

Identity and otherness in *Gabriel e a montanha* and *Vagabond*

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Abstract: This review aims to comment on the movies *Gabriel e a montanha*, directed by Fellipe Barbosa, and *Vagabond*, directed by Agnès Varda, and promote a reflection about the concepts of *identity* and *otherness* by comparing the movies – which contain similar narrative aspects, since the main characters of both movies are travelers; however, the path and the journey convey quite distinct significances, which are of interest for this review.

Keywords: Brazilian cinema; *Gabriel and the mountain*; identity; otherness; *Vagabond*.

Resumo: Esta resenha objetiva comentar os filmes *Gabriel e a montanha*, de Fellipe Barbosa, e *Sem teto nem lei*, de Agnès Varda, e promover uma reflexão sobre os conceitos de *identidade* e *alteridade* por meio da comparação dos filmes – que contêm aspectos narrativos semelhantes, já que os protagonistas de um e outro são viajantes; porém, a viagem e o caminhar trazem sentidos bastante distintos, os quais interessam a esta resenha.

Palavras-chave: cinema brasileiro; *Gabriel e a montanha*; identidade; alteridade; *Sem teto nem lei*.

1. FELLIPE BARBOSA AND THE GAME OF APPEARANCES

It is likely that the name of Fellipe Barbosa has indeed achieved the impact it has today after the success of *Gabriel e a montanha* (2017), especially among the French film critics. After the release of *Domingo* (2018), the success of the film maker should continue; but it is already worth remembering his career in order to show his affinity for certain themes and a, so to speak, unique manner of filming them. Friendship and appreciation toward the characters often emerge with a conflicting ambivalence, a game of appearances in which the director seems to “abandon” the characters in order to enable the most that they stay close to the mind of viewers. But of course that does not make him innocent, neither his perspective nor his camera, and we may conclude that this game is the core of Barbosa’s creative process, that is, allowing some detachment in order to study the movements of his characters.

One can see that Barbosa likes to draw inspiration from nearby figures, dear ones, friends – it has been so with his short film *Beijo de sal* (2007), based on the encounter with a friend. His first feature film, *Laura* (2011), is a documentary about a friend – Argentina-born Brazilian woman who lives in New York and whose main occupation is “hunting” celebrities, sneaking into parties and meeting famous actors or singers. In what might sound like a parade of trivia, the film deals with the banality of the gesture and the lack of any *special* aspect about this world. *Laura*, in a way, is studied with the anthropological curiosity of Barbosa. While *Casa grande* (2014) presents an upper middle class family of the Barra da Tijuca neighborhood (RJ), which is financially ruined, but employs all efforts to keep what is left of the old appearances. Although they barely have money to pay for the transport of their son to school, they try to keep the special luxuries and the maid confined in her *little room*.

In Fellipe Barbosa’s universe, the characters move in a game of simulacra and simulations, that is, a universe of appearances, which may even seem, so to speak, *real* – something that Baudrillard¹ would define as that world in which the reference disappeared, replaced by the resource of simulation and volatility. Since there is no longer the “curve of the real, nor that of truth”, we would be in an age of simulation, with the “liquidation of all references” and their subsequent “artificial resurrection in the sign system”². Let us observe that the use of the term *liquidation* by Baudrillard has nothing of fortuitous, in intimacy with the *liquidity* of modernity evoked by Bauman³.

In *Laura*, *Casa grande*, and *Gabriel e a montanha*, *pretending* or *appearing to be* matter more than *being*, or also: they are confused with *being* – be it in *Laura*, with the heroine determined to fill her life by mingling with celebrities, as if, mystically, she would acquire the magic characteristics of the famous people she meets; in *Casa grande*, in which the large house of the title is only sustained as huge space, with comfort and a jacuzzi, in an effort to maintain the appearance of *being rich*, something more important than actually having wealth; or in *Gabriel*, which conceives an Africa full of clichés of cartoons and

1. BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *Simulacros e simulação*. Lisboa: Relógio d’Água, 1991. p. 9-10.

2. *Ibidem*, p. 9-10.

3. BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *A vida fragmentada: ensaios sobre a moral pós-moderna*. Lisboa: Relógio d’Água, 1995.

interacts with it as stereotype, in a process in which otherness is replaced by vanity and personal prejudices.

These pages focus on *Gabriel e a montanha*, on the reconstruction of the protagonist's journey – inspired by a friend of his, whose tragic fate and route in fact took place – and in his relationship with the inhabitants he meets and with the space he visits, studied here from the perspective of authors interested in understanding post-modernity, such as Baudrillard⁴ and Bauman⁵ (but also from the perspective of other contributions, such as the notion of “performance society” brought by Byung-Chul Han⁶). The comparison with *Vagabond*, the 1985 feature film by Agnès Varda, occurs as something almost inevitable, not only because of the several similarities with Fellipe Barbosa's movie, but because the comparison process enables delving into such distinct perceptions of the protagonists of both films.

2. GABRIEL AND THE WORLD AROUND

Gabriel e a montanha begins with the chapter “Kenya”⁷. There, Gabriel⁸ is called *mzungu*, “white man”. “Simple and sociable man”, describes the Kenyan friend, who would later baptize the son with the name of Gabriel. Everything about him, at first, inspires congeniality. He plays with children. He is given a sword and earns the respect of the friends of the *masai* people. And now dresses in funny, tribal clothes, the sword and the staff. The visual aspect here already characterizes a simulacrum: it is as if the clothes make him a *masai*, a tribal Kenyan. Soon it will be clear that the outfit only serves for him to participate, in the condition of tourist (although he considers himself a “traveler”), in that which he deems to be the everyday life of the location. A kind of forced *otherness*. Gabriel does not appear to see complexity or nuances in the *masai*, who would form an exotic unit. He wants to live in a distinct world, not in that which likes the post-modern hyperspace⁹ that infects all places. He claims to have found a “soul of Africa”, as if there were such purity and homogeneity in a continent so great, a place that belongs to “hybrid cultures of post-colonialism”¹⁰. In a contemporary world marked by exodus and refuges, Gabriel is the traveler who chooses, as *tourist*, always comfortable: he needs no adaptation, as the immigrant, but rather chooses to assume a kind of *temporary identity*, this *otherness* described previously, but with a look that is sometimes authoritarian, as if superior to the others. A friend from Kenya “baptized” him as Lemayan, “the most blessed”, a nickname that describes in letters he writes home: “I’m very ‘roots’”. He believes he travels in a “sustainable” manner and donates part of his resources to local people, who host him.

It will not take long for Gabriel (or Lemayan) to show other facets. Under the tribal outfit there is an authoritarian and competitive character. He climbs the Kilimanjaro and hurries to take pictures, as the *performance* subject, in the definition of Byung-Chul Han¹¹. He always wants to overcome nature, regardless of

4. BAUDRILLARD, op. cit.

5. BAUMAN, op. cit.

6. HAN, Byung-Chul. *Sociedade do cansaço*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2017.

7. GABRIEL e a montanha. Director: Fellipe Barbosa. Actors: João Pedro Zappa, Caroline Abras, Leonard Siampala, John Goodluck, Alex Alembe, Rashidi Athuman, Luke Mpata, Rhosinah Sekeleti et al. Rio de Janeiro: Gamarosa Filmes; TV Zero, 2017. (131 min), son., color.

8. Played by João Pedro Zappa. Gabriel's girlfriend, Cristina, is played by Caroline Abras.

9. In reference to Fredric Jameson's expression: GUPTA, Akhil; FERGUSON, James. Mais além da “cultura”: espaço, identidade e política da diferença. In: ARANTES, Antonio (org.). *O espaço da diferença*. Campinas: Papius, 2000. p. 31.

10. BAUDRILLARD, op. cit., p. 33.

11. HAN, op. cit.

adversities. He has eye injury due to not wanting to wear sunglasses in the snow, already foreshadowing the future tragedy. The photo appears as a character in *Gabriel e a montanha*, since it is another element of simulacrum, which reproduces a memory of success, of good *performance*. Reaching the summit only makes sense if there is a camera around. *Being* and *appearing to be* have their borders eroded, they are one substance: without the photos, in a competitive society, the effort would have been null, or just a personal experience.

In the second chapter, “Tanzania”, the girlfriend Cristina is presented, who travels to Africa. Gabriel explains the exotic clothing – he is the only figure with tribal clothes at the airport – and the significance of the sword he was given, always as proof of status. Disagreement is initiated with one of the guides, as Gabriel wants to see gnus¹², which was not in the plan: “I’m paying.” Gabriel and Cristina lunch with a couple, Danish girl and African boy, who cannot get into Europe – unlike Gabriel, who rejoices: “Denmark is my second country.” Then, “Lemayan” has already left the scene, and a remarkably self-conceited figure emerges. When he realizes that the guide was confused at the time of collection, and almost physically assaults him. They end up seeing the gnus, with a bad climate. He belittles Cristina all the time, because he attended “top” university and colleges. He claims to “hate” the USA, although he is moving to Los Angeles. And explains his presence on the African continent saying it is because he wants to “work with people who really need” – he was born and lives in Brazil, but has not experienced poverty in his country and, as a tourist, makes a fetish of misery.

In the chapter “Zambia”, he spends hours downloading his photos. Because of that Cristina misses the ride with elephants, and he misses the bungee jump. In the fourth and final chapter, “Malawi”, Cristina is gone. With his hands injured, Gabriel insists on climbing the Mulanjie mountain, although the guide warns him that there is no time. It doesn’t matter. Gabriel wears sandals and doesn’t have proper equipment. Again, the photo appears in a key moment, when, amid the way, he asks the guide to photograph him while he jumps from a considerable height into a lake. As the guide missed the timing of the photo, Gabriel will have to jump again. The experience is worth nothing without any record of it. In a sense, the experience of jumping from a rock into the water is worth less than the photographic record that will be flaunted in social networks, typical characteristic of a *performance* society, in which all aspects, from work to leisure, must culminate in a process of being self-demanding and tirelessly pursuing a notion of success. Gabriel is, to some extent, the narcissistic subject of contemporaneity and, therefore, pursues less the experience itself and more the self-praise; the idea of *otherness* does not work for him. Or maybe what works is that which we previously called *forced alterity*, a congeniality that is also established as simulacrum.

The lack of relationship with the other causes above all a crisis of gratification. The gratification as recognition presupposes the instance of the other or of the third party. Narcissist subjects do not like experiences, they want to experience

12. Large-sized African mammal.

themselves [...]. The duress of performance forces them to produce more and more. Thus, they never reach a point of rest or gratification. They live constantly in a feeling of need and guilt. And since, ultimately, they are competing against themselves, they seek to overcome themselves until succumbing¹³.

As a result, according to Han, subjects in the *performance* society tend to exhaustion, burnout. “The performance subject is fulfilled in death. Fulfillment and self-destruction, here, coincide”¹⁴. After accusing the guide of being “lazy”, he ends continuing the trip alone, until he gets lost and dies, probably because of hypothermia. Felipe Barbosa’s film brings a moralist teleology, rather than a supposed “neutrality” of the perspective: Gabriel will die and is the only one to blame for that: rushed, ill-equipped, suspicious, arrogant, self-important, overbearing, belittles the guides, “lazy”, and disregards the local nature.

During his journey, Gabriel seeks at all times a village that does not exist, a caricatural tribal African whose model draws on clichés of the media, and there will be estrangement when he does not find the caricatural assumptions. Beatriz Sarlo¹⁵ points to a trend, even among peasant cultures, toward this process of *contamination*. The cultures by definition are *hybrid*, different from a remote inaccessibility that characterizes the isolated tribes, the people with little contact with one another. Gabriel, molded in a postmodern world, does not understand the scope of this process and its expression, in any part of the world he may go. If popular cultures “no longer listen, as privileged foreign voice, traditional authorities,”¹⁶ our hero does not understand that. He seeks a world that no longer exists and has a pedantic certainty of having found it.

The traditional identities were stable over time and obeyed the centripetal forces that operated both on the original traits and on the elements and values imposed by the economic and symbolic domination. Today, the identities undergo processes of “balkanization”; they live a present destabilized by the disappearance of traditional certainties and by the erosion of memory [...]. This framework of face-to-face bonds, in which premodern cohesion principles founded traditional authorities, has dispersed forever. The old strategies can no longer weld the edges of the new differences¹⁷.

Gabriel, therefore, *idealizes* the African man, as if being oblivious of the radically interconnected world in which he lives. His limited understanding of the process causes him to keep dressing as a tribal warrior during much of the trip, carrying the sword he was gifted and thus being inconsistent with the other local residents, dressed in jeans and less exotic clothes. The Africans are, therefore, objects to him.

Similarly he argues, to his girlfriend, that he is in Africa to know poverty up close. Former student of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ), proud to have attended the “best schools in Brazil”, he says he wants to “do something” for the global poor – at some point would he have realized that poverty is everywhere in his own country? Gabriel responds to a mechanism of clichés in which the African, in addition to being tribal, would be a kind of miserable *by vocation*. In his own way, he assigns himself a mission, a kind of

13. *Ibidem*, p. 83-86.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 83-86.

15. SARLO, Beatriz. *Cenas da vida pós-moderna: intelectuais, arte e videocultura na Argentina*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2006. p. 101.

16. *Ibidem*, p. 102.

17. *Ibidem*, p. 105.

particular *white man's burden*. His perspective is colonial and his help is a gesture of mercy to people who, according to his view, admire him for the alms he gives. He says he has penetrated the “soul of Africa,” but basically moves in the space understood by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson as belonging to “the hybrid cultures of post-colonialism” – in this postmodern hyperspace, as previously mentioned.



Source: Gabriel e a montanha (2017)¹⁸.

Figure 1: Gabriel and his tribal outfit

Distressed with the uncertainty of registering or not for a graduate program in Los Angeles, Gabriel seeks a world he idealizes and fantasizes about, reaffirming in his letters and conversations a kind of “gift”, his talent for understanding the most needy, as if he were a superior entity – if not so, at least he looks at everyone with an air of superiority. Rich boy from Rio de Janeiro, he is the typical personality that consider himself as *interesting*: the man gifted with cultural capital and, therefore, with a kaleidoscope that enables him to see what poor mortals and mortals that are poor cannot see. His capital will be first the money of his family; but this will always be eclipsed by his *cultural capital*, as observed by Jessé Souza¹⁹: his recognized and admired assets are immaterial assets, such as “prestige, recognition, respect, charm or beauty”; money, beauty, culture, and knowledge are perceived as something exterior to the subject, being necessary to “develop strategies that transform the money in expression of something innate and internal to the subject”: Gabriel is *interesting* because he would have in himself an “innate distinction not bought with money”. If he travels so much, speaks different languages and visits countries, it is because of mere “fortunate fluke” and not because he has money²⁰.

3. THE TOURIST AND THE VAGABOND

Similarities have been pointed out between *Gabriel e a montanha* and *Vagabond* (*Sans toit ni loi*, 1985), by Agnès Varda. And it would be understandable if Fellipe Barbosa were accused of plagiarism due not only to the similarity between the stories, but also to certain narrative strategies chosen in both films, which are

18. GABRIEL..., op. cit.

19. SOUZA, Jessé. *A elite do atraso: da escravidão à Lava Jato*. Rio de Janeiro: Leya, 2017. p. 93-94.

20. *Ibidem*, p. 93-94.

very much alike. From the outset, in both, we find poor workers – in Africa and in France, which is the setting of *Vagabond* – and there is all the speculation about the deaths, with several statements in voice over. The strategy of conducting the film as a great flashback is employed in both films, with slight difference: in *Gabriel*, we listen to the memories about the protagonist after the departure of the Brazilian backpacker. In *Vagabond*, there is more fragmentation and temporal *to-and-fro*, but the mechanism is the same.

However, more than the similarities, the differences between the protagonists matter here, distinct figures whose journeys have radically different purposes.

Mona²¹ is the name of the young woman found dead right in the beginning. Similarly to Gabriel, she wanders around with a backpack, but never leaves her country, France. And she never makes it clear why she is traveling: after all, we could not even call her trip a “journey”, because we have a highly introverted figure that simply lives as a wanderer. Unlike Gabriel, she does not celebrate great deeds, has no resources, speaks little, and has no destination. She sleeps outside in an old tent. She camps in the cold, sometimes has relations with someone she meets in the road, in a stay anywhere or during a ride – these characters will carry the memory of the girl, without, however, being able to decipher her. Mona is never willing to work, although she gets work occasionally for shelter, food and some money. Almost a walking *Bartleby*, who “prefers to not do”. If Gabriel is immersed in the *performance* pointed out by Byung-Chul Han, Mona is the opposite: she’s like Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, who “does not support the post-modern imperative, of starting to abandon the self.”²² Mona, like *Bartleby*, is a “figure with no reference for oneself or for something else” and feels bad with the “excess of positivity or possibility”²³, on the threshold between the appearance of a “girl next door” and a ragamuffin. She has no plans or destination, she just wanders. At some point, she becomes friends with a Muslim immigrant who, with his countrymen, emerge as outcasts in the country. This is an important clue, because the vagabond would be the pariah of modernity, according to Bauman²⁴. To some extent, Mona is a species of stateless persons by vocation. She wanders the roads, as a nomad with no people, lonely, in a “more radical version”, with no aspiration of finding a homeland, but happy because she has none²⁵. Gabriel, although he does not like the expression, is a tourist – unlike the wanderer Mona in her *vagabondage*.

First, the balance between factors of “revulsion” and “attraction” tilts heavily, in the case of the vagabond, towards “revulsion”; however, it tilts towards “attraction” in the case of the tourist. The tourist travels with a purpose (or so he thinks). His movements are first of all “in order to”. [...] The tourist was born in us from the relentless dissatisfaction and the desire of contrast. We are never sure we have tried things with enough intensity; we always have a deaf awareness that tells us that our experiences could have been better.²⁶

As a *tourist*, Gabriel seeks “a rejuvenating and invigorating feeling, mixing a vague scent of danger with an impression of salvation”²⁷. “In the world of the tourist, the strange is tamed, no longer scares, and horror is part of a package

21. Played by Sandrine Bonnaire.

22. HAN, op. cit., p. 62.

23. Ibidem, p. 62-63.

24. BAUMAN, op. cit., p. 100.

25. CANCLINI, Néstor. *O mundo inteiro como lugar estranho*. São Paulo: Edusp, 2016. p. 69.

26. BAUMAN, op. cit., p. 101.

27. Ibidem, p. 102.

purchased with warrant. Therefore, the world seems infinitely comfortable, infinitely obedient to the desires and fantasies of the tourist”²⁸. Mona is in the category of the *vagabond*, still according to Bauman, this “plague of modernity”²⁹. Unlike the tourist or a nomad, the *vagabond* escapes control.

What made the vagabond so scary was the apparent freedom to travel and escape the prior control network, locally based. Even worse, the movements of the vagabond were unpredictable: unlike the peregrine or, from the perspective that matters here, of the nomad, the vagabond has no planned destination. It is unknown where she will go next, because she does not know or that does not worry her much³⁰.

Finally, Gabriel gets lost in the wild environment and dies; Mona is eternally lost and out of place in civilization. The first, the *tourist*, believes to be living a spiritual journey, fueled by the contact with different cultures, because of the sacred nickname he was given, in addition to his sword and staff. Mona is the unwelcome traveler, whose internal purpose well could be, let’s say, a sort of “spiritual journey”. *Vagabond* brings no clues, as we never know who in fact is the strange traveler. This mystery exudes a mystic beauty: “A stranger here like everywhere else,” as in the verses of Fernando Pessoa.



Source: Gabriel e a montanha (2017)³¹.

Figure 2: Gabriel, found dead, near a rock



Source: Vagabond (1985)³².

Figure 3: Mona, dead in a ditch, after trying to escape from the cold

28. Ibidem, p. 102.

29. BAUMAN, op. cit., p. 99.

30. Ibidem, p. 100.

31. GABRIEL..., op. cit.

32. VAGABOND. Director and screenwriter: Agnès Varda. Actors: Sandrine Bonnaire, Macha Méril, Stéphane Freiss et al. Paris: Ciné Tamaris, 1985. DCP (105 min), son., color., 35 mm. Original title: Sans toit ni loi.

- Identity and otherness in *Gabriel e a montanha* and *Vagabond*
- Maria Ignês Carlos Magno and André Gustavo de Paula Eduardo

4. DENOUEMENT

The wanderings of Agnès Varda's character have the mark of lack of adaptability. She runs away, just runs away. Would she have obtained in death a perfect getaway? Gabriel, on the contrary, acts as a pathfinder and has something of authoritarian and colonial. Both *Gabriel e a montanha* and *Vagabond* allow a series of reflections on the contemporary man, as well as on the issue of identity and otherness. We know that Gabriel practices tourism, albeit with a veneer of spiritual enlightenment. Mona is the aimless traveler in a hostile world, with no bonds, family or friends: she assumes the radicalism of pilgrimage, in which the fixed abode is the very act of pilgrimage. She is an outcast, no doubt: she does not belong to the world of consumption nor to the *performance society*, a recent phenomenon – as if her journey, although seemingly innocuous, revealed the major significance of preserving her freedom, her supreme value. She participates tangentially in the world, living off the remains. How to fit her in a world of simulacra? Mona seems averse to it, because she has no social obligations or “masks.” The *vagabondage* exists as radical reaffirmation of individuality, even at the expense of misanthropy or the lack of social protection it implies (no money, living off miserable jobs, sleeping in the open, suffers with the cold, being abused sexually at some point of the film). However, she is not dissatisfied with this life. Thus, she acts as antipode of Gabriel, who visits all the continents but penetrates little in their essence. It is interesting that the director and screenwriter Fellipe Barbosa dedicated the film to his friend Gabriel, depicted here as childish and authoritarian. Perhaps his intent was not to absolve him from his flaws, which are, to some extent, the flaws of every human being.

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