Film and the city in Mozambican Cinema

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Abstract

Caio Fernando Abreu, a Brazilian writer, when speaking about his city of origin, wrote: "I live in Menino de Deus, of which Porto Alegre is just what there is around it". For this author, his city is not everything that is around it, but his own small corner, his neighbourhood, his microcosm. And in this way he speaks to us of our relationship with the city – it is metonymic. We create our own cartography, which is composed of fragments that we assemble to fit the drawing of our desire. I leave my neighbourhood if my desire lies outside of it, but my house, my city, is much smaller and is circumscribed not only geographically but also emotionally.

In order to assemble the puzzle of the urban space, we are guided by fundamental pieces that we detach from all the rest. And all the rest remains on the fringes. As in the cinema, that does not interest us lies outside the shot. In this way, my city is not just mine; I cannot share it, because it exists only in me. The other city, or the "real" city, is always another space, in which I walk but where I do not always see myself reflected. The psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl says that the city is the cradle of the common man – anonymous, part of the crowd. An ideal space for engaging in the necessary everyday forgetfulness about the fleeting nature of our experience in a space that is constantly changing.

The real city is the space of otherness, where we do not recognise those that we come across every day. They are invisible (like us). I therefore intend to analyse the urban space as the place for the recognition of the fracturing of the contemporary man, the place for various experiences in life and the constant forgetting of the other, of ourselves, of what lies around us. In the second part of this work, some notes will be presented about two spaces that become entangled as a mark of modernity in the African continent: the city and the cinema. In this case, the city in the Mozambican cinema. I talk about the way in which the western urban experience alters the gaze of those who have different stories to tell.

Art, according to Lyotard, does not say the unsayable, but it says it cannot say it. Through the viewing of some films from the Mozambican cinema, we shall therefore examine the way in which this urban space is put together. Cinema, which cannot say the unsayable, shows. In its own editing of the film, in its essence of consisting of fragments that are recomposed, it reveals a pain that cannot be sublimated, but which inhabits the inhabitants, who are frequently invisible in these cities.

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I look at the map of the city
Like someone examining
The anatomy of a body...

Mário Quintana

It has become common to discuss film and the city. And even more so to discuss both as concepts that are representative of modernity. We prefer to discuss films and *modernities*, in the plural form.

If we condition film to an actual experience and modernity to a unitary idea, we reduce their scope. As such, modernity is invariably associated with the concept of progress, a teleological idea of advantages acquired and to be acquired by culture through scientific and technological progress and overcoming the past.

Not only by overcoming the past but acquiring the conscience of improvement – the certainty that humanity inexorably walks towards the future and, thus, acquiring an acute conscience of the present. However, we believe that modernity has had many facets and that none of them has ignored the past but has compulsorily engaged in dialogue with it.

Thomas Bender, referring to NY as the never-ending city, states that modernity constitutes a dialogue with the past and that the past must always be present. This model of complete rupture with the past is only one of the many faces of modernity, which we are more familiar with. We are also more used to associate modernity with certain aspects of art, in particular architecture and, of course, cities or, better still, metropolises: the absolute symbol of the end of the 19th century as stated by Baudelaire and Benjamin, among many other authors, more or less renowned. Kracauer, whom is considerably less cited than Benjamin, whom he befriended and exchanged correspondence with, holds a very particular view on the metropolises of his time, especially Berlin and Paris. In a certain way, his view on Paris is related to Benjamin's. During his visits to Paris, Walter Benjamin sees, among many other aspects, a *passage* to modernity, a new temporality so well defined by Baudelaire; Kracauer sees Paris as a city that still communicates with its past, manifold and labyrinthine in opposition to Berlin: a city whose past was extracted from her and destroyed, where long avenues were transformed into symbols of modern functionality, or even the "Americanism" established in the Republic of Weimar.

"The repressed ornamental" is how Kracauer defines the new buildings in Berlin, as opposed to Paris, which preserved the ecstasy of its streets, the memory of the past in the present, in a world where the *ratio* was imperative, which allows the city to be labyrinthine and shamelessly ornamental. However, the repressed ornamental in Berlin, as anything that is repressed, surfaces in the form of massive shows, which resulted in shows promoted by the Nazis.

We refer to the visions of these contemporary and fundamental cities to understand modernity, or *modernities*, and to understand, one way or another, that the urban, labyrinthine or rational space marks a time that is marked by self-conscience: the time of its finitude or ephemeris. It is not by chance that the concept of *shock* (Benjamin) and *stoss* (Heidegger) are frequently used to discuss people's reaction to this new experience of and in time. This experience of shock, ontologically different, is associated with film as an experience that manifests the sensation of instability felt by those who experienced the beginning of modernity and film.

The *stoss*, more than a shock, is the anguish of knowing human limitations, of knowing that, like time and the things of time, the thread of a story cannot be controlled. Unlike Freud's *fort-da*, where the child simulates an absence but knows that he controls the presence, in modernity, the certainty of control is lost and the absences are not simulations but certainties. Film appears as the reel and the game line analysed by Freud, in which we can simulate absences and control the return of presence. But, at the same time, film is composed by shadows, adapted, according to Kracauer, to capture "a world without substance in a process of disintegration".

The fragmentary aspect of film, as well as its evocation of the real, has been used as a metaphor to speak about modernity and the perfect fit between film and the time that created it. It would emerge almost as an answer to the call of time. In the same way, Kracauer's pessimist view that was shared by many intellectuals at the time: the association of modernity with the Ford-Taylor model; with capitalism spreading throughout the world and, in particular, with culture and art; the configuration of new urban spaces, metropolises – *mother-cities* of a new civilization, made Lukács, for instance, refer to "transcendental homelessness".

Modernity projects the individual into "transcendental homelessness" and the city becomes the preferred choice of these homeless people. Modernity, uprooted and uprooting, fragmented and unstable, projects the individual into a permanent state of shock, according to Benjamin, offering to each of her numerous inhabitants the conscience of the ephemeral and the incapacity of total control over its own history, according to Heidegger. The city and film mingle as discourses of a time that runs, inexorably, towards an end that, at a frenetic pace, never stops promoting constant shows that occupy this time reinvented by the logics of capitalism, where idleness is transformed into leisure and leisure into a predetermined and ephemeral period of pleasure.

Film, like the city, is composed by fragments, pieces of reality or, better still, reality clips, which change according to light or viewing angle. At the beginning of the 20th century, theoreticians like Munsterberg and Jean Epstein came to the conclusion that film "takes place" in the spectator's mind.

They both worked separated in physical and temporal distance and there is no evidence that Epstein was aware of Munsterberg's pioneering work. The only certainty that we have is that both understood that film only exists because the spectator is able to interpret a series of frames dragging through time. The spectator is able to unify time and space and perceive it as a *continuum.*

We know that modernity gives rise to a new concept of urban space. And it promotes a new model of vision: subjective, corporeal and directed. In order to survive fragmentation (and Benjamin's shock), the perception organises our experience of the visible – we observe a constant flux composed by scattered pieces, different locations and temporalities. Like Paris in the 19th Century, the dialogue between past and present is a constant in every street and, simultaneously, this dialogical and dynamic temporality is experienced. Kracauer's Paris is not the same as Benjamin's. Nor will it be the same to anyone who lives or has been there.

Thomas Bender states that NY is an unfinished city. He also states that this is the most primordial feature that better defines her. We can apply this concept of unfinished city to all great cities, expanding to infinity, or shrinking and diminishing, in accordance with those who inhabit her, the space that they have to travel, the time of controlled pleasure – the so-called leisure - when they can live the city in a more expansive and diverse way than usual. In this aspect, city and film diverge – for as open as it may be, film text has an end – at least a narrative end. Film has narrative/image resources that force us to focus on specific details, scenes or landscapes. The city, for as rational as it may be, is more labyrinthine. It is like a puzzle that we assemble day after day.

In order to assemble this puzzle, the urban space, we walk guided by fundamental pieces that we highlight above everything else. And everything else remains on the margins. Like in film, things that do not interest us remain out of our field of vision. In this way, my city is only mine and I cannot share it because she only exists in me. The other city, or the "real" city, is always another space, where I walk but not always identify myself with. Psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl states that the city is the cradle of common men – anonymous, part of the crowd, the ideal location to forget daily living and necessary when faced with the fugacity of experience in a space in constant mutation.

The real city is a space of otherness where we do not recognise people that we see every day. They are invisible (like us). Thus, urban space converts itself in the place of recognition of the fracture of the individual, a place of diverse ways of living and constant experience of oblivion: of the other, of us, of what is around us. We learn to see/live the city as we learn to see films. The image, in and outside film, is a text that needs to be decoded. In some countries in Europe and in the United States, this decoding process becomes easier because they invented the rules of the game, of film and modern city. In which way do the definitely others, like the Africans, see and experience these two founding texts of contemporary Western civilization?

Notes on another Cinema

Art, according to Lyotard, does not speak the unspeakable, but rather says that it cannot say it. Through a few Mozambican films, let us go through the way in which the city and film, converted in discourse, are perceived/experienced. Film, that cannot speak the unspeakable, shows it. It reveals, through its own editing, in its essence of fragments that are regrouped, a pain that cannot be suppressed, but inhabits the often invisible inhabitants of these cities.

In his book, *Secret Language of Film*, Jean-Claude Carrière states that film was brought to the African continent by European colonisers as another weapon in their already well loaded luggage. This fact is not uncommon if we consider that, at the beginning of film, the Church also used films as part of the homily. In countless occasions image has been used for pedagogical purposes – whether through teachings that would expand knowledge of the other or a form to simply dominate it. Cinematographic image followed the same rule. It rendered itself, on numerous occasions, to be used as an instrument of cognition and domination. Due to its connection with the real, film was used to create and strengthen ideologies; to impose models and suggest patterns of behaviour.

The Western city and film arrived in Mozambique almost at the same time. Lourenço Marques is built as a metropolis in the etymological sense of the term: mother city of a Western idea, a model of civilization that would spread throughout the country and, perhaps, through this vast continent. It is interesting to emphasise that one of the first institutes created by SamoraMachel, after independence, was the INC – Instituto Nacional do Cinema (National Institute of Cinema). The main function of this institute was to produce news-reel, short documentaries – Kuxakanema – which were distributed throughout the country.

This gives us the dimension of the pedagogical and propagandist importance that this means of communication had during the first phase of independence in Mozambique. It also gives us the documental dimension that strongly marked film production in this country.

There was no television at the time and film assumed the role of creating the image of the new Government and the new country. In addition to news-reel, several films, mainly short and medium length, were produced. During an interview, Ousmane Sembène, Senegalese film director, considered as the "father of African film", stated that, for him, film had a very specific purpose: to educate people. His movies were consciously pedagogical and film was merely a vehicle for his discourse. Image is a powerful tool in places with multiple languages where space is dominated by *heteroglossia* – the speech is constructed socially and not everyone dominates the official language of his own country. Generally speaking, this is also the outlook of Mozambican film: fiction movies produced by autonomous entities, usually NGOs, which play an important social function and present, through an apprehensible discourse, issues that are very important for the country, such as people uprooting, poverty and HIV.

In these films, the city is either the main character or the background. And its absence, like the reel in Freud's game, is merely a hidden presence. In Mozambican film, the city gains relevance from its characters; they are the ones who move through its space and interact with the city and others according to their habits and needs. Thus, people and their activities are more important than the physical space which they inhabit. This is the reason why, in the majority of scenes involving the city, the presence of the urban space is marked, in particular, by buildings and public spaces, such as hospitals, schools, gardens and *dumbanengue* (street markets).

Observing Mozambican cities through the director's perspective, we can verify a lack of urban planning. It is in the cities' centres that we feel the colonial presence, the main buildings were preserved and larger companies or institutions have occupied them. The cities of Maputo or Tete, from a central point of view, are organized, cosmopolitan and modern. But on the outskirts, where the majority of the population lives, we are confronted with a completely different reality: massive neighbourhoods that form enormous tentacles around the centre. There is no attempt by the directors to disguise the city. The city is presented as it is: unplanned, unequal. (In this context, it is important to highlight that, due to the scarce economic resources at their disposal, Mozambican film directors contract very few extras and the shooting set is established *in loco*. In such films as Licínio de Azevedo's *The Great Bazaar*, the scenes were shot in real time at the Bazaar itself and, in addition to the actors the people who live at the Bazaar also took part in the film).

Very often, the city appears as a path and the railroads connect the characters with the urban space in Licínio de Azevedo's, *The Great Bazaar*. The streets of Maputo divide the city into many more, as in the film *Another Man's Garden* by Sol de Carvalho. In the film *Babes*, also by Licínio, the juvenile universe is presented, with the city of Tete for background. The young girls talk about affection and disaffection, watch TV and dress-up like Western girls. The surrounding space and recurrence to a Western taboo, witchcraft, give local colours and tones to the film.

If the city is a path, it is also a space of ambiguity – on the one hand, it is seen as a place full of opportunities for those who live in poor neighbourhoods or in the countryside (*Cobwebs*, *Another Man's Garden*, *The Great Bazaar*, *Mahala*) and, on the other hand, it is shown as a space of exploration and inequality (*Night Stop; When the Sea Hits the Rock*). In one way or the other, it is a place separated and distant from the origin of most characters.

The city, or cities, in these films, appears fragmented, dismantled, re-arranged. It is the same city but there are multiple and diverse spaces, and the use of each building, each corner. The Mozambican city is the same, but it is another city. Its fragmentation does not follow the *raccord* of Western cinema, its internal logics is made of appropriations, duly or unduly, of the public space and the representations of private spaces within it. The analysis of the sequence of images of the city is not only built on the physical materiality of spaces, but rather from what is done and what happens in the city, from its own inhabitants. In this sense, the city manifests itself more in the bodies that inhabit it than in the organization of the sceneries that it proposes.

A city is a dialogical space and this dialogue is captured by the director's camera in the form of a fiction that is very close to docudrama, the matrix of a film industry that is still under development. An unfinished film, just like the cities that it portrays. But, as stated by Bender when referring to NY, the unfinished aspect of the city is a feature, not an error.

And a choice, conscious or unconscious, of a space that does not want to confine itself, built with concrete and glass. Above all, built by people. It is the human mass that makes that city what it is. And it is this city of people that the film speaks about, whose voices are still not very much heard in these cities, on this side.

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Films

As Pitas
1998
52 mn
Director: LicínioAzevedo
O Grande Bazar
2005
56 mn
Director: LicínioAzevedo
O Jardim do Outro homem
2006
100 mn
Director: Sol de Carvalho
PregosnaCabeça
2004
32 mn
Director: Sol de Carvalho.