THE MONSTRIFICATION OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN CINEMA: *AVA YVY VERA* AND *SEVEN YEARS IN MAY*

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When Tomé de Sousa first arrived in the Portuguese colony of Brazil in 1549, with the title of first governor-general and the task of enforcing Portuguese control over the land, one of his first responsibilities was to have a wall built around the then-capital, Bahia. Among the listed manufactured goods—scythes, axes, knives, combs—exchanged with Indigenous populations for wood were seventy pieces of mirror. Almost four centuries later, the mirror would become an apt metaphor for cinema, accounting for both the analog and the virtual, the subjective and the objective, the social and the individual. Nonetheless, this historical record of colonial occupation points out that both the technology and the metaphor are not neutral, let alone universal. For the colonized, the image promised by the mirror restricted access to their own selves: a wall had been erected with brazilwood to completely block the view.[1]

In 2012, two important forums for nonfiction filmmaking—CPH: DOX and Sheffield Doc/Fest—each held panels on what was then posited as a new reality: the hybrid film. While the application of the term for audiovisual works that combine fiction and documentary is far from new—Edgar Morin himself used the adjective in 1962 to describe *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*), which he had codirected with Jean Rouch the previous year—its transformation into a category has elicited strong reactions.[2] "I do not like the term 'hybrid' to describe formally ambitious documentaries," Robert Greene later wrote, while advocating for calling such films simply "movies."[3]

In a less generic but paradoxically more evasive provocation, Erika Balsom questioned the predicament of reflexivity in contemporary documentary, suggesting instead the foundation of a "reality-based community" where observational cinema could stand as an ethics in a world where alternative facts, posttruth, and fake news had become efficient strategies of the new global right.[4] Her investment in a distinction between "narration" and "description" aimed to restore the separation that the hybrid film never fully destroyed. Originally published in 2017, Balsom's piece generated a talk two years later at the "Art of the Real" program at Film at Lincoln Center, followed by a response by Toby Lee at Visible Evidence in 2018 that reclaimed the necessity to frame the experience of "reality" in relation to social, economic, and cultural circumstances. This dispute over terminology coalesces critical work, film programming, and the documentary industry into a "global" arena where theoretical specificity lives and dies.[5]

Rarely acknowledged in generalist accounts, Brazilian cinema has a particular stake in this discussion beyond its current role as a laboratory for the New Right. Films like Mario Peixoto's *Limite* (1931), Linduarte Noronha's *Aruanda* (1960), Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna's *Iracema: Uma transa amazônica* (1975), Walter Lima Jr.'s *A lira do delírio* (*The Lyre of Delight,* 1978), Glauber Rocha's *A idade da terra* (*The Age of the Earth,* 1980), and Eduardo Coutinho's *Cabra marcado para morrer* (*Twenty Years Later,* 1984) have created a modern Brazilian cinema founded on taxonomic irreverence. As Robert Stam wrote, "[F]ashionable talk of postcolonial 'hybridity' and 'syncretism' often elides the fact that artists and intellectuals in Brazil and the Caribbean were theorizing hybridity over half a century earlier."[6]

Hybridity has been used in various forms by thinkers of and from underdevelopment including Frantz Fanon, Néstor García Canclini, Oswald de Andrade, and Édouard Glissant to destabilize the blind spots of systematic knowledge in colonial structures that have not quite gone away. It is ironic, then, that part of the film world has turned this practice itself into a stable, finite category that can then be used by the same system of knowledge it was meant to criticize. As a brand, the hybrid film immobilizes

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"becoming" into "being," promoting both the death and the afterlife of hybridity as a purposeful paradox that keeps colonialism at work.

Much as the affirmation of diversity in the arts too often preserves the vantage point of the occupier who gives voice to or makes space for the occupied, so does the indiscriminate use of "the hybrid film" in a transnational network reinforce a universal lexicon.[7] Radically different works made in widely distinct contexts are crammed under the same umbrella, with no regard for the specific exchanges taking place in each film and context. The same terminological flexibility that allows for the circulation of these films in the international round of festivals, grants, and critical response renders other ways of being in the world—and other ways for films to be films—inconceivable.

The limits of this taxonomic comfort and the presumption of universality that hides behind it become all the more evident when applied to works created by, or in collaboration with, victims of institutionalized brutality. The colonial entanglements of mirrors and walls are revived in two recent Brazilian medium-length films: *Sete anos em maio* (*Seven Years in May,* 2019), Affonso Uchôa's follow-up to his art-house hit *Arábia* (*Araby,* 2017, codirected with João Dumans); and *Ava Yvy Vera: A terra do povo do raio* (*Ava Yvy Vera: The Land of the Lightning People,* 2017) by Genito Gomes, Valmir Gonçalves Cabreira, Jhonn Nara Gomes, Jhonaton Gomes, Edina Ximenes, Dulcídio Gomes, Sarah Brites, and Joilson Brites—all first-time filmmakers of the Guarani-Kaiowá ethnicity.[8] Both films use collaboration, reenactment, documentation, and fabulation in order to shape traumatic events previously rendered invisible: the mass incarceration of young men in Contagem, Minas Gerais, in the first; and, in the second, the assassination of the Guarani-Kaiowá leader Nísio Gomes, murdered in 2011 by farmers usurping Guarani-Kaiowá sacred land.[9]

In photochemical film, the term "underdevelopment" signifies an imprecise process that generates an image that has never fully formed, having been partially washed away with the fixer. In Brazilian cinema, Paulo Emílio Sales Gomes defines the construction of the self within underdevelopment as "the rarefied dialectic between not-being and being someone else."[10] This absence of being characterizes the phenomenological world that these films are accessing. The transits between reality and fiction reflect an originating context where separations were never delineated, and the relation between the real and the fictive recalls a verse by Caetano Veloso: "Here everything looks / Like it was still under construction / And is already in ruins."

The Face of the Monster: *Seven Years in May*

Affonso Uchôa's *Seven Years in May* is a film of simple features. An opening title card mourns the memory of "Preto (Black), who died way too soon" as the sound of footsteps anticipates the first shot, in which Rafael dos Santos Rocha walks on a road at night, playing a character based on his own life. The following sequence, filmed vérité style, shows a group of young men pulling guns and police uniforms from a storage trunk in a vacant lot. These men embody the "policemen" who terrorize Rafael in performative play that involves noticeable pleasure, and that recalls both experiments in behavioral psychology and the hyperrealistic exercises that acting coach Fátima Toledo used when working with actors on films such as Fernando Meirelles's *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God,* 2002).[11] The ambiguous specificity of the name on the film's memorial card—"Black," an adjective turned name for a specific someone who could be many—resonates in this role-playing game: the other men are just like Rafael, but the guns and the uniforms separate them.

After a ninety-second panoramic shot of the protagonist limping near a power plant, carrying the effects of reenacted brutality in his body, a brief insert of a shot of a fire leads to a half-profile medium shot of Rafael, with the fire burning off-screen. His clothes imply continuity, but this is the first time that the viewer has access to his face. In a confessional tone, Rafael tells the story of how he was framed, tortured, and arrested, and how that experience changed the course of his life. The shot continues, uninterrupted, for a full seventeen minutes—more than a third of the film's running time.

This contrast between the integrity of duration and the fractures of orality scramble the fictional clues planted by the reenactment sequence at the beginning of the film, at the same time that the fire alludes to the conventional location of storytelling: a fireplace or campfire. After seventeen minutes, once the viewer has either left the theater or settled into the position of someone (a friend, a priest, or a social worker) who listens, something marvelous happens: a reverse shot.

It's hard to translate the weight of this cut without experiencing the full duration of the uninterrupted chronicle that precedes it, but the shift from a primordial form of account that is both descriptive and narrative—a talking head—to one of the most overused conventions of

Rafael dos Santos Rocha, limping near a power plant, in *Seven Years in May*.

Griffithian montage— the shot reverse shot—destabilizes the fictive and the real, as well as the terms of the exchange between them. When writing about in-person reenactment, Ivone Margulies points out the inherent instability that such a choice lends to the filmic utterance: "While one's performance of one's own life story is easily confused with a public reclamation of one's self and voice . . . the ambiguous agency of the actual protagonist turned actor grants to these films their refractive, critical quality."[12] In *Seven Years in May,* the stability of selfhood is complicated by both the multiple registers of reenactment and the arrival of a fictional device in the form of a new character, Wederson Neguinho, who initiates the following exchange with Rafael:

NEGUINHO: You have a sad story, just as many people I've met.
RAFAEL: Is your story different?
NEGUINHO: It's just like yours.

The confessional listening developed until then suddenly feels intrusive: the story we had heard was being told not just to the audience, but to someone whose own story is just like Rafael's and who partakes in a similar experience of reality. The film shapes their commonality in its form. The cut between the interview shot (a documentary convention) and a stiff Brechtian dialogue in shot reverse shot enacts a productive indistinction between othering and empathy, difference and sameness, inclusion and exclusion, construction and ruins.

According to Uchôa, the long monologue was shot over thirty times at different locations among which he planned to cut, preserving an aural continuity throughout the visual discontinuity. Once the improvised account started resembling a script, he realized that the single long take could enhance the ambiguity of registers, pushing against the "reality-based community" with a reverse shot. "The problem," he concluded, "is that we live in a world where the real is an aesthetics, and capitalism has mastered this aesthetics. If it speaks the language of truthfulness, it becomes true."[13] The question, then, is not how to fight the unreal with an aesthetics of reality that has long been turned against it, but how to challenge the universalism that renders this aesthetics invisible, broadening the possibilities for being in the world and reshaping the imaged real.

The clash between Rafael's oral account and Neguinho's reverse shot produces a monstrous collective memory that gives shape to a violent experience of underdevelopment that spreads over the entire neighborhood. In the film's final sequence, *Seven Years in May* takes one last formal leap to express the pervasive institutionalization of this brutality in the realm of play. It enacts a schoolyard game in which

Campfire confessional: Rafael dos Santos Rocha prepares to tell his story.

a large group of participants must follow the instructions given by a single person: when he says "dead," they must crouch down; when he says "alive," they must stand up. The film literalizes the coercive training behind that facade of taxonomic clarity—"dead!" or "alive!"—by having a police officer call the shots. In this underdeveloped rendition of Simon Says, the only possibility of survival lies in scrambling the binary—bringing out the deadness in the living, the obscurity in the precise, and the fictive in the real.

Returning the Mirror: *Ava Yvy Vera*

The access to a felt reality becomes even more complex when the camera is guided by an entirely different cosmology— one not limited to the visible world, and passed around among filmmakers working completely outside the documentary industry.

In the opening shot of *Ava Yvy Vera,* a film that emerged from the project Imagem Canto Palavra nos Territórios Guarani e Kaiowá, sponsored by the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), a symmetrical tableau, captured with a handheld camera, shows a single tree in the middle of a soybean crop. The observational feeling of the shot is complemented by an unidentified oral account in Guarani, uttered as an in situ voice-over narration from behind the camera: "Every day I came under that tree to make a call. It's only safe to come at night. There are many gunmen around here." Yet here you are, under the big bright sun, and the excessive visibility paradoxically destabilizes the visible: can the gunmen see them? Are the filmmakers at risk?[14]

As the shot progresses, the narration shifts. Inspired by the contextual title card in the opening of James Cameron's *Terminator* (1984), which was rendered as voice-over narration in Portuguese in the dubbed version released in Brazil, the voice-over segues into description, imagining a physical space that challenges and expands what the camera shows.[15] The tree is perceived by the filmmakers as an antenna, because it was in the only place with cell-phone reception in their territory, and "the wind, this wind, was created by the white men, who took down all the trees. This place was a big bushland, and now see what replaced it.... There were many guavira fruits here ... termite nests ... medicine."

The richness of the recalled real contrasts with the ordered sameness of the crops, as the camera gains mobility, moving toward the tree and panning around. Layers of history coalesce in this flow between image and sound, creating an entire landscape that, although unavailable for indexical observation, exists in the fold between not being and being someone else. In *Ava Yvy Vera,* the camera is not the tool that provides access to reality: it is the artifact that comes too late to document systematic extraction.

The presence of the camera nonetheless allows for a collective mourning that takes many forms, from observational documentation of rituals and customs to oral accounts, where characters mimic the sound of gunshots and switch from Guarani to Portuguese to recall the words used by their perpetrators. In one of the film's most striking sequences, the characters/filmmakers wrap themselves with vines as camouflage, describing what they did to hide from the *karai* (the white men). The camera follows them as they slink through the trees by the side of the road, demonstrating their strategy of survival. While one of them plays for the camera, the other describes what they did when the camera was not there. "We went out here and observed," the voice says, as they stand by a dirt road. "We stepped out, and crossed to the other side." And with that, the other man steps out and crosses to the other side of the road, crossing also the line between description and narration.

The film cuts to a shot of smoke flowing up the trees, as a female voice says off-screen: "The white men are watching us.... I think they saw us yesterday afternoon, when we set up the fire, and now they found us because of the smoke." Betrayed by visibility, a group of teenagers practice what to do should the *karai* appear. A crackling sound in the woods is enough to send them running around in pantomime, hiding behind trees while keeping an eye out for the enemy. The camera runs with them, stays with them, ducks with them, invested in their same felt reality, until the playfulness of the reenactment slowly gives way to palpable tension and it is no longer clear whether the

The tree as an antenna, in *Ava Yvy Vera*.

karai are there again or not. Can the camera ever be too late when the tragic events are relived in daily cycles?

In their preface to the 1957 edition of *The Book of Imaginary Beings,* Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero wrote that "a monster is no more than a combination of parts of real beings, and the possibilities of permutation border on the infinite."[16] The monstrous is the expression of the unshaped, the affected documentation of the phenomenal reality between not being and being someone else. It is the refusal to normativize discontent. When history ascribes a different meaning to the mirror in underdevelopment, the metaphor of cinema is bound to reflect that. What *Seven Years in May* and *Ava Yvy Vera* do is to revise the terms of exchange, returning the mirror to the forms of the occupier, creating a monstrous reflection. If Robin Wood was right when he said that the monster is always a return of the repressed, then underdeveloped cinema is itself monstrous, and its vocation is to haunt.[17]

Notes

1. For the official record of colonial exchanges, read Alexander Marchant, *From Barter to Slavery: The Economic Relations of Portuguese and Indians in the Settlement of Brazil, 1500–1580* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966) 93, footnote 36.
2. Edgar Morin, "Chronicle of a Film," republished in *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism,* ed. Jonathan Kahana (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 467.
3. Robert Greene, "Die, Hybrid! Die!," *Sight & Sound,* September 25, 2019, www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/unfiction/die-hybrid-die
4. Erika Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community," *e-flux,* no. 83 (June 2017), www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community/. Also see "To Narrate or Describe? Experimental Documentary beyond Docufiction," live talk at Bar Laika, New York City, April 28, 2019, https://www.e-flux.com/program/260218/bar-laika-presents-art-of-the-real-spotlights-erika-balsom-to-narrate-or-describe-nbsp-experimental-documentary-beyond-docufiction/.
5. Pamela Cohn, "Minding the Gap between Fiction and Reality: CPH: DOX Celebrates Ten Years," *Senses of Cinema,* no. 65 (December 2012), http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/festival-reports/minding-the-gap-between-fiction-and-reality-cphdox-celebrates-10-years/. I'm indebted to Toby Lee for her response to Erika Balsom's piece, which helped set some of the parameters that were formative in this piece.
6. Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 70.
7. The terms "occupied" and "occupier" were coined by film critic Paulo Emílio Sales Gomes in 1975, in his classic article "Cinema, trajetória no subdesenvolvimento." In all published English translations I have encountered, the

terms have been replaced with "colonized" and "colonizer," sacrificing the dynamic nature of the original terms. As I have written elsewhere, "[T]he epistemological advantage that the 'occupier/occupied' tent poles offer over 'colonizer/colonized' [is that] the occupier status is not determined by place of birth; it is a dynamic role that permeates daily practices and can be played by the occupied themselves." Fábio Andrade, "A Post-Colonial Situation?," *fabioandrade.me,* October 2019, https://wp.nyu.edu/fabioandrade/2019/10/08/a-post-colonial-situation/.

8. In December 2019, I coprogrammed with Mary Jane Marcasiano a Brazilian film series at Film at Lincoln Center, produced by Cinema Tropical, *Veredas: A Generation of Brazilian Filmmakers,* that paired these two films in the same screening. As of spring 2020, *Seven Years in May* has been released on VOD. For its distributors, see Fábio Andrade, "Veredas tropicais #08," *Cinema Tropical,* May 11, 2020 www.cinematropical.com/cinema-tropical/veredas-tropicais-08
9. For more information about that program, see: "Veredas: A Generation of Brazilian Filmmakers," *Cinema Tropical*, undated, www.cinematropical.com/veredas.
10. Paulo Emílio Sales Gomes, "Cinema: Trajectory within Underdevelopment," in *Paulo Emílio Sales Gomes: On Brazil and Global Cinema,* ed. Maite Conde and Stephanie Dennison (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), 194.
11. For an ethnographic account of Fátima Toledo's method, see Emilio Fraia, "Como não ser ator," *Piauí,* January 2009. https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/como-nao-ser-ator/
12. Ivone Margulies, *In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.
13. Uchôa and I recorded a personal conversation about the film on December 19, 2019, which was the main source for the content of this paragraph.
14. *Ava Yvy Vera: The Land of the Lightning People* credits the people who make the film and appear in it, but it does not single them out. Though my research has allowed me to learn who is behind the camera or who is in front of it, I have chosen not to include that information, preserving the film's own conception of authorship.
15. The source of inspiration for the opening of *Ava Yvy Vera* was shared with me by Vincent Carelli, filmmaker and founder of the nonprofit organization Vídeo nas Aldeias (Video in the Villages). He is quoting Fábio Menezes, who was the instructor of the workshop with the Guarani-Kaiowás.
16. Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1969), 14.
17. Robin Wood, "Return of the Repressed," in *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews,* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 58.