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The Modern City Facing the Future

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Architectural and social modernity: The image of Brasília in two European movies

The last of the great successful Brazilian movies, "Central do Brasil" (English version Central Station, 1998) by Walter Salles, shows the Brazilian architectural image of the forties and the fifties in a way that somehow has not pleased admirers of modern architecture, as we here gathered. Narrating a story of two characters who leave the urban life, which is portrayed as savage and rotten, in order to find lost human values in a rural and pure space, the movie adopts an anti-modern and conservative perspective, as pointed out by Olavo de Carvalho (Carvalho, 1999:34-38). The journey from Rio de Janeiro to Brazil's Northeast interior starts in the Pedregulho housing project, designed by Affonso Eduardo Reidy. This building represents till nowadays the required social commitment of Brazilian modern architecture. This architectural scenery is just the headquarters of organ traffic dealers, who had bought the boy, the story's hero. The boy is kept captive just in this building, which is undoubtedly associated with an existential void and with the absence of a moral fiber in urban life. This sequence of the film could be interpreted as follow: the first step in finding again basic human values and national identity, which were both destroyed by the big contemporary metropolis, requires running away as fast as possible from this modern architecture, the evil dwelling. This escape annihilates all the aspirations of building a better social universe and a new national identity - aspirations between which modern architecture in Brazil has oscillated.

The extremely simple duality between good and the evil in the story, spatially represented by the

Northeast hinterland and by the Rio de Janeiro city, shows a serious misunderstanding of the non-linearity of modernity, as Marshall Berman presents it in his work "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air", when specifically analyzing the modernism of the periphery, beginning with the literature on Petersburg and its social history. He states that the meanings of modernity in Petersburg that come from the "shock and (...) interaction of experiments of modernization in both top and base" (Berman, 1986:269), "had to be more complex, paradoxical and indefinite" (Berman, 1986:169). Berman is trying to characterize what he defines as modernism of underdevelopment. In opposition to an experience of a modernized reality of the developed nations; the modernism of Petersburg "emerges from hardship and underdevelopment" and, for this reason,

"it is forced to be construed of fantasies and dreams of modernity, to be nourished of an intimacy and fighting against mirages and phantoms. To be truthful in relation to the life from which it emerges, it is forced to be strident, harsh and incipient. It folds on itself and tortures itself for its incapacity of alone building a history, or it launches in extravagant tentativeness of absorbing all the burden of history. It beats itself in frenzies of self-aversion and preserves itself only through vast reserves of self-irony" (Berman, 1986:220).

Berman himself suggests that the process of modernization in Petersburg "may offer cues to some of the mysteries of the political and spiritual life of the third world cities - Lagos, Brasília, New Delhi, Mexico City - nowadays" (Berman, 1986:269). Who definitely has not followed these clues indicated by Berman was James Holston, who, in his book "A Modernist City A Criticism of Brasília and its Utopia", identifies all the paradoxes and distortions, which for Berman are foundational part of this sort of modernizing process, as problems and accidents that make the utopia not working. Believing in the possibility of a homogeneous and entire modernity that inflexibly establishes itself and based on a questionable unified vision of the Modern Movement in architecture, that, for example does not distinguishes between the modern architectural history of the twenties in Germany from the fifties in Brazil, Holston does not perceive nuances that put in question his polarized position and ends linking the ideas of the Brazilian architects to the Russian Revolution communist ideals. Holston even says that for these architects the Brazilian modern architecture represented a rupture with the colonial past (Holston, 1993:81; 103-105;174). Summarizing, what for Berman is the moving force of this moder-

nity, the confrontation between its phantasms and their appropriation, is for Holston its failure.

By trying to identify in narratives about Brasília some of the themes aroused by Berman in his analysis on Petersburg, I shall work with two European movies launched shortly after the inauguration of Brazilian capital. On one hand, using cinema, the most representative medium of 20th century communication, this object of study can be understood as an actualization of the use of literature to the study of the modernization of Petersburg in 19th century. On the other hand, even if the history of Brasília does not yet offer a dramatic importance of the Russian revolution, which was the focal point of the literary course followed by Berman in his discussion of the city by the Neva, and even if the authors and film makers here studied do not have the same cultural standing as Dostoievski, Gogol, Chernyshevsky or Mandelstam, and as smaller as the universe represented by the two movies is, this paper might be understood as a small case study in the construction of the city image; the comparison of the use of Brasília in these two films offers some starting points to a larger work that incorporates other cultural forms that deal with the Brazilian capital, such as lyrics of local pop and rock'n roll bands from the eighties (Legião Urbana, Plebe Rude, Capital Inicial, etc)¹.

The film "*L'Homme de Rio*", a French-Italian co-production of 1963, which was directed by Philippe de Broca and featured by Jean-Paul Belmondo and Françoise Dorleac, is a typical film of adventure that, not without irony, follows the patterns of James Bond's films. Adrien, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo, is a simple soldier of the French air force; on his first day of vacation in Paris he sees his girlfriend, Agnes, played by Françoise Dorleac, being kidnapped and then he follows her to Rio de Janeiro. After Adrien manage to free Agnes in a hotel in Copacabana, where she was captive, the couple end out following the bandits to Brasília, where an old friend of Agnes' father lives, Mr. De Castro, who had in the past discovered with him three pre-Colombian little statues – the real desired object by the bandits. Mr. De Castro not only owns one of the sculptures, he is also one of the builders of the new capital. The couple, however, do not manage to prevent De Castro from be murdered by the bandits, who rob his statue. In the sequence Agnes is kidnapped again and taken to the Amazonas state. Adrien takes an airplane in the Paranoá lake and falls by parachute in the middle of the Amazonian forest, but he soon localizes the gang in Manaus². Hidden inside the boat which took them to the place where the three sculptures would reveal a diamond treasure, Adrien rescues Agnes while consecutive shakes cause the

collapse of the cavern where the gang's leader had just discovered the treasure, killing him. The last scene in Brazil, showing the couple running away from the forest, shakes and explosions, reveals that the last ones were, in fact, occasioned by the construction of a road crossing the forest, what is probably a reference to Belém-Brasília road.

The film's characters remain all the time foreigners passing rapidly through the country and in Brasília the mutual influence between the story and the social space is minimum, limited to a social gathering offered by De Castro. The architectural modernity of the Brazilian capital performs in the script the index function of exotic, just as Copacabana, slums and *rodas de samba* do in relation to Rio de Janeiro or as the Amazon forest, presented in aerial takes and showed off as a place of alligators, caves and hidden treasures, does in the later sequences. As a back drop for a chase in an adventure shot, the landscape formed by the Oscar Niemeyer buildings is there to amplify the effect of strangeness so important in this sort of movie. Thus, in the construction of this exoticism, compared to the referential city, Paris, if the Amazon is another environment of natural character, the place of ancient not-Western cultures, and Rio de Janeiro, the place of samba, the landscape of Brasília, a city that was unknown by the character played by Jean-Paul Belmondo, is a radically different urban space – one futuristic and indecipherable.

However more important to our analysis is trying to understand the function performed by the character De Castro: a powerful person, nice and of "Latin spirit", a macho in terms of the way he treats his wife and dressed with a light color suit that recalls a Northeast "coronel" – these aspects all make him a very traditional figure. It is however this same De Castro, the builder of the new capital, who, in his first words, makes the only reference, too radical, to the architectural modernity exhibited in the film. Talking to his subordinates at the building site, he says:

"Audácia, Pessoal! I want all these windows! I do want to see glass everywhere! There might be light, and a luminous light, transparent! Like a butterfly wing, these flats are the wings of a butterfly."

This discourse, typical of the modern architects of the twenties, was radical. Now it is easily repeated by this so conservative character. In this moment all the paradoxes of this "Modernity from top to bottom" are explained: its promoter is all but revolutionary or committed; he is a great entrepreneur from Rio de Janeiro, somebody who is really committed to the establishment and the hierarchy, who is a typical example of the country's older social order.

The film, a French-Italian production directed to the international public, uses a last subtle point in

order to reinforce the specificity of the character De Castro, which is only clear to the spectator who knows Brasília or Rio de Janeiro. The shots of the building site as well as the ones of De Castro's private residence were filmed in the spaces of Rio de Janeiro Modern Art Museum, designed by Affonso Eduardo Reidy. So in the scenes shot in one of the balconies of the Museum, Adrien contemplates from there the Esplanade of the Brasília federal public administration buildings. This montage, which could seem surreal to those who know the two cities, serves to emphasize the function of the character De Castro by bringing to the space of the new capital the modernism which took place in Rio de Janeiro. The film shows the city in such way that turns relative any tentative of purist demands in asking the city its condition of utopia.

The second film, *"Weit ist der Weg"* (Long is the way) is a German production of the early sixties directed by Wolfgang Schleif and featuring Freddy Quinn and Ingeborg Schöner. It tells the story of a fisherman, who lives in Salvador and befriends at the same time Jane, a homeless girl, who becomes attached to him calling him "daddy", and a medical doctor, Anita, who is working in Brasília as it's being constructed of and during the film enjoying vacation in her homeland, Salvador. Freddy lives in a slum over water; he is a fisherman and musician, a man without no material stability and because of that he decides to take Jane to an orphanage, where by coincidence Anita had worked before leaving to Brasília. However, Jane runs away from the orphanage but Freddy finds her. She is very ill, and he takes her back to the orphanage where she undergoes a surgery. By then he tells Anita his desire to take care of Jane as his inability to do since he does not have a proper employment. Anita suggests to Freddy that he go to Brasília, giving him a lead on where he might find work.

Arriving in the Brazilian central highland Freddy starts working in road construction, soon he is disillusioned with his wage and thinks of going back to Salvador. Then he re-meets Anita in the middle of the road, which makes him decide to remain at the building site of the new capital. Freddy moves to the *Cidade Livre*³ and starts working in cargo transportation by lorry. Besides being robbed by the bandits, who get all the savings that Freddy gathered in Brasília, the hero is involved in weapon smuggling once weapons were in the lorry which he was driving. He is arrested by the police who soon after are convinced of his innocence and releasing him. He then heroically saves Anita, who is in danger inside a mobile X-rays vehicle which is in the middle of a fire caused by the gang in the savanna. Once he has saved Anita, he receives his savings back from

the State and thinks about going back to Salvador and adopting the girl. However, Anita and Jane are already in front of the Federal Supreme Tribunal waiting for him. From there the three arrive in the Praça dos Três Poderes as a new family in the new city, this is the scene that ends the film.

The interpretation of the modernity of Brasília as social modernity is absolutely clear in the film. The opposition between Salvador and the new capital of the country not only provides a convincing contrast of the Brazilian historical urban environment of Salvador with the new and modern environment, but it also reveals clearly the difference between a traditional social structure where the citizen is destined to a poor existence due to the omission of the State as the promoter of welfare, and the new capital, the place where a new social order is established. Thus, in Salvador the hero is a dweller of a favela; there is no public health system except the orphanage headed by catholic sisters, there is no opportunity for getting jobs, and the city lacks police service and transportation system. Its inhabitants are all the time singing and dancing, while in Brasília, even in the *Cidade Livre*, the State is present through out. The police are always working both as preventive and repressive forces; the high technological health system is accessible to all and the justice supports the citizens - even if to have it one needs to realize a heroic act. The film gains a dimension of reality just by shading the opposition above, which described by this way may seem reduced and simplistic. At the moment when Freddy is disillusioned regarding to his work of construction of new roads to Brasília, he doubts on the promises of changing life associated to the construction of the new capital. Talking to Miro, his colleague at work, who came with him to the central highland, Freddy discovers his hearth:

"Miro, I can not cope with life here anymore. The wage is only a tax to sweat. I am very serious, I am going to put an end in this dreadful work. I can find another job where I don't need to sweat so much. I could do thousands of other things and came to submit myself just to this."

Also the scenes in the *Cidade Livre*, with its wooden buildings, a poor population of workmen, and the repetition of urban social practices associated with the not-modern universe of traditional Brazilian cities - the informal commerce done in the streets and the organized crime - all clearly show that the dimension of life transformation of that group is diminished and that the chances of access to the spaces effectively modern of the new capital remain reduced, almost nonexistent.

It is possible to clearly identify easily with the Freddy character, the figure of the “common man” who fights for his rights to face the phantasm of modernity that imposes itself from top to bottom, a figure that Berman identifies as elementary in the modernity of Petersburg. Dreaming of going to the new capital in order to transform his life, Freddy first works constructing new roads, later in the *Cidade Livre*, having access to the *Plano Piloto* only when he is arrested by the police. Until this moment, the few images of the *Plano Piloto* buildings always appeared in the background, somehow blurred, almost mirages, to use a term borrowed from Berman. The final scene, showing the three main characters walking through the *Praça dos Três Poderes*, clearly indicates that the “common man” conquered his right to the modernity proclaimed by the buildings of that city, that finally he has tamed the phantasms. The architectural modernity here became a lived space, one that may eventually indicate a social modernity⁴, even if in a very elitist mode because it is reserved only to a hero but not to the thousands of the *Cidade Livre* inhabitants, who due to the restrictions imposed on the Federal District population, were forced to live in the satellite-cities.

The depth of exploration about this theme of social emancipation in this movie is, however, clearly limited by its very condition of origin: it is a musical, adventure production joined to a love story, executed as entertainment for a German audience in which the main actor is a pop singer, a very popular media star in German speaking countries during the fifties and sixties. The determining role that this has in the shaping of the production is evident in the songs sang by Freddy Quinn during the film. One is written in Spanish, and other has a refrain in Italian for a German text; the use of two foreign languages give a Latin touch to the plot; the fact that the songs weren't in Portuguese didn't seem to disturb the audience.

On one hand, the discourse present in both movies examined here shows in several moments that the understanding of the construction of the Brazilian new capital probably will be more distinctive the further removed the representation is from ideological demands of affiliation with the European Modern Movement before 1932. Instead of this, an analysis of Brasília should get closer of a deeper comprehension of what really was and the nature of the modernism of the periphery. The process of establishment of a military dictatorship in 1964 gives further evidence of the parallels to Berman's periphery – thinking in the repression histories regarding to the yearning of liberty of Petersburg's “common men” – and likely it might have inhibited for some years the production of texts like the ones of

the German films here studied⁵. On the other hand, if one compares Freddy to the first “common man” of Petersburg, Evgeni from the “Chevalier of Bronze”, poem by Alexander Pusckin, who became crazy as he faced one of the city's phantasms, the hero of the German production has a slightly more optimistic end.

If we try to further this question to a real discussion about the evaluation of Brasília in the history of Modern architecture, it seems possible to say that Brasília appropriated the image of modernism which was “available” when the city was built to itself. The difficulties of this appropriation are connected to two different aspects. First, the role which Brazilian modern architecture played within the Modern Movement in relation to the aesthetic “dead end” of the years following the Second World War: at this time, the production of architects like Niemeyer, Costa or Reidy was considered by some as something new which could overcome the architecture built in Europe and the United States between the two wars and by others as a force which could give a fresh impetus to the modern architecture of the “great masters”. Second, due to its way of production, i. e. as an example of a modernism of underdevelopment, or “from the top to the bottom”, the new Brazilian capital reveals the limits of a political and social emancipation ideology, which represents an essential part of the Modern Movement, in an astounding clear way. This is Brasília's paradox which cannot be perceived by those who look upon the city from an orthodox perspective only: as it took shape within an aesthetic framework established during the twenties, its design not only illustrates the limits of Le Corbusier's maxim “architecture or revolution” from within architecture itself (which nevertheless can be observed in the formal results of the buildings with all their mannerisms), but in the opposite way they also contaminate the modernism “from the top to the bottom” with an emancipated, perhaps only visionary, potential which constitutes the city's image.

NOTES

¹ The references are the Album “O Concreto já rachou” (The concrete has split) by Plebe Rude or the lyrics of the song “Faroeste Caboclo” (Caboclo's Western) by Legião Urbana.

² In the film montage, the forest is located next to Brasília, reediting a common image related to the city, that is, it was built in the middle of the forest – an image which is presented, for instance, in German language architectural magazines. These images are also applied to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in those magazines from the forties and fifties.

³ The *Cidade Livre* is the name given to the settlement of commercial activities to support the construction of the *Plano Piloto*. Later on, it was named *Núcleo Bandeirante*

offer being transformed in a satellite-city. It is interesting to point out that the scenes of the film were taken in the very *Cidade Livre*, showing, even only for few seconds, a little of the urban dynamic of this environment built provisionally, the only place whose process of formation the State left to the private initiative.

⁴ In this scene even the hero's clothes are modified, for the first time he dresses a white shirt, clean and ironed.

⁵ For instance, two stories of the book "Primeiras Estórias" by Guimarães Rosa, that were analyzed in Campos, Márcio. *A grande cidade em construção: Brasília em dois contos de Guimarães Rosa*, conference held in V Encuentros de Escritores Latinoamericanos: La Ciudad en la Literatura Latinoamericana, at Vienna, Austria.

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