

SCREAMING SKULLS: PERFORMANCE AND PROPHECY IN “ONCE THERE WAS BRASÍLIA” (2017)

DOSSIER WORLDS IN PERFORMANCE: 20 YEARS
NAPEDRA

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to analyze the performances on the movie *Once there was Brasília* (2017), by Brazilian filmmaker Adirley Queirós, based on performance theories and Bertolt Brecht epic theater. The work mixes documentary and science fiction to present a fragmented narrative that develops from interruptions and leaps. By elaborating a gloomy atmosphere and performance experiments between Ceilândia and Brasília, the film seeks to think and embody the political defeat expressed by the 2016 coup that removed Dilma Rousseff from power from the perspective of ordinary people from Brasília outskirts. Finally, this work reveals a prophetic gesture that foreshadow a future of terror, death, and imprisonment in Brazil.

KEYWORDS

Film Analysis;
Anthropology of
Performance; Adirley
Queirós; Ceilândia;
Brasília.

*In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.
Bertolt Brecht.*

PREAMBLE

In this essay, we will discuss performances in the movie *Once there was Brasília* (2017), by Brazilian filmmaker Adirley Queirós. The film's plot presents people incarcerated in an allegorical city figured as a large prison. As in the author's other works, it imaginatively reinvents the urban space of Ceilândia — the peripheral city where Queirós lives and works — and Brasília (Campos 2019). There are three main characters: the Woman (played by Andreia Vieira), the foreigner Wellington Abreu (character who bears the same name as the actor), and a man who is not baptized, whom we will call Masked Man (played by Marquim do Tropa de Elite) due to the costume aspects that characterize him – he wears a macabre black welder mask during most of the projection. The woman is incarcerated in this city-prison in search of the alien Wellington Abreu, who makes an ill-fated space-time journey whose details will be discussed throughout the essay. The Masked Man organizes an army of rebels to fight the monsters that attack from the offstage. Our reading highlights the importance of arranging performance tactics and epic Brechtian style scene games for Queirós' work¹.

The composition of a gloomy and suffocating atmosphere is one of the main objectives of the film. Set in the first year after the coup d'état that removed Dilma Rousseff from the executive power, the work shows us a nocturnal Ceilândia, full of monsters, dangers, garbage, and lots of fire. In this context, the characters seek clandestine meetings to organize a guerrilla group formed by inhabitants of Ceilândia – a group that mixes humor and wonder. With this meeting, they elaborate a performance in front of the National Congress in Brasília.

1. This essay focuses on an analysis of the performative and epic elements of *Once there was Brasília*. For a more comprehensive reading of the work, see Campos (2019) and Hora (2020). For an interview about *Once there was Brasília*, see Mesquita (2017). An exemplary and representative text about the reception of the film in its debut in Brazil for independent critics was written by Juliano Gomes (2017). For analyses of other works by the filmmaker, see Alves de Lima (2016a; 2016b; 2017; 2019; 2020), Mesquita (2011; 2015), Mussel (2016; 2022), Brasil (2013), Guimarães (2013), Furtado and Lima (2016), Furtado (2019), Gonçalves (2020). For a commentary that outlines some relationships between Queirós' cinema and science fiction sub-genres, see Suppia (2017). For a good biographical interview with Queirós, see Mena, Imanishi and Reis (2015).

The film analyzed in this work directs its procedures, therefore, to two historical narratives: the foundation of Brasília in 1960 and the coup d'état that removed Dilma Rousseff from power in 2016, initiating a true political nightmare marked by the “democratic degradation” of Brazil (Avritzer 2020). We can consider such stories as examples of what Anna Tsing (2015) called “narratives of progress” that, in the film, are subverted by the performances of subaltern subjects in the periphery of Brasília, reinvented by science fiction resources. Some historical characters appear in the film via their voices, such as Juscelino Kubitschek, Michel Temer, and Dilma Rousseff. Reassembling traces of these historical events by the manipulation of archives, Queirós puts them in relation to smaller stories – especially the stories of actress Andreia Vieira². However, the film does not present us with a linear and clear narrative, but rather fragments of stories, setting experiments by combining resources from science fiction and sensorial ethnographic film, and performances that confront the ethnographic register and fictional fabulation.

Once there was Brasília is a sensorial film in which the time of the narrative is suspended. The work builds an atmosphere of ruin and terror that reinvents Ceilândia and Brasília as hellish landscapes haunted by the horrors of power expressed by the epic construction of Brasília and the 2016 coup d'état. Queirós makes a dialectical use of montage when confronting sounds from archives, memories of one of the main characters, and the environment built on the scene (Campos 2019; 2020).

The film mixes documentary and science fiction to create a complex image of the historical present from the point of view of peripheral subjects. We are facing a work of sensory ethnography whose main interest is to unfold aesthetically the embodied experience of a woman inhabiting the outskirts of Brasília who, in the film, plays a fictional role while also representing herself. Like the actresses and actors in Brecht's epic theater, actress Andreia Vieira enters and exits the role in a gesture in which, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, the one who shows is shown (Benjamin 2017a, 19). Her memories, especially her real experience as an ex-convict, serve as raw material for the film's formal texture. Everything happens as if Queirós wanted to transform his interlocutor's experience into *mise en scène*. This is accomplished by creating environments that emulate the narrow space of a prison cell, by composing an asphyxiating atmosphere and by the petrified performances of actors and actresses (Campos 2019; 2020).

Richard Schechner (1985; 2013b) proposes a concept of performance that is close to the film editing procedure (Schechner 1985, 35). Everything

2. I have analyzed the temporal matter of the film in other essays (Campos 2019; 2020).

happens as if the actor – or, in a broader sense, the performer – playfully experimented with a series of fragments of behavior in the act of staging. According to the author, “performance is doubly behaved behavior, restored behavior” (Schechner 2013b, 40-41). The performance consists of “the ritualization of sounds and gestures” and “may be characterized by highly stylized behavior,” or “may be congruent with the behavior of daily life.” In any case, performances are, according to Schechner, “twice-behaved, coded, transmittable behaviors” (Schechner 2013a, 52). The performance constructs an action made up of fragments of past behavior – which means that the enactment mixes elements collected from various sources. During a performance, for example, traces of a recollection process and guidelines for a dramatic text can come into play – one does not exclude the other.

“What performance does is create worlds” (Schechner 2013b, 63). In Queirós’ film, the actors and actresses move around the ruins of Ceilândia according to an idea of staging that rubs against daily life and highly stylized behavior – documentary realism and farce. Faced with this scenic orientation, a contrast arises between everyday life and imagination. By juxtaposing elements from the lives of the actors and stagings in which the characters are almost immobile in front of the camera, the film builds a constellation of gestures saturated with tension. Our argument is that the film generates friction by creating a dialectic between the commonplace and the extraordinary, between the “risk of the real” (Comolli, 2008) that crosses the scenes and the petrified performances that corroborate the invention of a world speculated by science fiction.

We will use some scene descriptions as building materials to discuss the characters’ performances and their encounters in the world created in *Once there was Brasília*. We intend not to analyze the film in its chronology, but to create a fragmentary thought experiment by a descriptive melee of excerpts from the work to think about aspects of the actors’ and actresses’ performances.

Anna Tsing (2015) proposes an encounter category that proves to be useful for our purposes. Faced with a world of uncertainties in which the precariousness of life becomes the rule, Tsing writes that “[e]ncounters are, by their nature, indeterminate; we are unpredictably transformed” (Tsing 2015, 46) in its unfolding. Daily life, despite being repetitive, has openings for the imagination. The author suggests that we are indeterminate forms of life – we transform ourselves at every encounter. “Our daily habits are repetitive, but they are also open-ended, responding to opportunity and encounter. What if our indeterminate life form was not the shape of our bodies but rather the shape of our motions over time?” (Tsing 2015, 47). Queirós’ cinema explores this rift opened by the indeterminacy of our trajectories and encounters, making imagination a vector for reinventing

the reality of the outskirts of Brasília in direct confrontation with the resurgence of nazi-fascism in contemporary Brazil.

THE WOMAN

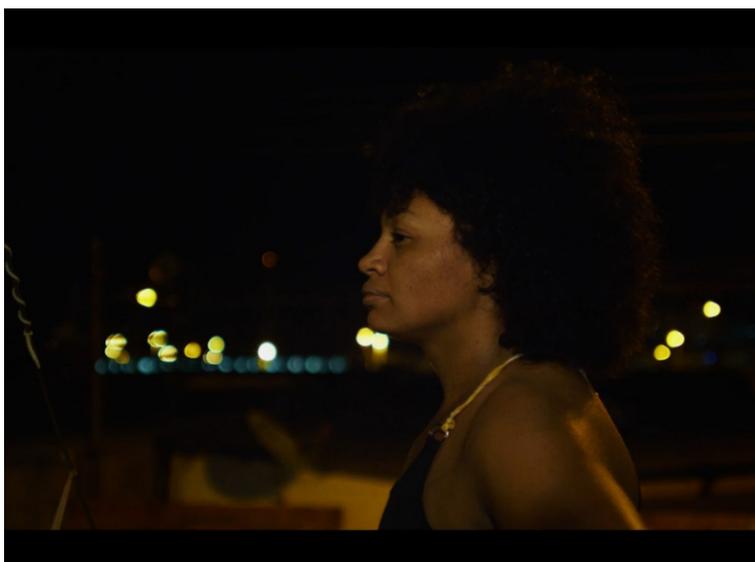


FIGURE 1
Once there was
Brasília movie
frame.

We observe Andreia in profile – her face looks to the left of the frame as the subway passes in the distance. The character averts her gaze and looks at the ghost machine on the night horizon. The train is out of focus, but its movement and the noises it produces are unmistakable. Sirens start blaring, the police have arrived. “Andreia Vieira, check,” the policeman’s voice echoes off-screen. A cutaway presents the environment in a close-up view. We see a railed corridor – to the right of the frame – which finds a staircase – in the center of the frame. The corridor has a series of doors and windows, which indicates that this is a group of small apartments. Downstairs, another row of apartments and the gate to the street can be barely made out in the Ceilândia darkness. The building appears to have only two floors. Andreia goes through the corridor, then goes down the stairs and finds the guard, who is inside a black car – the siren glows yellow. “Your ID,” orders the guard. In the absence of an answer, he repeats in the form of a question: “What is your ID number?” “2071318 (two, zero, seven, one, three hundred and eighteen)” replies Andreia. “Sign here,” says the guard. A cutaway takes us inside a subway. What follows is the meeting between Andreia and Wellington Abreu, a situation that will be discussed later on. For now, we jump back in time to return to the character’s home.



FIGURE 2
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.

The still camera shows us a close-up shot inside a cluster of what appear to be small apartments. The shots described now serve as a continuation of the police raid scene. Andreia goes upstairs and meets two children in the narrow hallway. She leads them – we will soon find that they are the character's children – into the house, telling them to stay away from the stairs – a neighbor is doing some activity on the floor below, near the gate, but we can only see his silhouette in the shadows. Together, the three of them follow the corridor until they enter the apartment. The scene is reframed. We see the corridor more clearly – the children play as the

subway passes on the horizon. A quick cutaway shows the character in profile in the foreground, during a conversation with one of her children – much older than the two little ones. The two make small talk – she tells a story. At that moment, the camera pans to the right, showing the boy from the chest up – he is washing the dishes while chatting with his mother. A quick cutaway shifts our gaze back to Andreia in the foreground, restoring the camera’s previous position. She talks about a soccer match she was injured in when she was younger. She also says that she had already given birth to him at the time and was still being beaten by her mother due to her age. At the time, Andreia was quite young – only 16 years old. The son listens to her. The conversation is good-natured and the two smile. Suddenly she mentions her time in prison and how good it was to get out to see her children. The least amount of joy would make all the difference in that situation.

Producing a clash of moods that is characteristic of Queirós’ films, which zigzag between mocking laughter, melancholy, and fury, this scene reveals more than biographical information about the character/actress. One of the objectives of the duration of the plans is to record Andreia’s walking style, her way of smiling and speaking, her accent, slang, gestures. It is a formal choice that reinforces the sensorial style of ethnography that we mentioned earlier.

FIGURE 3
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



Andreia Vieira is the actress who most exposes herself in the film – in the sense that there is a clear effort to show traces of her own history. On stage, these life stories are reinvented by the fiction created by Queirós. Andreia was arrested in real life and her actual children are the ones with her at this moment, which sets up a documentary scene in this cinematographic fiction.

The character’s starting position evokes a mug shot. This stylized pose reminds the viewer that we are in a prison city – it is a gesture that leads us to imagine this space as an imprisonment. During the scene, we watch

a commonplace conversation in which the character recalls other times, bringing her past to the conversation with her son. The *mise en scène* welcomes the filmed bodies and the story narrated throughout its duration. It is in this documentary register that the film jumps to fiction: the police arrive to check if the prisoner is in her cell. There is friction between the actress presenting herself via her memoirs and the character transfigured by the fictional drama in which she is imprisoned in Ceilândia.

The main gesture that signals this dramatic condition is the immobile and profile position at the beginning of the scene. The tension starts with the character's name: the same name as the actress. It is by colliding the everyday elements shown and the stylized gestures that Andreia Vieira's staging was built. This relationship is not limited to this actress' work. Let us now move on to another character to analyze how this procedure appears in another situation in the film.

THE MASKED MAN



FIGURE 4
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.

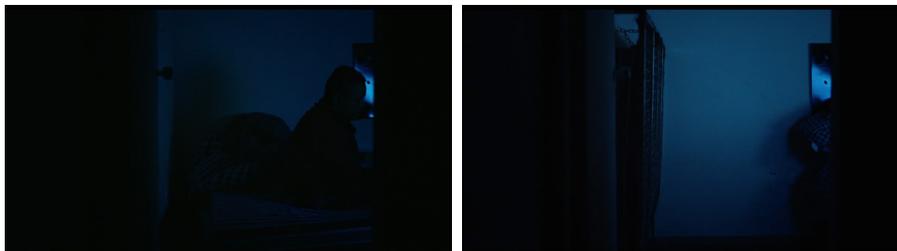
After the scene in which Andreia Vieira talks to her son, we are transported to a closed environment: it is the Masked Man's house. In this scene, he is maskless inside his room. The place is small and narrow – more like a prison cell. Once again, we find aesthetic choices that reinforce the atmosphere of incarceration and horror by the details of the environment and the (im)mobility of the bodies. We see a close-up of his sad face. The frame is bluish and dark. We hear a metallic sound, like a cell being locked. By the sound, we also discover that a helicopter is making rounds. Its spotlight wanders in and out of the frame, creating an alternation between the illuminated face and complete darkness. We observe the character's countenance as it appears in the light then disappears on the black screen.

FIGURE 5
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



We see a general plan of his room – or his cell. The character enters the frame from the right in his wheelchair. Blue is still present, creating a melancholic atmosphere in the dark room. On the wall, on the left, we can see a bed that the character pulls out to lie down. He assembles the bed feet first – we still hear metallic bangs, maintaining the impression that we are in a prison. The man lets go of the chain that held the bed to the wall. He throws a blanket and pillow on the mattress and jumps out of his wheelchair onto the bed, then lies down to sleep. We hear the rattle of a bunch of keys and the derailment of something metallic that again suggests a cell closing. Before the shot ends, we hear the next scene, that features a concert by this character's rap group.

FIGURE 6
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



The actor Marquim do Tropa is part of the gangster rap³ group Tropa de Elite. It is one of his presentations that Queirós displays in this scene. The record is documentary: we see young people having fun and the group singing. However, Marquim do Tropa appears wearing his metallic

3. Gangster rap is one of the most important expressive forms of cultural life on the outskirts of the Federal District. Adirley Queirós is part of the first generation that went to live in the satellite cities of the extensive periphery of Brasília, a generation that has a series of cultural producers of gangster rap such as X (Câmbio Negro), Dj Jamaica (Alibi), Japan (Viela 17). Queirós' first short film, entitled *Rap, o canto da Ceilândia* (2005), was dedicated to this local genre of music and its connections with the history of the formation of the outskirts of Brasília. In addition, the filmmaker incorporated several songs and artists from this generation of urban rebels into his films, both in the soundtracks and in the casts. Regarding the last topic, the most successful artistic partnership between Queirós' cinema and rap was with Marquim do Tropa de Elite, who starred, for example, in the film *Branco sai, preto fica* (2014), work for which the music artist from Ceilândia won the award for best actor at the 47th Festival de Brasília do Cinema Brasileiro, in 2014.

mask – an element that clashes with the documentary orientation of this scene. The first image of the sequence introduces us to his audience. The camera pans slightly to the left. The shot is short, and we move to a close shot of the man in the mask singing: “Ratatata! Click clack boom! Cocktail Molotov, Guindart 121,” in reference to the rap groups Cocktail Molotov and Guindart 121, important representatives of the peripheral music scene of the Federal District. Thus begins the strange concert in which the character gestures and tries to sing, but without success. We observe it from the side until the moment when the camera starts to make a lateral movement to the left. We see the audience film the concert with their cell phones. Among the audience, we find Andreia Vieira wielding a camera. The movement ceases facing a group of young people taking pictures of their friends and a scene cutaway takes us back to the stage. Therefore, the cast blends in with the performance audience, recording the party with a camera in hand.

The masked rapper appears to no longer sing. The camera makes a vertical movement downwards, and we see his armor and his wheelchair. He squeezes his hands, looking nervous. Camera movement is slow and revealing. We discover this character’s affliction with a simple hand gesture. In the soundtrack, we hear cells closing, and the scene ends abruptly. Cutaway to the Federal District subway.

This scene is a registry of the “under the risk of the real” rap show, in which the world surrounding the filming pierced the *mise en scène* of the documentary, giving rise to unexpected and unpredictable appearances. In its mixture of science fiction and documentary, *Once there was Brasília* reveals to us a record that gives way to reality, since it is built in “friction with the world.” It is what Comolli called “a cinema engaged in the world” that is made of “the chance to deal only with the fissures of the real, with what resists, with what remains, the scum, the residue, the excluded, the accursed part” (Comolli, 2008, 172-173). The stylized costumes and the petrified performance of the Masked Man clash with this documentary gesture, creating a hybrid scene between the observation of the nocturnal landscape of the rap show and the fabulation of an agonized world via fiction. Let us go to the subway scene.

FIGURE 7
Once there was Brasília movie frames.



The close-up shot shows a line of prisoners under the gaze of a guard. They have their backs to the camera with their hands behind them. The prisoners' uniform is navy blue, a color that suits the chromaticism of the film's environments, marked by a melancholy blue. A voice informs us where we are: "Attention, passengers. This is the last train with the Ceilândia terminal." They are waiting for the subway that will take them to Ceilândia-prison. We see a shot of the prisoners lined up from the front – we are approaching their bodies. Another cutaway features a medium close-up of the studs. The close-up shot shows the sad expression of some prisoners, while blurring the faces of others. The scene presents a movement that goes from a remote plan and, therefore, far from these bodies, to a close-up shot of their faces. The subway arrives and several people get out of the wagons. Caught by surprise in front of the cinematographic apparatus, they find the unusual scene strange – the filming itself in a public space, and the lined up actors playing inmates. The *tableau* confronts passers-by in a revelation of artifice that is characteristic of epic theater and its cinematic updates (Stam, 1981). Some look to the camera for answers. Another cutaway transports us into the wagon. The close-up shot shows some prisoners standing and one sitting. At the bottom of the frame, we see one of the guards watching the wagon door. Behind the standing prisoners, there is another guard.

FIGURE 8
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



Now we know the reason for our character's suffering – and, reinforcing the film's epic writing, this motivation is historical and collective. The camera movement from the previous scene showed us a gesture of distress and impotence from the masked man. The scene was abruptly interrupted to show us the context of his anguish: in the world depicted in the movie, more and more people are being imprisoned in Ceilândia.

There is a clear performance, in the Schechnerian sense, put into play in the staging by Andreia Vieira and Marquim do Tropa. Elements of life outside the cinema are mixed with stylized stagings that put the immobility and impotence of the characters into action, creating an atmosphere of ruin, imprisonment, and death. The performance creates an array made up of strips of behavior expressed in the performing action – fragmentation

and reinvention are affected in this process. The documentary record of the scenes described so far shows their epic quality insofar as the actor and actress show themselves by representing a conjuncture. The film shows, simultaneously, a bit of the life of these actors and the social *gestus* they present to us. Let us deal with the issue of actors first.

Walter Benjamin states that “the first commandment” of epic theater is that the actor be shown – in Brecht’s words, that “the one who shows [...] shall be shown” (Benjamin 1998, 11). He quotes Brecht:

The actor must show an event, and he must show himself. He naturally shows the event by showing himself; and he shows himself by showing the event. Although these coincide, they must not coincide in such a way that the contrast (difference) between them disappears (Benjamin 1998, 11)

“In other words, the actor must reserve the possibility of artistically leaving the role” (Benjamin 2017b, 28). The scenes we describe bear a resemblance to this Brechtian procedure. In a documentary record, the film shows the actor and the actress, highlighting, however, gestural moments that reveal the impotence and immobility of these people in the face of the world they inhabit. We arrive, therefore, at the question of the *gestus*. When asked “what is a social *gestus*?” Barthes replies that “it is a gesture, or a set of gestures (but never a gesticulation), in which a complete social situation can be read” (Barthes 2015, 95). Never a gesticulation since it is a gesture cut out of its context, that is, it is a “pressing moment” torn from everyday life to demonstrate social conditions. For Benjamin, it is a quotable gesture (Benjamin, 2017b; Stam, 1981), precisely due to being interrupted in the flow of actions. The spectator is led to critically observe such gestures, which are assimilated with astonishment.

The gesture of the motionless profile at the beginning of Andreia Vieira’s scene, the restless hands of the masked man during his unsuccessful singing, and the desolate look of the prisoners being transported demonstrate a situation of immobility and impotence of these characters in the face of the current political situation in the film, marked by the 2016 coup, the process of resurgence of the Brazilian police state and the glimpse of a near future of violence against peripheral and black populations.

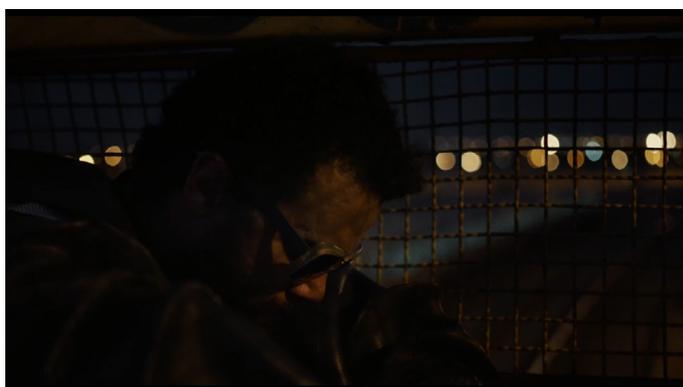
THE ALIEN MEETS THE WOMAN

We are inside the subway. The camera frames Andreia obliquely in the foreground. She has her head down but looks around her. She looks straight ahead, then glances at the outside of the car. A cutaway shows us, also in

the foreground, the alien, who is now on the footbridge at the beginning of the film. At that moment, he is the one watching the subway pass through the railing. It is dark and we also see W.A. from an oblique angle, a little to the side, a stylistic trait characteristic of the work of photographer Joana Pimenta in this film. We see the character's right ear, part of his neck, and the rims of the sunglasses he is wearing. The subway passes and he looks down – he is sad. The vehicle goes by making a clatter, the sound of friction is always intense. W.A. raises his head and a cutaway shows us a general plan of the footbridge.

FIGURE 9

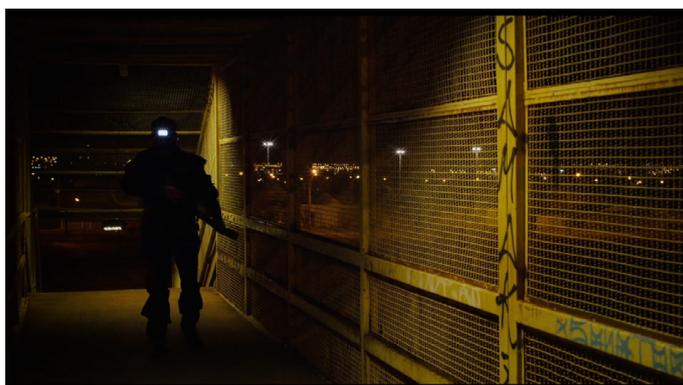
Once there was Brasília movie frames.



Two light points partially illuminate the building. Wellington walks across the scenic space holding his gun and smoking a cigarette. He comes from a dark area – behind him, a point intensely illuminated by a reflector – and passes through one of the illuminated points to, shortly thereafter, enter the darkness again – the flashlight on his forehead is lit and he continues wearing sunglasses. He steps out of frame to the right edge of the frame and goes behind the camera. An ellipse connects the alien's slow walk to his encounter with Andreia. The scene is strangely dry and straightforward, devoid of sentimentality.

FIGURE 10

Once there was Brasília movie frames.



The camera frames Andreia and Wellington in profile and in the foreground – their faces occupy the edges of the frame. W.A. smokes while trying, with difficulty, to light Andreia’s cigarette, while she protects the tobacco from the wind with her right hand. They are on the walkway, next to the railing. Outside, a storm. Thunder roars and lightning fleetingly flashes on the night horizon. Andreia asks the alien: “Is there a prison on your planet? Have you ever been arrested?” More loud thunder and W.A. falls silent – he takes a drag on his cigarette, so does she. The characters keep looking at each other. Suddenly, he asks, dodging the woman’s question: “What’s your name?” She runs her hand through her curly hair and answers “Andreia.” The alien starts nodding and says, “I came from space.” She follows the battery of questions: “Did you meet Corina there?”. He replies no and continues: “She was my only contact on the ship.” Another bolt of lightning brightens the horizon for an instant and a cutaway reframes the scene. The fixed camera is now closer to faces in darkness. W.A.’s flashlight casts its bluish light on Andreia’s face. Thunder rumbles, she looks up as if looking for the source of the noise and then turns her gaze to the side.

FIGURE 11
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



Another cutaway takes us away from the characters, who are now talking elsewhere. The open plan shows us almost nothing. We can only see W.A.’s silhouette in the dark of night and Andreia’s torso illuminated by the alien’s flashlight. In the shadows, she tells her story: “The judge always chased me. Always. He always chased me. In every hearing I went to, I always took my children, so he could see that I had my children. But still he gave me jail. The guy put his hand on my ass. He was wrong. And I still had to do time? Everyone being acquitted. People over there...” A siren in the distance forces the character to interrupt her speech – W.A. looks at the horizon and asks: “Did you hear that?” She replies, “I did.” “I think we’re being watched,” says Wellington. She nods her head in consent. The alien resumes the conversation: “Do you know this place well?” Andreia nods her head again. “The judge is a monster. Beware.” The characters continue to smoke their cigarettes during the conversation. She resumes her story: “He chases me. My lawyer even filed a lawsuit against the judge.

All my requests have always been denied. They were always denied. I was supposed to have pulled it out on the street. If I had taken six months less, I would have pulled it out on the street, and he didn't give me six months. He made me stay. He said he couldn't leave me on the street. He had a lot of evidence against me. He threw me out there in the system like I was trash. As if I were nothing". Her last words coincide with the noise of a metal gate closing.



FIGURE 12
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.

The alien is an outsider – a true outsider of classic Westerns. A Clint Eastwood who came from afar and arrived, by heaven, in our prison city. Of his life we only know his name – the actor's real name – and what was presented to us by the film's text: he has a family and was arrested when trying to invade a lot on his home planet⁴. Now, he has the mission to assassinate President Juscelino Kubitscheck, but he got lost in his space-time journey and landed in today's Ceilândia – shortly after the coup d'état that removed President Dilma Rousseff from power in 2016, as the film insists to emphasize starting from its synopsis.

During the conversation scene between Wellington and Andreia, a gesture stands out. "The judge is a monster. Beware," says the alien. Roland Barthes asks himself "how far can social *gestus* be found?" He replies: "to a very long way: even in the language itself" (Barthes 2015, 95). Saying that the judge is a monster evokes not only the judge who judged Andreia's case, but all those who, in their legal practice, harm black and peripheral populations – which makes us think of one of the main characters of the recent conservative turn in Brazil, judge Sérgio Moro, one of those responsible for the case that sent former president Luiz Inácio Lula da

4. Unlike the work done with Andreia Vieira in which her real stories are reinvented on stage, what Wellington Abreu tells us about his life is part of a script with no reference to reality.

Silva to prison in 2018, which made it impossible for him to be re-elected that same year and paved the way for the rise of far-right candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro to executive power. The rest of the sentence is also important: “Beware.” With this speech, the alien means: be attentive, observe your surroundings and know your enemies. Justice is not on their side. Watch out for “monsters.”

INTERGALACTIC WARRIORS

After observing the prisoners being transported in the subway, a section presents us with an overall plan of an open field in Ceilândia. W.A. appears on the right of the frame – the alien is wielding his weapon. He smokes a cigarette and watches the movement of the region. We hear a passing plane. The man crouches down and remains alert. At the bottom of the frame, on the left, the subway appears passing by the almost deserted field. The man squats down, flicks a lighter to light the barrel of his gun, points the stuff at the subway and shoots. The shot produces a small explosion, thus the barrel of the gun gives off sparks and a lot of smoke. Shortly after the shot, he runs towards the subway, unable to catch up. The camera follows him by panning to the left. The character tries, unsuccessfully, to stop the oppressive movement of the subway – he wants to block the movement of prisoners, but alone he cannot do anything. W.A. will need to find other people to articulate some effective action. In this topic, we will describe the performance result of the encounter between the characters – they join other inhabitants of the prison-city to present us with a performance.

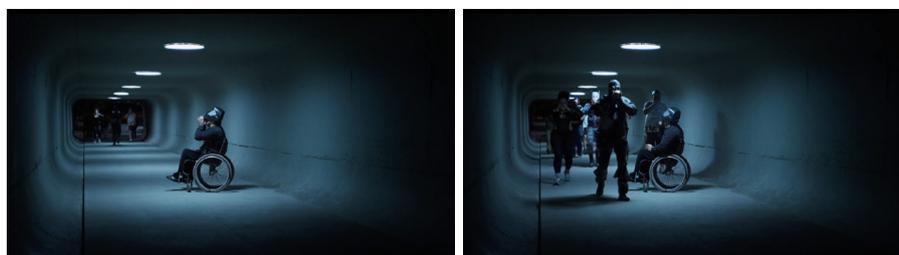


FIGURE 13
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.

After our alien’s botched action, a quick cutaway takes us into what looks like a squared underpass with rounded corners. The lights in the space

emphasize the cold colors of the frame – again it is the blue that shades the scenographic environment. The masked man is in the center of the frame. We listen to the flickering of light bulbs as he smokes a cigarette. The man takes an object to his mouth and blows. It is a horn, but we still do not know its contours. The deep sound of the device works as a call, it resonates twice, and, on the second time, the man stops and continues to smoke his cigarette. People are arriving through the entrance of the passage at the bottom of the frame. First, we see several silhouettes in the darkness of the night. The leader blows his horn twice more, and the sound echoes in the closed environment.

FIGURE 14
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



A small army of masked people emerges from the shadows. All wielding and blowing their own horns. The bass sounds blend together, forming a horrific cacophony. The army crosses the frame making a clatter. After everyone has passed in front of the camera, the leader follows them, leaving the frame to the right – like the rest of the troupe. We see the backstage of a meeting of warriors. A woman stands on top of a metal structure while synchronizing her microphone to the “alpha satellite.” The environment is dark and full of metal beams. She tests the microphone: “1, 2. Hi. Cosmic sync. Streaming. Hey.” We see the leader of the group sitting in his wheelchair in front of the woman, who is on top of a metallic structure that highlights her in the environment partially lit by some reflectors and by the headlights of cars arriving on the night horizon – to the left and bottom of the frame.

“Beginning broadcast. Test transmission,” continues the woman in what looks like the backstage of a clandestine event. The cars approach the structure, the woman, and the masked man. We listen to the roar of different engines while watching the dance of their headlights in the Ceilândia darkness. The cars park, and a cutaway transports us to a strange stage.

A general plan frontally frames the scene. In the soundtrack, a drum roll comically introduces the confusion to come. Now we can get a closer look at the four-foot-tall stage made of metal beams. In front of it, we can

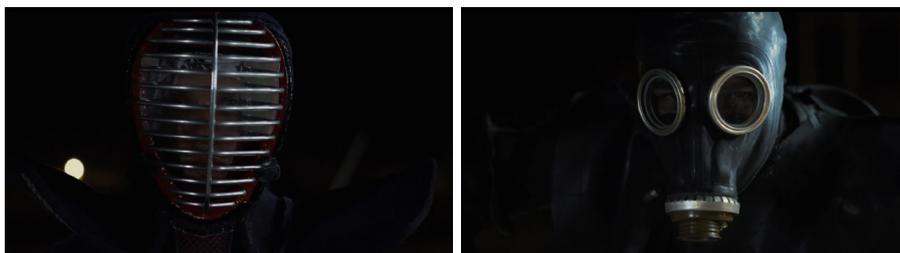
make out a fighting ring made of construction fences: precariousness is also present in this composition. Four lamps illuminate the stage and ring. On the stage, we see the woman who was testing the connection to the “alpha satellite,” we will call her “announcer.” In the ring, we see the masked man in profile.

This scene presents us with a humorous parody of *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), by George Miller. In this film, Max finds a city amidst the war-torn landscape. Buildings emerge in the middle of a lawless desert where people kill each other for a little fuel. In this town, there is a strange ring where the townspeople resolve their everyday conflicts. This place is the Thunderdome, where people confront each other in deadly duels. The similarity between the Queirós ring and this kind of legal device in the city of *Mad Max* is undeniable. However, the first reinvents the second, making a quote that transforms the Thunderdome into the stage of an assembly of allied warriors against the advance of offscreen monsters.

Returning to the description of the scene, a presentation of bizarre warriors follows. The first is the alien Wellington Abreu, with his leather clothes, a gas mask, and his gun made of an exhaust pipe. The rhythm of the drums coincides with the character’s gesture, who jumps into the middle of the ring and hits the ground with his weapon – producing a bang – and then lands in an attack position – taking aim with his weapon. He ends his war dance with another slam to the floor and heads to the left corner of the frame. The second warrior appears to mimic a monster. He leaps into the middle of the ring with a bang, landing in a crouch on the siding floor as he lets out grunts – we will find out later that he is a “reptilian.” He keeps walking in this position and moves to the right of the frame. In third place, a pair of swordsmen appears, they simulate a battle with their wooden swords and, after the performance, they crouch each on one side of the frame. The fourth warrior is Andreia Vieira, who is dressed in black gym clothes and boxing gloves. She leaps into the middle of the ring like everyone else and lets out a battle cry. Afterwards, the character does some boxing moves and crouches on the right side of the frame. The fourth warrior is a stout man who stomps up the steps, making a fuss. He also unleashes his warrior shout and somersaults into the center of the ring, landing on high guard, like an MMA fighter. The fifth fighter is quieter. He wears a black kimono with a purple sash and shuffles up the stairs, as if he does not want to make any noise. Suddenly, the warrior gets up and does a somersault towards the center of the ring, landing in a squatting position and framed in profile. A cutaway takes us to a series of close-ups on the faces of some of the warriors. Another cutaway takes us to the previous general plan. Another warrior appears, but bowing, in a gesture of respect. He wears a black kimono with a green sash around his waist. The seventh warrior (the second woman in the group) wears

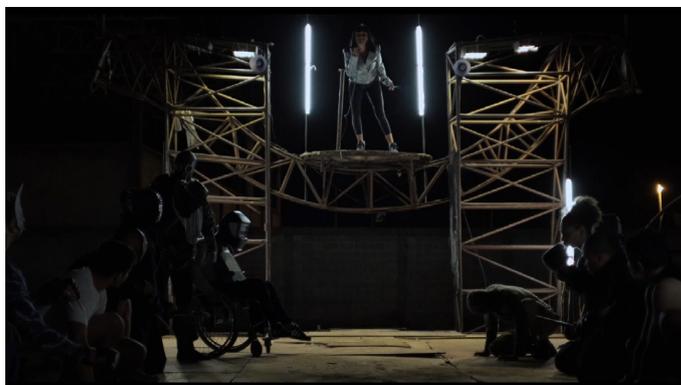
gym clothes and boxing gloves. She enters the scene firing agile Muay Thai strikes and crouches to the right of the frame. Finally, an extremely comical figure appears, a hooded man wearing a black sweatshirt with a yellow snake on it and blue pants. He climbs into the ring, does a botched somersault, and attempts an unsuccessful back somersault. He crashes to the floor, bows, and walks away. Halfway through, he realizes he is going the wrong way and turns the other way, crouching on the left side of the frame.

FIGURE 15
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



At the end of the presentation, we see two rows of warriors, which leaves an empty space in the middle of the frame. Above all and occupying this center, the announcer of the event is seated. She smokes a cigarette as she watches the scene from above. After a while, she gets up, takes another drag on her cigarette, and brings the microphone to her mouth. She blows a kiss to the warriors and begins her speech. “Welcome, fighters! This is Ceilândia’s twenty-seventh intergalactic tournament! Broadcast, live, by the alpha satellite! A cosmic concession to all galaxies and planets who are live watching you tonight!”

FIGURE 16
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.





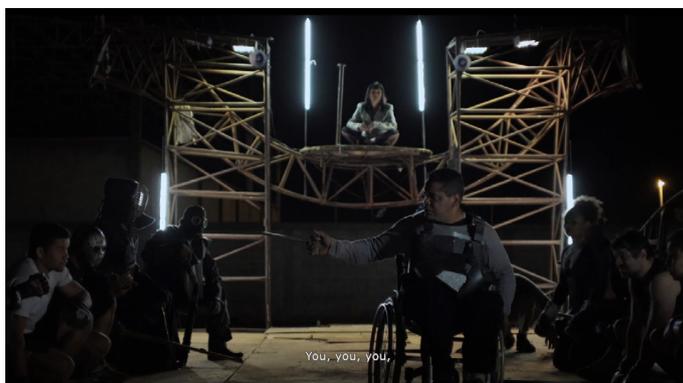
A cutaway takes us to a remote plan of the ring. Behind the metal beams, we see the warriors basking on top of the fence. The announcer continues her speech and begins to introduce the warriors. However, two fighters get ahead of themselves and start a fight. The drums roll again in the soundtrack, giving the scene a burlesque aspect. The announcer starts to narrate the fight instead of separating the unexpected conflict. “The fight started hot!” The leader’s shout interrupts the action: “Stop!” A cutaway restores the scene’s initial perspective. The warriors return to their positions, each on their side of the board. In the center, the leader of the group in his wheelchair. He is maskless, but still wears his armor.

In a military tone, the leader shouts: “Rest!” A few seconds of silence follow. A cut shows us the announcer in *contre-plongée*. She plays with a chain with her hands for a few seconds. The wind hits her face, her hair dances. The man takes a drag on a cigarette and says with conviction, as he moves forward in his wheelchair: “Warriors! I handpicked you. You, you, you, you. All of you,” says the man, pointing to his warriors. The ring becomes an assembly, and the leader continues:

The enemy is on the loose! The monster is everywhere! In Congress, in Ministries, in the Palace! Congress must be ours! The Ministries, everything has to be all ours! Only the best and most qualified are here. I’m sure that at the time of war here nobody will chicken out! We are a strong, united, and organized people! The enemy is among us and plots in the dark. Runs errands and shipments at night. The enemy says “I will give it to you,” but he doesn’t give us anything. We have to capture him!

The army is organizing an action. The leader references the interim president of Brazil and his *mesoclises*, Michel Temer (“the enemy says *dar-te-ei*” [I will give it to you], but he doesn’t give us anything”). The monsters on the loose are some of the protagonists of the 2016 coup: Congress, Michel Temer, Sérgio Moro. The film’s montage stitches together the ring set shot with a series of close-ups of the warriors, to later show remote plans in which subtle camera movements to the left show four of them standing still in the ring – the main characters of the group and a supporting character named Franklin (as we find out in the next scene). They pose for the camera, away from each other. The scene ends with a general shot of the environment. We see a car in front of the ring, the announcer on top of her stage and the four warriors standing still. Suddenly, we hear the noise of the vehicle’s ignition and blue lights come on inside the car: someone presses hard on the pedal, producing a resounding roar of the engine. This sound mixes with radio interference noise.

FIGURE 17
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



CHASE SCENE

Cut to the interior of the car. It is the same vehicle from the beginning of the film: a bluish environment with fogged up windows and a radio installed on the dashboard next to the steering wheel. Inside the machine are three warriors in a night watch. They are looking for something, but the narrative does not specify what exactly the characters are looking for. The scene features close-up shots of their faces – the camera shakes along with the car, which wobbles non-stop. They seem to be crossing bumpy streets. The leader smokes a cigarette and asks: “W. How is the scheme going?” Wellington responds, “I’m following the coordinates.” The car continues to rock, demonstrating the precarious state of the vehicle and the street. The leader asks the driver: “Take it easy there!”

We see the remote shot of a dirt lane surrounded by unpainted walls. In front of the walls, we see heaps of sand and other materials, which indicate the ongoing constructions. The car appears at the end of the street, making a right turn to enter the frame. In the soundtrack, we hear a continuous creak, typical of an old car. We hear someone say: “Man, I think this car is bugged. They always find us, dude!” To which W.A replies: “Yeah. They’re right behind us all the time.” They are being watched. Dogs bark and howl, singing into the night. The car approaches the still camera and parks right in front of it. The driver turns off the headlights, and we can now perceive one of the warriors standing in the backseat – his torso is on the outside of the vehicle, which has a large hole in its roof. He is watching the surroundings. We are in the sandy alleys of *Sol Nascente* (Rising Sun), entrenched in unfinished houses, a typical feature of Brazilian *favelas*.

FIGURE 18
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



Inside the car, the men start talking. “The night will be long,” says the leader. W.A. complains about the cold and the third man, named Franklin, replies that “it was way colder last week.” The leader asks where W.A. came from. He answers: “Kaspenthall.” Another question: “what’s it like?” W.A. replies that “it’s just like this,” pointing to the outside of the car. “The same way, the hood?”, the leader seems amazed at the similarity between such distant places. He cuts the conversation short to launch a comical proposition: “Look. The three of us awake, we’re going to be captured easily, you know? We’ll get tired. I’m going to take a nap, alright? Bro, that’s the rule! I’ll take a nap and you two stay awake. I’m going to sleep for half an hour.” Something seems to appear off-screen: an engine roar pops up in the soundtrack. W.A. says, worried: “Check it out! Check it out, it’s getting closer, huh?!”

FIGURE 19
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



We see a remote plan of the alley. A car speeds past the warriors’ vehicle. Another parody emerges here, but this time it is Mad Max’s chase scenes that are reinvented in the process. Instead of using a parallel montage, a common feature in scenes of this type, Queirós and Joana Pimenta opted for a shot in which the cars move away from the still camera. The two vehicles become almost indistinguishable in the narrow horizon of the street – the spectator is led to imagine the whole action, thinking about the offscreen. The characters’ lines continue on the soundtrack, which provides clues about the botched action. They are having trouble chasing the car on the uneven dirt streets – we are led to imagine potholes and mounds of earth appearing as obstacles for the old car the characters are in. Instead of a high-speed race, we have an attempt at a chase filled

with obstacles presented by the local geography. Returning from the patrol, the characters stop by a gas station to calibrate the car tires. After that moment, they listen to Michel Temer's inauguration speech on the radio. A close-up shot frames the characters' faces as they listen to the politician's promises.

Good evening everyone. I assume the presidency of Brazil after a democratic and transparent decision by the National Congress. The moment is one of hope and the resumption of confidence in Brazil. The uncertainty has come to an end. It's time to unite the country. And put national interests above group interests. This is our flag. I am aware of the size and weight of the responsibility I carry on my shoulders. My commitment is to recover the strength of our economy. And put Brazil back on track. Under this belief, I lay the foundations of our government.

Before the last sentence, a cutaway is made, so that Michel Temer's last words are said while we see a new scene. His speech is interrupted by the alien's gun firing and the bugged car exploding – yet another Brechtian interruption of the action. It is a breaking of the connection between objects/equipment and the subjectivity of the fighters by a sudden, violent gesture of rebellion. An explosion.

The explosion scene is composed of a *tableau*. The action begins with a sudden shot from W.A., who fires at the vehicle – the car explodes on the spot. We see the four warriors from the back as they watch the fire spread across the car. We hear the flames crackling, the wind blowing, and dogs barking in the distance. In the image, car carcasses scattered across the field stand out, as well as the intense fire and the smoke screen that rises to the skies of Ceilândia. The ensemble shot frames the full body warriors in an open field – their bodies are completely still in front of the flames, and we watch this fire dance as it destroys the troupe's vehicle.



FIGURE 20
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.

SCREAMING-SKULLS

Via the soundtrack, the screams of our army of warriors invade the scene, mixing with the noise of the burning environment. A dry cut shows us the leader of the army framed obliquely in the foreground. He is blowing the horn that now reveals its outlines: a skull with metal teeth. The man is dressed in black clothes and holds the skull with both hands, in a gesture that stands out against the black background. The sound of the horn resonates until it ceases, with no hurry. A cut shows us another close-up shot. This time, we see other warriors from the masked man's troupe. They blow their screaming skulls – instead of bass, the soundtrack features screams of horror.



FIGURE 21
Once there was
Brasília movie
frames.



The montage stitches together the closed shots of the skulls with an overall shot of the army letting out its screams of hatred and suffering. The scene takes place in front of the National Congress, as a performance against the process that took place in this space and seems to have opened the doors of hell in Brazil. Faced with the approval of the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Congress, inhabitants of the outskirts of Brasília show their skulls for the cynical dawn of a new Brazil, professed by Michel Temer and his allies. The encounter between the intergalactic warriors results in the action of showing skulls and letting out screams in front of the modernist monument in a petrified pose. With this, Queirós subverts the discourse of the politician and the narrative of the impediment as a democratic way out for crimes of responsibility of the head of state that proved, over the years, to be a farce. The sounds of the screams overlap, forming a mixture of different bellows and, in this procedure, the film takes us in a violently contrary position to the narrative foreshadowed by Michel Temer and his allies. The plan that frames Andreia Vieira's skull frontally is the apex of the plastic composition of the scene. From this fragment, we see the skull's gaping mouth, its metallic teeth, and its black eye sockets. In the soundtrack, the scream becomes more monstrous with a sound distortion procedure. Faced with the place where a new history of victors begins, where the "transparent and democratic" decision that removed Dilma Rousseff from power took place, Queirós shows us the face of death.

It is a performance that creates an absurd rift in the everyday urban landscape to condemn the strengthening of the far-right in Brazil and the subsequent intensification of state terror against black and peripheral populations. From a choreographic point of view, the scene presents a dance of immobility that expresses a collective experience of terror – violence and torture, fascism and the police. Queirós' urban guerrilla builds a sound and kinetic choreography of popular fury. The periphery skulls scream in front of the monuments of the modernist city, echoing their deformed voices in a gesture that messes up the usual meanings of urban space, displacing ordinary ways of being and moving in the city. With this action, the symbols of state power are disallowed – the landscape that epitomizes the power of the modern republic is subverted. The Praça dos Três Poderes becomes the city of the dead, haunted by the cadaveric fury of the oppressed.

The insurgent presence of the periphery at the center of the nation's power tears, therefore, the "mytho-poetic mantle" of Brasília (Holston 1993), responsible for overshadowing the history of violence and exploitation of the federal capital. Periphery understood not as a tight space or scenario of the social tragedy of postcolonial cities, but as an epistemic and relational position capable of disputing the hegemonic knowledge about



the city and its unequal landscape (Aderaldo, 2018). Peripheral bodies show their destructive nature by breaking the phantasmagoria of the contemporary city, revealing the asymmetrical and violent relationships between center and periphery. The “destructive character,” wrote Walter Benjamin (2012), sees paths to all sides. What is at stake in the performance previously described is, after all, the old motto of anarcho-punks: to destroy in order to build.

National symbols of order and progress are turned into chaos. Thus, a disordered nightmare world is established. And at this point, Walter Benjamin’s words about the Parisian surrealists resurface with brutal force:

Life seemed worth living only where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth; language seemed itself only where sound and image, image and sound, interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called “meaning” (Benjamin 1999, 208)

At that moment, Queirós calls the dead onto the scene. We are led to think about the dead of the past, present, and future. People who died yesterday, people who die now, people who will still die in the ever-renewed journey of building a new Brazil are invited to haunt the National Congress. Brasília intended to build a modern Brazil in which different classes lived in harmony. However, it generated death and exclusion. Poor people from various parts of the country died in its construction, and the survivors were expelled to satellite cities. These specters are put on stage with the skull and the scream, which are presented as signs of a catastrophe in progress, living up to Walter Benjamin’s observation about the figure of the historian: “In any era, the living discover themselves at the midday of history. They are expected to prepare a feast for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table” (Benjamin 2018, 797).

By using performance and montage, Queirós’ film shows us the face of death in the face of ongoing history. Subverting official discourses and rubbing its characters, *Once there was Brasília* takes us through hellish landscapes in which the characters fable actions in the face of the political situation. We saw that the work of the actors and the actress is done in a register between documentary, performance, and epic theater. They show themselves and present the characters, seeking to express, rather than dramatic actions, a social situation whose design seeks to infuriate and scare the spectators.

PERFORMANCE AND PROPHECY

Film critic Roger Koza (2019) highlighted some “prophetic fictions” of contemporary Brazilian cinema: *Com os punhos cerrados* (2014), by Ricardo Pretti, Luiz Pretti, and Pedro Diógenes; *Jovens infelizes ou um homem que grita não é um urso que dança* (2016), by Thiago B. Mendonça; *Branco sai, preto fica* (2014) and *Once there was Brasília* (2017), by Adirley Queirós; *Baixo Centro* (2017), by Ewerton Belico and Samuel Marotta; *Os sonâmbulos* (2018), by Tiago Mata Machado; *Sol alegria* (2018), by Tavinho Teixeira; *Tremor Iê* (2019), by Elena Meirelles and Lívia de Paiva. These films foreshadowed the intensification of State violence in contemporary Brazil in dystopian narratives about the present, finding expressions that “take care of the future” from a sharp perception of the now.

From the corpus of works highlighted by Roger Koza, *Once there was Brasília* is the film that best managed to express the feeling of immobility, hopelessness, and fury that marks the lives of many Brazilian men and women since 2013, with its peaks in 2016, with the coup, and 2019, with the beginning of the Bolsonaro government. From a very creative observation of the present, the film offers us a prophetic image that figures catastrophic times in the history of contemporary Brazil. Queirós’ work, therefore, foreshadows the intensification of the culture of terror (Taussig, 1987) under the government of the far-right president Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a leader who put into practice a policy of death, of generalized dismantling of social policies, and of destruction of public institutions and the environment without concern for the balanced management of the public machine and no care for the citizens. This anti-political style of government intensified during the pandemic, which generated a radical “anti-life” attack by Bolsonaro (Avritzer, 2022).

It is, therefore, an exemplary case of counterattack by the Brazilian artistic field to the signs of resurgence of Nazi-fascism in contemporary Brazil, a process that culminated not only in the Bolsonaro government, but in the persistence of Bolsonarism in Brazilian culture and politics. Bolsonarism is marked by a series of linguistic and ideological elements, such as authoritarianism, punitivism, individualistic entrepreneurship, meritocracy, armamentism, scientific denialism, anti-intellectualism, etc. (Nunes 2022)⁵, which culminated in an extremely violent political

5. For a detailed analysis of cultural and linguistic aspects of Bolsonarism, see Nunes (2022) and Starling, Lago, and Bignotto (2022). Something we learn right from the start in these precious readings is that Bolsonarism is not limited to the Bolsonaro clan. Noting the persistence of the culture of terror and hatred in the news reporting massacres, shootings, and murders carried out by Bolsonaro supporters even after the presidential defeat in 2022 and the failed coup attempt after the invasion of the National Congress and Palácio da Alvorada on January 8, 2023 is enough.

culture of armed groups whose behavior is inspired by the terror of the militias that Bolsonaro's clan helped build in Rio de Janeiro⁶.

The most repeated word in studies on Bolsonarism and the Bolsonaro government is, without a doubt, destruction. Heloísa M. Starling (2022), for example, wrote that Bolsonaro revives a Brazil from the past prior to the New Republic, dating from the leaden years of the military regime – a period in which the hard lines of the dictatorship intensified the repression of the immortal communist threat, using surveillance, extreme police violence, incarceration of subversives and suspects, and widespread torture and extermination of enemies of the military government. Bolsonaro's policy of destruction and the Nazi-Bolsonarist⁷ culture of terror is characterized by the author as an update of the figure of the “reactionary,” that is, the one who seeks, in his choices and actions, to destroy the democratic structures and practices arising from of the bourgeois and French revolutions – the return of an authority in the *Ancien Régime* style.

A series of studies emphasize the destructive, genocidal, and anti-political nature of the Bolsonaro government, a combination that led the country to a process of “democratic degradation” or, in a term closer to Queirós' film, “political nightmare” (Avritzer 2022, 54-55). The country “exploded in hatred” (Starling 2022, 95) and elected a ruler who carried out the most frontal demolition process of the democratic apparatus of guaranteeing rights, by creating a true kingdom of death against his enemies and subaltern populations under the war logic of friend against enemy. Queirós' film is, without a doubt, the work that best managed to create an expression of this nightmare marked by terror, torture, death, and widespread imprisonment.

This completely nocturnal film seeks in the past of a black woman inhabiting the outskirts of the federal capital the image of a future of resurgence of the police state and institutionalized violence against peripheral populations. The night works as an allegory of the darkness that has taken over the contemporary Brazil – a country that had a strong resurgence of fascism in the political system and civil society groups.

The screaming skulls of *Once there was Brasília* emerge as the presence of a Brazil that exterminates and imprisons its peripheral population – the Brazil of hunger, police violence, and death to marginalized people. It is

6. In 2020, the Bolsonaro government invests full force in anti-life policy to act in the coronavirus crisis in Brazil. Leonardo Avritzer, for example, identifies this intensification of the rebel captain's Death Policy as the beginning of his government's crisis and of Bolsonarism, to a different extent. Indeed, it was during the pandemic that Bolsonaro began to lose more allies and was weakened in the political field, which culminated in a kamikaze strategy that contributed to his defeat in the 2022 elections, among other recent catastrophic events.

7. For the historical connections between Bolsonarism and Nazism, see Starling (2022).

the foreshadowing of a ruin – a film that thinks with the ruins of the future. The image of Brazil that glimmers somberly in this work transforms it into a no man’s land, a field of terror that serves as a stage for lurid performances. Perhaps something close to what Michael Taussig (1987) called the “space of death,” that is, a liminal and grotesque space of transformation in which beings wander aimlessly awaiting the imminent death. Locus of inconclusiveness “without cadenced harmonies. No cathartic resolutions. Just fights and bits of possible holes. Nothing more” (Taussig 1987, 7). Simply raw, fetid death. Queirós’ film creates a similar space in which the characters wander and halt in an anti-climax without cathartic resolutions, without uplifting twists: just the ruins of a country in the process of self-destruction.

In a recent book, Anna Tsing (2015) describes the contemporary world as the ruins of progress – a context of extreme precariousness in which regular jobs become scarce and people find themselves increasingly vulnerable in relation to others (Tsing 2015, 20). Technical progress has destroyed entire landscapes – its promises are buried in this new world resulting from capitalist development. The author searches for what emerges “beyond the call of industrial promise and ruin” (Tsing 2015, 18): “We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours” (Tsing 2015, 3). This is what the author calls thinking with ruin. Denying both postmodern pessimism and catastrophic romanticism, the author seeks to follow networks of relationships and the stories of their participants to think about the forms of life that emerge in the fabrics of contemporary capitalism. This precarious world exposed and reinvented by the film is what we comment on in this essay. The case of *Once there was Brasília* serves as an example of these landscapes produced by the expansion of capitalist modernity. Trash, fire, dust, and scrap come into play: the entrails of dreams of progress.

As we have seen, Queirós’ film uses procedures from Brecht’s epic theater. His scenes are fragmentary, minimalist, and discontinuous. Its editing creates a jerky development – in other words, the film is full of interruptions and jumps. The actions are abruptly cut, a gesture that establishes a *mise en scène* in which violently interrupted fragmentary scenes are juxtaposed. The work’s greatest effort is to create a catastrophic atmosphere for a recent event in national history, allowing us to see and hear an image of our historical reality in the light of the memories of actress Andreia Vieira.

Epic theater does not seek to develop actions, but to “represent conditions.” According to Walter Benjamin, this goal is achieved by the “principle of interruption” that is mobilized by using montage (Benjamin 1994a, 133). Queirós’ film demonstrates its epic quality by interrupting any and all

dramatic action, which makes empathy and subsequent identification with the dramas of the actors and actresses impossible. As in an epic play, the work advances in leaps, causing shocks (Benjamin 2017a, 27). This is an art that seeks to cause astonishment – not empathy.

The relaxed interest of the audience for which the productions of epic theatre are intended is due, precisely, to the fact that practically no appeal is made to the spectator's capacity for empathy. The art of epic theatre consists in arousing astonishment rather than empathy. To put it as formula, instead of identifying itself with the hero, the audience is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being (Benjamin 1998, 18)

Once there was Brasília achieves this goal with the duration. The long, juxtaposed scenes make the viewer feel trapped. Inside Wellington Abreu's spaceship, we are amazed at the precariousness of the environment and the loneliness that marks the life that unfolds there. The shots stretch and nothing happens. The decoupage and sound editing contribute to the experience, building an environment that is perceived as a narrow and noisy space – whose weight comes not only from the metals that visually constitute it, but also from the sounds that the spaceship produces.

By splitting what was apparently evident and putting together the heterogeneous aspects, the montage carried out in *Once there was Brasília* produces a Brechtian distancing to the historical event that it seeks to represent.

If everything is renewed, the constant change of things that pass generates a continuous distance from everything that happens. And through distancing, events are torn away from the stability of habits, from their apparent naturalness; highlighted, everything makes them weird (Bornheim 1992, 264).

The ill-fated intergalactic journey of Wellington Abreu goes hand in hand with the stories of ex-convict Andreia Vieira and the parodic army of a rebellious wheelchair user to astound us in relation to the “monsters” that are on the loose – threats from off the screen – and from the world that surrounds these characters. Producing a distance, the film makes the Brazil after the 2016 coup strange and intolerable.

According to Didi-Huberman, distancing would be “taking a position par excellence”. This is produced by a distance that erupts close to the spectator. “In the epic vision, according to Brecht [...], it is a distance that asks to be understood in the object itself, no matter how close its appearance or its

photographic framing” (Didi-Huberman 2017a, 61). The distance makes it awkward to demonstrate a situation. By dismantling the situation and reassembling it from another point of view, the distance produces a surprise in the spectator.

Distance creates gaps where only unity was seen; because montage creates new groupings between orders of reality spontaneously thought of as very different. Because all this ends up dismantling our usual perception of the relationships between things or situations (Didi-Huberman 2017a, 64).

“The original astonishment leads to the critical, practice-oriented attitude” (Bornheim 1992, 261). Finally, we conclude that the film analyzed in this essay seeks to revolt its spectator. Faced with the catastrophe that erupts in the film, the spectator’s astonishment can turn into anger and a critical attitude. Like Benjamin’s narrator (1994), Queirós’ cinema seeks to exchange experiences by using image and sound. *Once there was Brasília* shows us that a future of death and imprisonment is to come: its prison-city and the horrifying scream of the screaming skulls foreshadow the recrudescence of the police state after the 2016 coup, in which the incarceration process and the extermination of peripheral people is violently intensified, especially in the hands of the police – in the name of order and public safety. These two elements become emblems of the Brazilian government’s discourse with the rise of Jair Messias Bolsonaro to the presidency of the Republic, a far-right politician known for his hatred of black people, gays, the poor, women, and socialists. Observing the fascist onslaught in Brazil and other countries around the world, Queirós shows us a twilight world: the crossing into darkness.

In an interview with Claudia Mesquita, Queirós comments that “the choice of film that we make is totally influenced by the spirit of the coup, by the fall of Dilma, by Temer’s first measures...” (Mesquita 2017, 169). Brasília’s promises were not fulfilled – as the poverty of the satellite cities alone attests – and, in the film’s catastrophic present, new promises are made, based on Michel Temer’s speech. Again, a new Brazil is promised. The image of the catastrophic future derives from the film’s skepticism – or even pessimism – regarding these promises. In this interview, Queirós says that the film reflects on the political “defeat” that the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff represents and the immobility that this event caused. In the words of the filmmaker,

The film wanted to think like this: if we lost, if we were defeated, it’s time to recognize that we are in immobility. From this immobility, where can we go? Our concern was

how history advances on us, and we are increasingly confined, increasingly trapped, isolated (Mesquita 2017, 172).

The petrified performances in front of the modernist monuments seem to mimic the concrete constructions of Oscar Niemeyer in a gesture of monumentalization of the bodies of the periphery. Ordinary people from Ceilândia become people of stone in front of the National Congress who, on stage, entrench themselves in a poetic face-to-face confrontation with the socio-cultural transformations of contemporary Brazil. If the screams of the skull foreshadow a historical moment characterized by terror, Queirós' work elaborates a performative counter-discourse in reaction to the infernal world drawn by science fiction.

When asked “what makes us revolt?,” Georges Didi-Huberman responds by stating that what revolts us is, in principle, a loss (Didi-Huberman 2017b, 289). After tearing us apart, loss leads to desire. “It would even be possible to say that the loss, which at first afflicts us, can also – by the grace of a joke, a gesture, a thought, a desire – uplift the whole world. That would be the first force of the uprisings” (Didi-Huberman 2017b, 290). We can say, therefore, that *Once there was Brasília* fables from a loss – from the acceptance of defeat – and, in this sense, it rejects the reality that begins to take shape from this loss – it takes a position in the face of this reality. “Wouldn't the evidence of the uprisings be, first of all, the gesture by which we refuse a certain state – unjust, intolerable – of things that surround us, oppress us?” Queirós' film presents us with a cry against the situation that erupted from the 2016 coup, a situation that has not yet taken a definite shape – but has already shown its destructive force. The skulls let out monstrous screams in front of the National Congress: this is the gesture of an angry refusal of the “bridge to the future” presented by the new rulers. “Despair, indignation, then anger, then, finally, the call to ‘do something.’ It also begins with a cry, with a cry” (Didi-Huberman 2017b, 344).

As suggested by Richard Schechner in the seminar “Seismology of performance: NAPERDRA 20 years,” the performances function as a kind of cinematographic montage in which the speculated future guides the selection of the past touted in the performative action. In other words, the future produces the past. The here and now of the action is decisive, but the temporality produced in the performative action is, after all, an amalgamation of heterogeneous times – a montage saturated with tension. The petrified performance in front of the National Congress mixes times like this: the past of imprisonment and violence is articulated in a position taken in the now, causing an image of a somber future to explode.

After the screaming of the skulls, we return to the starting point of the film, so that the characters, in a state of alert, return our gaze to us by breaking the fourth wall: they bring us to the fable, showing us that we are also subjects involved in the hell that was sketched in the movie.

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