

REFRAMING UTOPIA: CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN CINEMA AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

The fall of the Berlin wall in 9 November 1989 marked the end of the socialist Utopia and the victory of post-modern, anti-utopian neo-liberalism. A few months later, in 1990, Francis Fukuyama published his polemical article 'The End of History and the Last Man', subsequently expanded into a best-selling book.¹ Also in 1990 the master of puns Jean-Luc Godard shot a film with the apt title *Allemagne neuf zéro* (*Germany Year 90 nine zero*), *neuf* in French meaning both 'nine' and 'new'. Its references are clear: the fall of the wall as well as the film *Germany Year Zero*, directed by Roberto Rossellini in 1947, about a Berlin razed to the ground after the 2nd World War. Both negation and inauguration are encapsulated in Rossellini's zero. On the one hand, it allegorises a devastated country and Europe, where despairing children commit suicide. On the other, it establishes a *tabula rasa* where young filmmakers of his and other countries – such as Godard and his companions of the French *nouvelle vague* – can inscribe a new film aesthetics, free from the taints of a brutal past reduced to dust.

Through humour and irony, Godard, in *Allemagne neuf zéro*, collects the debris of Utopia amidst the remains of the catastrophe. The film features Hans Zischler, who, together with Rüdiger Vogler, starred in *Kings of the Road*, directed by Wim Wenders in 1976, in which two *flâneurs* travel along the border between West and East Germany in a romantic search for the lost threads of history and the links of a homeland torn apart by the war. Through the 70s and 80s, Wenders applied himself patiently to the reconstruction of the narrative and the fable, bombarded by his idol Godard. His road movies, whose characters are endlessly searching for a story and a home, left their mark and created a school of which Brazilian filmmaker Walter Salles is a devoted disciple. For Godard, in his turn, there seems to be no greater entertainment than to deconstruct his followers by means of parody, especially when they are quoting him. The result are jewels of self-reflexive humour, such as these lines from *Allemagne neuf zéro*:

Pieces of history for sale! Pieces of the wall for ten cents.
Books, flags, shirts, buttons, come closer, ladies and gentlemen, buy
them! That comes from Orianienburg, that from Dachau.²

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin, 1993.

² In the original, in German, in lower cases, without punctuation and in verse: 'hier stück geschichte/nur zehn pfennige/mauersteine aus Berlin/koppeln/bücher/fahnen/hemden, knöpfe/kommen sie heran/meine herrschaften, kaufen sie/das stammt/aus Orianienburg/das aus Dachau'. Cf. Jean-Luc Godard, *Allemagne neuf zéro – phrases (sorties d'un film)*. Paris, P.O.L., 1998.

Allemagne neuf zéro, made of citation and deconstruction, running from Goethe through Conrad in the best post-modern style, mixes up the ruins of the 2nd World War in the 40s with the fallen wall in the present, thus reducing history to random fragments of time and space and emptying the nation of its meaning and narrative potential.

Laura Mulvey has already pointed out, in Godard's work, the recurrence of the return to zero, which acquires different meanings at each stage, referring both to the origins of cinema and the feminine myths, and these oscillating between the virgin mother and the prostitute, the perfect circle of the womb and the vaginal hole.³ I would like to approach contemporary Brazilian cinema in the light of these various references, which connect it, at one end, to the Utopia of origins and, at the other, to the motherhood principle. I will depart from an interrogation: in a time devoid of political utopias, when all inventions dissolve in a new zero and the nation is nothing but a ruined project, how does one think about a new national cinema, as is the case of the recent Renaissance of Brazilian Cinema?

A modern product par excellence, resulting from industrial progress, cinema has always lived under the imperative of the 'new'. Having been a powerful weapon of propaganda in the war, it was levelled together with the nationalist ideologies and subsequently revived with an even greater drive for novelty, as is proved by terms such as neo-realism, *nouvelle vague*, *Cinema Novo*, new wave, etc., all of them typical examples of post-war modern cinemas. The myth of the inaugural zero was a common denominator among these new currents, starting with the neo-realist ground-breaking film *Germany Year Zero*. 'To start from zero' became a slogan for many new wave filmmakers. Werner Herzog, at the beginning of the New German Cinema, used to refer to his cinema as an 'art of illiterates', starting from zero 'as if film history had never existed'. Glauber Rocha used to refer to Brazilian culture as a 'culture year zero', adding: 'From zero, like Lumière, Cinema Novo restarts at each film, stammering a brutal alphabet which tragically means "underdeveloped civilisation"'.⁴

An obvious condition for cinema's new beginnings are its periodical declines or deaths at every new technological innovation. This happened with the arrival of television in the 50s, of video in the 80s and of digital technology in the 90s. Cinema survived all these threats of total disappearance, and has even experienced a boom since the fall of the wall and Godard's 'new zero'. New cinemas emerged in different parts of the world during the 90s, particularly in Asia, from Iran to Japan.

From the mid 90s onwards, it was the turn of Latin America, notably Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, where cinema flourished for various reasons: a new audio-visual law, creating fiscal incentives in Brazil; the multiplication of film schools in Argentina; and the privatisation of the film financing system in Mexico. However, in all of them, the film revival had to do with socio-political changes that brought democratic (and neo-liberal) governments to power. This fact had an interesting influence on the film aesthetics in progress. Free from the political commitments of Cinema Novo and Third Cinema times, when film

³ Cf. "The Hole and the Zero: Godard's Visions of Femininity", in Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*. Bloomington, Indianapolis, London: Indiana University Press/BFI, 1996.

⁴ Apud Lúcia Nagib, *Werner Herzog – o cinema como realidade*. São Paulo: Estação Liberdade, 1991, p. 136.

making meant to struggle against local dictatorships, European colonialism and American imperialism, now it had become a matter of guaranteeing a secure place in both national and international markets, as well as joining the chorus of a globalised cinematic language.

In the past decade, centres like the Sundance script laboratory, which trains script writers from all over the world to write films such as *City of God* or *Amélie*, have contributed greatly to establishing an international grammar for independent film making. Participants of such training periods are often young cinephiles, graduates from film schools, whose aim is to acquire the ability to translate their experimental, auteurist drive into a commercially viable discourse. Thus, radical tendencies are duly trimmed for the sake of narrative continuity, even when subject-matters are fragmentary or pure metalanguage.

Despite this internationalising trend, the fact that cinema immediately revived in Latin American countries as soon as there was a political opening is significant of the continuing belief in its power as a conveyor of national identity. Ismail Xavier has already noted, about cinema, the 'persistence of national allegory and its significant presence in our times... even when the national question has lost its centrality'.⁵ A phenomenon that seems particularly noticeable in Brazil is how filmmakers' gaze has turned back to their home country since the mid 1990s. At the end of the 1980s and especially between 1990-92, during the dark period of President Collor's government, filmmakers thought the only way out for them was the airport, as Tom Jobim had once said about Brazilian music. Several of them, including Walter Salles, Walter Lima Jr and Hector Babenco, decided to switch to international productions, spoken in English. Unfortunately, but also predictably, most of these films resulted in critical and financial flops, prompting directors to return home as soon as a reasonably effective system of film financing was re-instated in Brazil.

This return was accompanied by an interesting euphoria, partly due to the atmosphere of hope inspired by the creation of a new currency at parity with the dollar, and the drastic reduction of inflation. The political and economic changes of the mid 1990s seemed to make Brazil more attractive to filmmakers. Many films of this period display an attitude of admiration and respect towards the country's peculiarities, its varied landscapes including the arid backlands of the North-East, and its racial mixture, especially amongst the lower classes. Behaving like Brazil's first discoverers and imbued with geographical and anthropological concerns, several filmmakers undertook journeys aimed at mapping the country as a whole. Good examples are Djalma Limongi Batista, whose film *Bocage* (1998) was shot in seven states of Brazil; or Walter Salles, whose *Central Station* (1998) runs from Rio through the far North-East. It was, of course, only a short period, soon followed by a wave of disillusionment with the neo-liberal project, when filmmakers travelled round the country to diagnose the persistence of its old problems. A typical example, here, is Sérgio Bianchi, whose sarcastic *Chronically Unfeasible* (1999) covers Brazil from Paraná through Rondônia just to confirm its unfeasibility. In both cases, however, Brazil continues to be the attracting pole.

As one would expect, these directors, invested with the mission of reviving cinema in their country, immediately felt the urge to be novel. It was not an easy task, as they had no intention of making a *tabula rasa* of anything;

⁵ See Ismail Xavier, "Historical Allegory", in Toby Miller & Robert Stam, Eds. *A Companion to Film Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

much to the contrary, the establishment of bonds with old cinematic traditions seemed the only viable way to reformulate utopian projects, albeit under the shape of nostalgic citation. I will examine here three eloquent examples of Utopian motifs in Brazilian cinema at the turn of the millennium, which bear the national and inaugural desire in their own title: *Central Station* (*Central do Brasil*, Walter Salles, 1998), *Midnight* (*O primeiro dia*, Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, 1999) and *Latitude Zero* (Toni Venturi, 2001). These films describe a trajectory of rise and fall, from a country of the future to a country of the past, in which the zero announces and denies Utopia.

In all three there is a clear option for narrativity. *Central Station* and *Latitude Zero's* impeccable scripts were the result of training periods at the Sundance laboratory. And *Midnight* belongs to the series of films commemorating the new millennium commissioned by the French television channel ARTE.

Although not radical works in themselves, they all refer to radical moments in Brazilian film history. The most important of these references is *Black God, White Devil*, directed by Glauber Rocha in 1964. This landmark of Brazilian Cinema turns around the famous utopian formula, which says that 'the backlands will turn into the sea, and the sea will turn into the backlands', meaning that the poor of the countryside will take over the wealthy littoral. As a cinematic fulfilment of this prediction, it ends with a long tracking shot of the poor northeastern protagonist in his desperate race through the desert land, which is finally replaced by images of an agitated sea. The prophecy, updated to the typical revolutionary hopes of the 60s, was drawn from the northeastern oral tradition and millenarianist beliefs of the XIX century predicting the return of the mythic Portuguese king Dom Sebastião in 1900 as a great redeemer. It also included references to the myths of Eldorado, the lost paradise and the island of Utopia itself.

Land in Anguish, also directed by Glauber Rocha in 1967, after the disappointment with the military coup in 1964, provides the negative closure of the maritime utopia. The film opens with a cosmogonic sea, scanned by an aerial camera leading to forested mountains upon which is inscribed the title 'Eldorado'. As is revealed later in the film, this golden paradise that is announced is dominated by politicians, businessmen and the media, all united in a conspiracy to prevent the access of the poor.

In this new beginning of the so-called 'Renaissance of Brazilian Cinema', the national utopia re-emerges, again in connection with the opposition backlands-sea. *Central Station* promotes a kind of ransom of the North-East through characters who migrate from the seacoast back to the backlands, where Utopia seems to reside. *Midnight*, in its turn, re-enacts, at the hour zero of the millennium, the Glauberian prophecy, presenting the quotidian sea of Rio's upper classes as unattainable to the northeasterner. Finally, *Latitude zero* stages an emptied, 'zeroed' Eldorado at an abandoned gold mine in the heart of Brazil as the end of the macho Utopia and the establishment of the feminine principle.

The utopian backlands

Central Station is the epitome of the passionate rediscovery of Brazil, and it was internationally acclaimed as the milestone of the rebirth of Brazilian cinema. Returning home after the adventure of *High Art* (1991), an international production spoken in English, and *Foreign Land* (1995), about Brazilian exiles,

Walter Salles and his script writers found in Wim Wenders' works a good way of re-approaching home. The chosen model was *Alice in the Cities* (Wim Wenders, 1974), a typically transnational film, in which a German pre-adolescent girl living in Holland, having been abandoned by her mother in a New York airport, meets a German journalist going through a creative crisis, who takes her back to Germany in search of a hypothetical grand-mother. In *Central Station*, it is the boy Josué in the Rio railroad station Central do Brasil, who loses his mother when she is run over by a bus, and falls pray to Dora, a jobless teacher now working as a letter writer for illiterates. She first sells him to dealers in human organs, then regrets it and takes him back to the North-East in search of his father.

Obviously, the recourse to Wenders required adaptations, starting with the writing capacity that needed to be recovered. Instead of a blocked journalist, we have a professional writer who, at the end of the film, is fluently writing the story of her life in her own letters. The recovery of the narrative gift is intimately connected with the re-encounter of the characters with home, as much as the film's retrieval of 'the Brazilian face'. Needless to say, such elements are entirely absent from *Alice in the Cities* and other Wenders' films. The allegorical Portuguese title *Central do Brasil* expresses the conviction of a totality, a point zero, a core represented by the Central Station, to which migrants of all regions of the country converge.

The film opens with close-ups of illiterate people (the ones once defined by Herzog and Glauber as the subject and object of the new waves), played by real passers-by of the railroad station, who dictate letters to Dora. This gallery of faces is so striking and became so famous because the eye that looks at them through the camera is clearly fascinated by their peculiar racial features, representing the country's various regions. Their speeches, marked by their original accents and slang, are recorded with enhanced clarity, as if captured by innocent ears that had never heard such a language before. The way these faces are presented seems to be based on at least two aspects of what Marilena Chauí defined as the 'Brazilian foundational myth': 1) Brazil has a peaceful, orderly, generous, cheerful and sensual population, despite their plight; 2) Brazil is a country devoid of racial prejudice and religious discrimination, where mixture fortifies the race. According to Chauí, such beliefs freeze the Brazilian character in unchangeable characteristics, impeding political action.⁶ Indeed, in *Central Station*, the illiterate members of the populace, poor though they all are, seem to be at peace with life, judging by their smiling faces, their tidiness, their courtesy, even their colourful racial mixture, enhanced by the touch of the naively sensual young man who calls his girlfriend 'pussy'.

On the other hand, the central station congregates all the evils that threaten these naturally good people: unemployed workers degraded to peddlers; abandoned children turned to delinquency; organ traffickers, all surrounded by a chaotic traffic that kills innocent passers-by, like Josué's northeastern mother. The causes of these evils are not investigated, as the class conflict, as well as the ruling class, if they exist, belong to the film's off-space, therefore to the outside of the station and consequently of Brazil.

Reassuring though this reencounter with homeland might be, it is not sufficient to provide recognition. Indeed, the identification of Brazil with home

⁶ Cf. Marilena Chauí, *Brasil – mito fundador e sociedade autoritária*. São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2001, p. 8.

does not happen without the help of former filmmakers who had the national project as their main mission, namely Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Ruy Guerra. As is well known, Salles shot several parts of his film in the exact locations where these filmmakers had set their revolutionary works of the 50s and 60s, such as *Rio Northern Zone* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1957), *The Guns* (Ruy Guerra, 1964) and *Antonio das Mortes* (Glauber Rocha, 1969). Thus, the protagonist's fictional search for his father in the northeastern backlands is mimicked by the director's real search for his cinematic ancestors.

The search for fatherhood and homeland had never been a subject-matter for Cinema Novo members, who had an obvious territory of belonging and despised past cinematic traditions. The first commandment for all new waves of the world was to deny the work of their immediate forefathers, pejoratively called *cinéma du papa* in France, or *Papas Kino* in Germany. In the Brazilian underground cinema, at the end of the 60s, the murder of the father acquired oedipal dimensions, as described by Jean-Claude Bernardet in *O vóo dos anjos*.⁷ Conversely, in *Central Station*, the respect for father figures indicates a scepticism in relation to present times and the director's position as an outsider to an accomplished past.

Therefore, the beautiful, carefully polished images of the rediscovered home, depicted with vivid colours by the exceptional DP Walter Carvalho, carry something strange, even uncanny in them. This is perhaps the sense of Ivana Bentes' concept of 'cosmetics of hunger', which, according to her, has replaced Glauber Rocha's 'aesthetics of hunger' in the Renaissance of Brazilian Cinema. Indeed, these images are diametrically opposed to Cinema Novo's ugly, angry poor, in a land ravaged by drought.

Central Station, as an exemplary case of its time, instead of producing identification, brings to light, through citation, the very impossibility of re-enacting the national project. Utopia can only be realised as an absence, a hypothetical encounter with a father who never materialises and is only conceivable as fiction. The presence of drought and misery in the northeastern birthplace can only be staged as decorative details of a *tableau vivant*, bearing no real consequences and asking for no specific intervention in the present. The lack of a project to fight social injustice turns utopian motifs into an innocuous, nostalgic play.

Fernão Ramos has pointed out, in recent Brazilian films, the prominence of foreign characters, who are always embodying some kind of superior consciousness over the native Brazilians, plagued by an inferiority complex.⁸ Indeed, Brazilian filmmakers of today, stemming from the upper classes as they all do, seem to be torn between a certain kinship with the foreigner, who is also the former coloniser, and a true compassion and sympathy for the poor and oppressed native. They still seem to be haunted by the Antonio das Mortes syndrome, the prophetic figure of Glauber Rocha's films, who, according to Jean-Claude Bernardet, represents the middle classes in their perennial hesitation between the lures of the ruling classes and the actual needs of the poor.⁹ Speaking of a different class from their own, filmmakers become the guilty

⁷ Jean-Claude Bernardet, *O vóo dos anjos: Bressane, Sganzerla*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1991.

⁸ Cf. Fernão Ramos, "Humility, guilt and narcissism turned inside out in Brazil's film revival", in Lúcia Nagib, Ed. *The New Brazilian Cinema*. London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2003.

⁹ Jean-Claude Bernardet, *Brasil em tempo de cinema*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1967.

ethnographer, searching for redemption through the production of a benevolent, idealised image of the Other.¹⁰

In *Central Station*, the gap created by the lack of a project for social change is filled up by melodrama, which guarantees narrative continuity and offers a likely, though improbable solution. To that effect, the plot is transferred from the threatening, urban, modern public sphere of the Central Station to the safe, comfortable isolation of archaic Brazil in the North-East, thus reversing the route of real Brazilian migrants. In order to attain a balance in the composition of this archaic realm, the editing constantly recurs to frozen images of paintings and photographs. Icons of the Madonna with baby Jesus are indispensable items in the decoration of homes, both in Rio and in the backlands, being frequently cut together with reverse shots of Josué's longing eyes as he recalls his mum. After Dora's trance, in the middle of a northeastern religious festival, her kind nature is finally revealed, and she wakes up the next morning lying on Josué's lap, in a kind of reversed Pietà. Later on, Dora and Josué take a picture together with the cardboard figure of Padre Cícero between them, Padre Cícero being a major myth of political, paternal and sacred leader of the Brazilian North-East. This photo is then shown in the film as a symbol of the completed family triad, now fictitiously reunited.

Ismail Xavier has observed the affinity between the concept of nation, in its totalising reach, and the sense of the sacred.¹¹ In *Central Station*, the promise made by the icons of Madonna and Pietà is eventually fulfilled by the photograph reconstructing the sacred family, which identifies the father with homeland. Photography is, according to Peirce, the icon par excellence thanks to its physical bond with nature. And photographs are a constant presence in Wim Wenders' films, in which they should be, but never really are, the evidence of the real. In *Central Station*, the photograph is a means of sanctioning popular religion, something that never occurred in Cinema Novo, and the family is identified with homeland in its symbolic completeness in a not very different manner from the workings of hegemonic American cinema. This is how the film retrieves the fable, but not social history, made superfluous by the interiorisation of the drama. Passing by post-modern citation cinema and Wenders' modern romanticism, it finally encloses itself within the limits of domestic melodrama.

With the addition of the image of Padre Cícero, homeland becomes an iconography of the past which, transferred to the private realm, acquires a pacifying function in the present. Just like the photograph, the backlands also freeze in the utopian territory of an archaic past, immune to time and the evils of modernity, left behind in the central station.

The zero and the empty Utopia

Clearly, such approach has not been unanimous among the films of the revival, and one can easily observe, even in films portraying attractive, green backlands, such as *Perfumed Ball* (Paulo Caldas e Lírio Ferreira, 1997), a contamination between backlands and littoral cultures, and between archaic and modern Brazil. Salles' own films, just after the international success of *Central*

¹⁰ See, in this sense, Michael Renov, "Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the 'Other' Self", in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, Eds. *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

¹¹ Op. cit., p. 351.

Station, deploy a different view, as seen in *Midnight*, directed by him and Daniela Thomas in 1999. In this short period Brazil had changed, the new currency had undergone a brutal devaluation in relation to the dollar, and the middle classes were waking up to the neo-liberal disaster.

The focus was then turned to the *favela*, or shanty town, this other territory of poverty which mirrors the rural backlands in the urban world. *Midnight* belongs to a group of recent *favela* films, connected with production company Videofilmes and including directors such as Kátia Lund, Eduardo Coutinho, João Moreira Salles and novelist Paulo Lins. The group's greatest commercial success so far is the film *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles e Kátia Lund, 2002), based on Paulo Lins' novel of the same name. Commissioned to be a reflection on the turn of the millennium, *Midnight* proposes itself as a revision of past utopias, bridging backlands and shanty town with the help of a northeastern migrant character, João, played by Luís Carlos Vasconcelos, who makes his origin clear through his strong accent.

João is a prisoner freed by corrupt jailers on the eve of the millennium's first day with the mission of exterminating his best friend in the shanty town. Having accomplished his job, he takes refuge on the roof of a sky-scraper, where he meets Maria, a middle-class woman on the brink of suicide after being left by her partner. Both accomplish the unexpected encounter between different social classes, described by Ismail Xavier as a recurrent feature of contemporary Brazilian cinema.¹² João and Maria make love at the hour zero of the millennium, to the light and sound of fireworks, and, at this climactic moment, the Glauberian backlands-sea utopia as well as the zero metaphor are re-elaborated. A rapidly moving camera, turning in the opposite direction of the couple dancing in each other's arms, reproduces something like the trance simulated by the spinning cameras of Glauber's films. The phrase 'the backlands will turn into the sea', exhaustively repeated in *Black God, White Devil*, is adapted here into the refrain:

It will turn, everything will turn. Nine will turn into zero, another nine will turn into zero, another yet will turn into zero, and one will turn into two. Everything will turn, right will turn wrong, wrong will turn right, and the one who kills now will save.

João makes this announcement at the top of his voice, repeating the words he had heard from an old prisoner, who falls dead when denied his release, promised for the first of the year. The formula of a 'turn into zero', in the film, reveals itself as an insightful find, for it brings together the Glauberian backlands-sea opposition and the northeastern beliefs, without actually formulating them.

The announcement of social revolution is replaced by the achievement of a dubious individual freedom, and the turning of round numbers, without their millenarianist references, is reduced to superstition. Thus, the moment zero turns over itself in a kind of empty prophecy and nostalgic citation. The turn of the millennium is its own negation. The prophet himself is finally reduced to nil, being shot at the beach while leisurely watching his one-night lover bathing in a paradisiacal sea, as suitable for her class only. Acknowledging

¹² V. "Brazilian Cinema in the 1990s: the unexpected encounter and the resentful character", in Lúcia Nagib, Ed. *The New Brazilian Cinema*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003.

itself as sheer citation, the zero, here, contrary to Rossellini's, is clearly not intended to break ground for a new world or new cinematic languages, but simply to express the desire – devoid of a project – for communication between different social classes.

If in *Black God, White Devil* the tracking shot in a straight line, accompanying the character's race towards the sea, expresses the teleology that breaks the vicious circle of religious beliefs, here it is the gun shot that brings a liberating illumination to the middle-class character. The shanty-town is now part of the bourgeois experience. However, the light that bathes Maria, when she opens her window on the first day of the millennium and sees Christ the Redeemer on the top of the Corcovado mountain, finds no support in the diegesis, being no solution but a mere rhetorical device.

The empty centre and the twilight of the macho

Latitude zero is set in the very centre of Brazil, not just metaphorically, but in Poconé, Mato Grosso state, near the line of the Equator, therefore the reference to the globe's latitude zero. The film is the result of a low budget project for Brazilian cinema, designed by its director, Toni Venturi, in co-operation with a group of São Paulo filmmakers, on the basis of which the Brazilian Ministry of Culture created a line for financing low budget films.

As a means of economy, but also as an aesthetic option, the film has only two actors, who had exhaustively rehearsed before they travelled to the locations, so that the shoot would consume a minimum of time and material. The good preparation of the tiny cast also allowed for a large number of sequence-shots, aimed both at saving money and enhancing the theatrical performance.

Economy and independence, in Venturi's proposal, are clearly designed to accentuate the authorial trace. But *Latitude Zero* can be seen as a film of several auteurs, as it bears a combination of different fingerprints which dissolves the figure of the director as its sole auteur. Playwright Fernando Bonassi, the author of the play at the origin of the film, is the key figure in this melting pot in which cinema and theatre have been simmering since the very auteurist *Starry Sky* (Tata Amaral, 1997), a violent drama between a couple who are the predecessors of *Latitude Zero's* protagonists.

As in Cinema Novo times, auteurism is here combined with the intention of producing national allegory, as is made clear in the film title referring to Brazil's point zero. But, in accordance with the desire to reduce and save, the option was for an empty, post-utopian centre, instead of the crowds overfilling the centre of the country in *Central Station*. The location is an abandoned gold mine, where the sole remaining inhabitant is Lena, a woman in advanced pregnancy, who runs a bar deserted by its patrons. In the monumental natural landscape, the excavated walls of red earth suggest the hundreds of avid hands which laboured there in the past. Now, they are the leftovers of the Eldorado once dreamed of by the first discoverers, the ruins of Utopia, the lost paradise. The sea that turned into the backlands.

Lena is getting ready to depart when Vilela appears, a fugitive soldier willing to settle down with her, following the orders of a certain Colonel Matos, who had impregnated and abandoned her. The arrival of a man brings back the echoes of a former destruction, of a green Brazil whose debris is still around in

the form of the ashes of burnt forests and in the endless loads of logs swiftly passing by on the back of trucks.

Lena and Vilela develop a relationship of disagreements, with dialogues that are rather parallel monologues and fleeting moments of love resulting from pure physical need and mutual material interests. The opposition between male and female projects soon becomes obvious, as usual in Bonassi's work. Vilela, who, as much as his boss Matos, is a remnant of Brazil's dictatorial past, devotes himself avidly to a fruitless exploitation of the mine, thus making clear his connection with a predatory utopian project, now transferred to timber extraction.

Lena, in her turn, simply wants to get rid of the oppression of past and present machos. Her resistance is supported by the feminine attribute of maternity. To the empty zero of the male utopia of the gold, she opposes her full belly. To photograph her means to show her concrete, physiological needs, and in this sense the film is a plunge into the female viscera, whose turbulent state is indicated by abundant signs of heat, such as images of the sun, burning timber, red earth, besides the character's own sweat and outbursts. The woman about to deliver acquires a threatening, proto-revolutionary quality. She is the active part, the owner of the obscene hole about to reveal itself to the camera in a scene of masturbation.

Reduced to the mere instinct of survival and reproduction, Lena falls outside the typically Christian dilemma between the virgin mother and the prostitute, which Godard regularly revisits in his successive years zero. *Latitude zero* also disavows the dream of the father and the homeland, whose image was fixed in *Central Station* in the tableau of the reversed Pietà, through which the son becomes father and hero. The Brazilian foundational myths of Eldorado and multi-racial people are here invoked and negated through the signs of their absence. All that remains is an enormous hole in the ground.

The story, then, restarts from zero, with the first encounter between man and woman. However, in contrast to what had occurred in *Midnight*, in which the man is eliminated by alien forces and the woman is set free by the intervention of chance, here it is the woman who finally shoots the man dead, sets fire to her photos, the useless home and the false hopes of the family triad, departing on the back of a truck, with her son in her lap. Rather than the reversed Pietà, *Latitude Zero* offers the picture of Madonna, in which the woman is the protective figure to the little man.

Bonassi has been devoting himself, without concealing a certain regret, to the depiction of the twilight of the macho in Brazilian theatre and cinema. And indeed, the new Brazilian Utopia which is being shaped by this cheap, auteurist cinema, seems to be the land of the Amazons.

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