he does not take up arms, the colonized man remains a slave; a policeman had to die before the French became aware of the Algerians.

In moral terms, this violence is not filled with hatred nor is it linked to the old colonizing humanism. The love that this violence encompasses is as brutal as violence itself, because it is not the kind of love made of complacency or contemplation but rather a love of action and transformation.

4 Protagonists of Pereira dos Santos's *Vidas Secas*, Ruy Guerra's *Os Fuzis*, and Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, respectively.

This is why Cinema Novo didn't produce melodramas. The women of Cinema Novo have always searched for a possible way out for love, given the impossibility of loving when famished: the prototypical woman of *Porto das Caixas* kills her husband; Dandara in *Ganga Zumba* escapes from war for a romantic love; Sinhá Vitória dreams of new times for her children; Rosa descends into crime to save Manuel and to love him; the priest's girl rips his vestment to win him over; the woman in *O Desafio* breaks with her lover so as to remain faithful to her bourgeois husband; the woman in São Paulo S. A. wishes for the safety of a petit bourgeois love, reducing her husband's life to a mediocre system.

The time has long passed since Cinema Novo had to justify its existence. Cinema Novo is an ongoing, self-explanatory process that is helping us to see reality clearer, freeing us from the debilitating delirium of hunger. Cinema Novo cannot develop effectively while it remains marginal to the economic and cultural processes of the Latin American continent. Furthermore, Cinema Novo is a phenomenon of colonized peoples everywhere and not a privilege of Brazil. Wherever there is a filmmaker prepared to film the truth and oppose the hypocrisy and repression of censorship, there will be the living spirit of Cinema Novo. Wherever there is a filmmaker prepared to stand up against commercialism, exploitation, pornography, and the tyranny of technique, there will be the living spirit of Cinema Novo. Wherever there is a filmmaker, of any age or background, ready to place his cinema and his profession at the service of the great causes of his time, there will be the living spirit of Cinema Novo. This is our definition and through this definition, Cinema Novo marginalizes itself from the industry, because the commitment of Industrial Cinema is to lies and

exploitation.

The economical and industrial integration of Cinema Novo depends on the freedom of Latin America. Cinema Novo makes every effort toward achieving this freedom, in its own name and in that of both its closest and more dispersed participants, from the most ignorant to the most talented, from the weakest to the strongest. It is a moral question that will be reflected in our films, whether we're filming a man or a house, in every observed detail, in philosophy: it is not a single film but an evolving complex of films that will ultimately make the public aware of its own misery.

This is why we don't have wider points of contact with World Cinema.

Cinema Novo is a project produced out of a politics of hunger, and suffers, for that very reason, all weaknesses derived from its particular existence.