

The erring mirror

You might say that the films included in Focus Brazil inform the public in this latest edition of Doku-Arts in two ways. Apart from what each film reveals when viewed in isolation, they reveal something more on a second observation, when taken together, when edited as if they were sequences of one long film. They then become a radical expression of that special Brazilian emphasis on the regular exchange of influences between the cinema and other arts.

What Mário de Andrade said in the mid-nineteen twenties to define the novel written as a documentary on so many Brazilian turns of phrase, on typically Brazilian expressions incorporated in the Portuguese language, what Mário said about "*Amar, verbo intransitivo*" ["To love, an intransitive verb"] ("I am writing a cinematographic novel. Novel, but cinema") is a good example – what Glauber said in the mid-sixties to define "*Terra em transe*" ["Land in a Trance"] ("a work of fiction, but filmed as a documentary on an opera") is another example. Two good examples of a dialogue in which the cinema takes from other art forms what they have taken from it; in which the other arts, like the cinema, make themselves out of the will to be constantly moving outside themselves; in which these expressions move on the impulse of a documentary.

So to make "*Vidas secas*" (1963) Nelson Pereira dos Santos chose the dry, direct, concise writing of the author Graciliano Ramos and the sharp, harsh, contrasting image of the folk woodcut of the Northeast; and Glauber Rocha, to make "*Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*" ["Black God, White Devil"] (1964), also chose a written work, the quasi-baroque folk poetry of the Northeast and the quasi-expressionism of the illustrations on the covers of booklets of poems sold in local fairs and markets. We have here the same process fed by the sensation already familiar to us in moving pictures, not only because in films the images move as if they were really alive, but also, or mainly, because in the cinema the structure, the order that arranges the images, is constantly moving towards the other arts, towards painting, literature, theatre, sculpture, poetry and music. Moving pictures: to be essentially cinematographic, the cinema image moves out of itself, it seeks as much from the cinema as feeds and inspires the other arts

One day Mário Peixoto discovered the film that he wanted to make, in a photograph he happened to see on a news stand – two clenched fists, held up, hand-cuffed, in front of the face of a woman looking at us; in these hand-cuffed hands and in these oppressed eyes, on the cover of the French magazine "*Vu*", number 74, of 14 August 1929, Mário found the image that summed it all up for "*Limite*" (1931).

One day Walter Salles rediscovered in the window of a bookshop a piece of a film that already existed in his imagination. He had dreamt of a young couple facing a ship grounded on a sand bank in the middle of the ocean, a key figure in a story of Brazilians lost from themselves, expelled from the country during the Collor government. By chance, in a photograph from the book "*Blues outremer*" by Jean-Pierre Favreau, Walter found the central image of the film made shortly afterwards with Daniela Thomas, "*Terra estrangeira*" ["Foreign Land"] (1996): a great ship grounded on a sand bank on the high seas.

The creative process, here, is the same as that which led folk art to find in the cinema the suggestion of a composition model able to cut and fix a fraction of a second of a gesture; the same also as that which led the cinema to find in the folk woodcut the suggestion of a composition model able to follow closely the gesture of people expelled from the countryside for lack of water and for lack of work, as, for example, the high contrast photograph, dominated by the intense white of "*Vidas secas*".

Let us imagine a cinema resulting from the fusion of the impulse of a documentary with a will to take other art forms as a critical mirror of cinematographic expression. Of course, it is not just a mirror (which, in the words of Fernando Pessoa, reflects correctly because it does not think, because thinking is essentially to err), but a critical mirror, which essentially errs. Or even, we can dream up the possibility that all artistic expression functions as the critical mirror of another artistic expression, that the true relationship established between them is that of a mirror that reflects another mirror, that mirrors the process, the surface that mirrors and not what is mirrored in it. Perhaps in this wild image we may find a picture of the creative process of films made among us, since "*Limite*" sought in the expressive experiences of European photography at the close of the twenties a way of saying that the cinema exists in a space where there are only limits and because of this very fact, no limits at all. Although not selected with this objective, the films of Focus Brasil can be taken as a radical image of this process – not while they are on the screen, but after, when they return in the imagination, in a second look, after having been viewed as they really are.

It seems that the cinema does almost nothing in the anthology arranged by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, "*A música segundo Tom Jobim*" ["Music according to Tom Jobim"] (2012), in a free association of songs by Jobim by interpreters from different parts of the world. It seems that the cinema does little when in "*As canções*" ["Songs"] (2012) it is ready to listen to people singing and talking about the importance of certain music in their lives, common folk, not singers, all filmed by Eduardo Coutinho in the same neutral scenario and from the same point of view. It seems the cinema does too much in the reinvention of "*Catatau*" by Paulo Leminski proposed by Cao Guimarães in "*Ex-isto*" (in Portuguese the hyphen gives a double meaning to the word *existo*, so that it could be read as "Ex-it" or "Ex-ist") (2011), not exactly an adaptation of the poem (in which it is asked what would have happened if Descartes had visited Brazil), but a free invention of images inspired by reading Leminski's writing. It seems the cinema wanders through the installations of Cildo Meireles in "*Cildo*" by Gustavo Moura (2010) almost as if the camera were an actor in the theatre, acting and using the works as a stage set, like the stage for a drama. To strike the eyes of the spectator as an image never seen before, it seems the cinema, in the films of Arthur Omar, behaves like a kind of pick-pocket: it takes what it needs, from wherever it can find it - from a version of Goethe, from a film by Raul Ruiz, from an item in a police report in the newspaper, or from any new technological resource. In all of these examples, it seems the cinema does the wrong thing to do get things right. In a documentary on music, perhaps, it is better to let the image dance to the music ("music does not need words", emphasized in a caption at the end of "*A música segundo Tom Jobim*"). In a documentary on what the visual arts have borrowed from the scenic arts, perhaps what is important is to act on stage. Similarly, but perhaps even more significant, in a documentary on the songs that folk remember as the music that filled their lives, it is most important for the cinema to rest quietly in

its corner, all ears, to understand the facts that in the life of each one tuned (or failed to tune) the voice of the interpreter.

You might say that artistic invention has a moment in which a specific art form acts like the spectator of another art form; and again that the cinema invented itself as an autonomous expression because it was first a spectator: it enjoyed, analyzed, allowed itself to be stimulated and challenged by the other arts; and you might also say that while watching a film the spectator repeats the gesture the cinema invented (and continues the unfinished process of reinventing), because what we really receive from art is the invitation to add continuity to the creative process.

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(Translated from Portuguese by Sheilah Cardno)