**The Politics of Cinematic Experimentation: Brazil’s Cinema Novo Movement**

“*Cinema Novo is not a narrowly defined, tightly knit school (…). Nevertheless, it represents the only occasion in which a group of filmmakers with a shared ideology strove towards a set of common goals: to create a national cinema, to reveal the country’s true face and to contribute to Brazil’s social development*” (Randal Johnson, “Brazil’s Cinema Novo” 97)

* Initial phase or Heroic period: 1960-1964
* Marked by “Aesthetics of Hunger” (from Glauber Rocha) and "a pact between politics in which filmmakers held a utopian belief that they could transform Brazilian society” (Ismail Xavier 2)

*“A movement like Cinema Novo cannot be isolated from its historical context, for it responds to and is influenced by the political development of Brazilian society, it positions itself in relation to the historical development of Brazilian cinema and it participates and reflects the ideological debates of the period in which it arose”* (Randal Johnson, “Brazil’s Cinema Novo” 96).

**Aims:**

1. **To map the Historical Context:**
2. **The political and ideological context in which Cinema Novo arose and to which it responded**
3. **Cinematic debates and issues in relation to Cinema Novo**
4. **To analyze key films and their experimentation with film aesthetics from the heroic period: *Vidas Secas* (*Vidas Secas*, dir. Nelson Pereira do Santos, 1963) and *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil,* dir. Glauber Rocha, 1964)**

**Objective:**

**To understand the pact between Cinema Novo and politics, and how the experimentation with cinematic aesthetics played a part in this.**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

1. **The Historical Conjuncture**
2. **Political and Ideological Context:**

* 1950s’ “**consciousness of underdevelopment**” (Antonio Candido 119), linked to the idea of Brazil as a poor Third World country needing economic restructuring to overcome underdevelopment.
* Central to politics of President Juscelino Kubistschek (1956-1960) and **developmentalism**.
* **Brasília** key symbol of developmentalism and Kubitschek’s **populist politics**.
* Brazilian Intellectuals commit to project of change.
* International climate:
* Algerian War of independence, 1954-62
* Cuban Revolution, 1963
* Vietnam War, 1955
* Work of ‘engaged intellectuals’ Frantz Fanon and Jean Paul Sartre
* **ISEB** (Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros) established in 1957 by Kubitschek to formulate a national thesis of developmentalism or Developmentalist-nationalism.
* **ISEB’s nationalist thesis**: underdevelopment caused by Brazil’s neo-colonial situation and continued dependency (exploitation by first world countries like US). Established dichotomy nation vs. anti-nation duality.
* **Nationalism by elimination** (from Roberto Schwarz): nationalism and development would occur through rejection of foreign/anti-national. Development key for nationalism and also linked to idea of liberation from continued colonialism, with revolution.
* ISEB and *conscientização* – **‘organic intellectuals’** (from Gramsci) in charge of raising consciousness of people.

1. **Cinematic History:**

* 1896: First film screening in Brazil
* Post World War One market dominated by foreign films, especially Hollywood
* Brazilian filmmakers establish versions of Hollywood studios to “face up to Hollywood” (from López).
* Chanchadas – mimicked Hollywood genres
* **Vera Cruz**: Elaborate studio in São Paulo in 1949 to make international quality films.
* Critiqued as:

“a *bizarre structureless monster, without roots in our country, nourishing itself on the dream of European cinema in an impoverished Brazi*l” (Carlos Diegues 272).

* Failure of Verz Cruz prompted experiments for a new alternative Brazilian cinema.
* Nelson Pereira dos Santos’ *Rio 40 Graus* (1954) – documentary style film, camera takes to streets, focuses on poor living in Rio’s favelas and uses non-actors.
* International Influences: Italian New Realism and French New Wave:

*“Neorealism taught us that it was possible to make films in the streets; that we did not need studios, that we could film using average people rather than known actors; that the technique could be imperfect, as long as the film was linked to its national culture and expressed that culture. (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, qtd. in Johnson, 99)*

“*If commercial cinema is tradition, auteur cinema is revolution*” (Rocha, qtd. In Johnson 100)

* Cinema Novo, Glauber Rocha, “Aesthetics of Hunger Manifesto,” 1963:

“*Brazil remains undeniably a colony and what distinguishes yesterday’s colonialism from today’s is merely the more polished form of the colonizer and the subtle forms of those preparing for future domination*” (69).

*“Hunger in Brazil is not simply a symptom but the essence of our society” (70)*

*“Sad, ugly, screaming, desperate films” (70).*

*“The aesthetic of hunger before being primitive is revolutionary” (70).*

* Links to other alternative cinemas in Latin America – e.g. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968 “Towards a Third Cinema” (Argentina 1969):

*“Third cinema is, in our opinion, the cinema that recognises in political struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point - in a word, the decolonisation of culture.”* (Solanas and Getino 34)

*“Cinema Novo is not one film but an evolving complex of films that will ultimately aim to make the public aware of its own misery.” (Glauber Rocha 70)*

1. **a) Vidas secas**

Focus on northeastern *sertão (like favela space of poverty)*

* space untouched by foreign modernity, hence authentic, national
* space of poverty hence allows for focus on social issues of underdevelopment

Adaptation of Graciliano Ramo’s 1938 naturalist novel.

*Themes:*

* Focus on family encapsulates fate of nation and migrants
* exploitation, poverty and hunger in *sertão*
* Legacy of past colonial landowning structures
* Lack of change: set in 1940s during Getúlio Vargas dictatorship and national consolidation when Northeast ignored.

*Aesthetics of hunger:*

* Stasis – slow pace and lack of change
* Stark visual and aural style (no extra diegetic music), little camera movement, overexposed lighting, shrill uncomfortable sound.
* Anti- Hollywood style
* Identification techniques (hand held camera, traveling shots, point of view, camera angles) place us in characters’ world but slow pact forces critical reflection.
* Aggressive towards viewer forces us to reflect on film conventions and content

1. **b) Deus e o diabo na terra do sol**

Focus on *sertão* and peasant couple mediated by *rural popular culture*:

* popular myths of rebellion: messianic religion (Sebastião – deus) and cangaço (Corisco - diabo)
* The narrator/ ballad singer of *cordel* literature– guides the action of the film

*Structure* – 3 sequences to film – linear progression:

1. Manuel lives with wife Rosa and mother. He takes care of landowners cattle. Cheated by landowner, Manuel breaks and kills him.
2. Manuel places destiny in Sebastião, religious cult leader and performs purification rites to show his faith. Local landowners hire Antonio das Mortes to kill Sebastião. Sequence ends with massacre.
3. Manuel is guided by singer to Corisco, the cangaço leader. Discussion of violence for social justice. Sequence ends with Corsico’s murder by Antonio das Mortes – makes way for Manuel’s final flight to the sea.

Unequal lengths yet similar *aesthetic pattern* - metaphors for context and characters’ psychology:

- condensed form of representation

- aural and visual contrasts

- immobility followed by action; silence by saturation

- the aesthetics are active, are agents of change

*Manuel’s consciousness*:

- *Demystification* of religion and social banditry as sources of social change/ revolution

- *Change* is in human awareness (consciousness) and actions

- Yet – change/ revolution is inevitable – the narrative is already prefigured by narrator/singer

**Filmography:**

*Sinhá moça* (dir. Tom Payne, 1953)

*Rio 40 Graus* (dir. Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1953)

*Vidas Secas* (dir. Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963)

Deus e o diabo na terra do sol (dir. Glauber Rocha, 1964)

**Bibliography and Further Reading:**

Bordwell, David. Thompson, Kristin. *Film History: An Introduction.* Postwar European Cinema: Neorealism and Its Context, 1945-1959. Pg. 333

Candido, Antonio, “ Literature and Underdevelopment” in *On Literature and Society*, Ed. And trans. Howard Becker. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995: 119-142.

Diegues, Carlos. “Cinema Novo,” in *Brazilian Cinema*, Eds. Johnson, Randal and Robert Stam. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995: 64-68.

Johnson, Randal. “Brazilian Cinema Novo.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 3, No. 2 , 1984: 95-106.

Johnson, Randal and Robert Stam. “Introduction.” *Brazilian Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

King, John. Magical Reels. *A History of Cinema in Latin America*. London: Verso, 2000.

López, Ana M. “`Facing up to Holywood,” *Reinventing Film Studies*, Eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Bloomsbury, 2000: 419-438.

Ramos, Graciliano. *Vidas Secas/ Barren Lives*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Rocha, Glauber. “Aesthetics of Hunger” in *Brazilian Cinema*, Eds. Johnson, Randal and Robert Stam. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995: 69-71.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Colonialism is a System” in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, Trans. Haddour. London: Routledge, 2001: 9-20.

Stam, Robert. *Film Theory. An Introduction*. London; Blackwell, 2000.

Schwarz, Roberto. “Brazilian Culture: Nationalism by Elimination” in *Misplaced Ideas. Essays on Brazilian Culture*, Ed. And trans. John Gledson. London: Verso, 1992: 1-18.

Wollen, Peter. “Godard and Counter Cinema. Vent d’Est.” *The European Cinema Reader.* Ed. Catherine Fowler. London: Routledge, 2002. 74-83.

Xavier, Ismail. *Allegories of Underdevelopment*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.