Chiaroscuro:
Glauber Rocha in Claro*

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Resumo

Este ensaio examina a presença de Glauber Rocha em *Claro* (1975), filme em que a política mundial está articulada com as políticas do cinema e do sexo. Um mosaico de esquetes, manifestações de rua e cinema direto realizado nas ruas de Roma, este filme oferece a oportunidade para o cineasta entrar em cena e engajar sua própria subjetividade na narrativa. Procuro demonstrar de que forma sua presença, ao se evidenciar, propicia possibilidades de leitura das cenas.

Palavras-chave

Cinema brasileiro, Glauber Rocha, análise de filmes e contexto cultural.

Abstract

This essay examines the presence of filmmaker Glauber Rocha in *Claro* (1975), a film in which world politics are intertwined with the politics of filmmaking and the politics of sex. A mosaic of sketches, street performances and direct cinema set on the streets of Rome, this film is also the opportunity for the filmmaker to step into the scene and engage his own subjectivity in the narrative. I claim here that his presence, whenever evident in the film, sets the tone for possible readings of the scenes.

Key words

Brazilian cinema, Glauber Rocha, film analyze and cultural context.

At some point in *Claro*, one of its characters looks directly at the camera and speaks:

> Silence! Silence!
> What are you looking at?
> What is the matter?
> What are you hearing?
> What are you saying?
> Where are you going?

These basic questions – which ultimately could be addressed to any audience at any film session – are at the core of the narrative of *Claro*, film made by Glauber Rocha in Rome, in 1975. For *Claro* interpellates its public in an unabashed, candid way. These questions shed doubt to the film itself, but more than that, they shed doubt, as we will see, on the possibilities of cinema itself.

Claro can hardly be defined as a work of fiction or documentary. A mosaic of Brechtian sketches, street performances and direct cinema set on the streets of Rome, this film is also the opportunity for the filmmaker to step into the scene and engage his own subjectivity in the narrative. For Rocha, having himself filmed meant much more than just presenting his presence as an author – that meant exposing his own burden of representation as the foremost Brazilian film director, the Cinema Novo leader, the cultural rogue, the opponent of censorship, the once opponent and then supporter of

the right-wing military[1], the enfant terrible of many a film festival. The same man who could author *Land in anguish* (considered by many as the foremost creation of Brazilian cinema), amass the grand prize of the critics at Cannes and behave like a real pig at social events.[2]

But instead of delving into the anecdotal episodes of Rocha's biography, the aim of this work is to examine some of his appearances on the screen. From that perspective, I believe *Claro* marks indeed a turning point in Rocha's career, one in which the filmmaker presents himself as a visible and audible part of the narrative. I also claim here that his presence, whenever evident in the film, sets the tone for possible readings of the scenes. In other words, his persona provides new inflections for what has just been shown: be it an indoor performance by a cast of actors and actresses, be it the recording of a political rally on the sunlit streets of the city. And as in chiaroscuro painting, in *Claro* Rocha's presence functions as the incidence of light that produces a tridimensional grasp of the scene, of the film, of cinema and its possibilities as a means to (re)present reality. In other words, my contention here is that Rocha's screen persona can provide new possibilities of answers to the questions faced by the viewers: after all, *What are you looking at?*

When Glauber Rocha made *Claro* he was at the end of an odissey which was often defined as his period of exile. Brazil was under the tight grip of a military dictatorship that arrested, tortured and scattered many of his friends into exile throughout the world. That was his first feature film after a period during which he traveled extensively, wrote for the screen, for the stage and produced an autobiographical novel[3]. In in this period, as author Sylvie Pierre puts it, Rocha "always kept Brazil in the soles of his windshoes" [4] Rocha

1. The military dictatorship in Brazil lasted from 1964 to 1984. Rocha passed away in 1981.
2. At the Cannes Festival, he was once invited by Elizabeth Taylor for dinner. He kept making little dumplings out of his food and throwing them at the star's cleavage, while claiming that in his part of world people did not use silverware. Apud Sidney Rezende, *Ideário de Glauber Rocha* (Rio: Philobiblion, 1986) p. 23.
3. *Riverão Sussuarana* (Rio: Record, 1976)
4. *Glauber Rocha* (Campinas: Papirus, 1996).

aligned himself with the exiled, tracking the (albeit romantic) path of the Third World artist (or Tricontinental, as he and Godard once dreamed of), one who could fit himself in the struggles spread throughout the world.

Rocha, in his turn, had been arrested and often threatened by the military, but was never officially exiled from Brazil. No wonder that period is often described as Rocha's self-exile, something that was sometimes interpreted as as act of self-defence (yes, he could be arrested again), but often seen as a virtual drop out. Rocha, however, insisted on his need to go abroad, claiming the lack of conditions to film in Brazil (despite the fact that many of his colleagues decided to stay and managed to work in the country).

Whatever reasons he might have had — either personal or political or both — he was to make three feature-length films outside Brazil: *Der Leone Have Sept Cabeças* in the Congo, in 1969; *Cabezas Cortadas* in Spain, in 1970; *História do Brasil* in Cuba, in 1973 (co-written with Marcos Medeiros); and finally *Claro*, in Italy. All these films can blend techniques and genres, making it difficult for critics and historians to classify them.

In his African, film religious rituals are portrayed side by side with theatrical sketches that included German soldiers of fortune, a theology-of-liberation priest, a voluptuous blond seductress, a CIA agent and a Portuguese swindler. In Spain, Rocha researched the roots of European pre-Christian traditions and assembled a parodic portrayal of a Latin American dictator in exile. Rocha's dictator talks on the phone about the death of his wife and its impact on the people – — a clear reference to Argentinian leader Domingo Perón and his wife Evita. (Perón's exile in Spain did not keep him from commanding the Argentinian political scene, literally over the telephone). Each of these films highlights the themes that are at the core of his work: the politics of colonialism, the politics of mysticism and the politics of sex.[5]

5. Sex, however, was then considered a minor theme by many of his contemporary admirers, as compared to the more noble ones (say, class struggle?), that placed Glauber Rocha the Third World filmmaker in the roster of the revolutionary artists.

We can sense, in this scenario, elements that evolve from the (cultural and political) context in which Rocha situated himself in Brazil as well as the elements that helped forge his complex public persona and the tragic burden of this very persona in his own private life.[6] If, as Michael Renov reminds us, the essential ingredients of an autobiography as a form of representation are the self, a life and a writing practice, in *Claro* the filmmaker shows a little of himself, some fragments of his life and a great deal of his filming practice. Rocha is set here to build a character, a persona based on himself but invested with responsabilities that a politically conscious filmmaker cannot minimize.[7] In this sense, *Claro* can be seen as an arena in which Rocha plays the role of The Filmmaker, rather than what could be seen as an autobiographical documentary.

I am thus more interested in his screen image. I will focus on specific sequences of *Claro* in which the filmmaker is present on the scene, interacting with other characters or with inadverted passersby in the streets of Rome. In this perspective, I believe, Rocha's acting before the camera can serve as statements of his own role as a Brazilian filmmaker (one who represented the leader of a cultural movement of international projection such as Cinema Novo), but also the intricacies of his politics (which could swing from a clear leftist alignment to a rather conservative understanding of the acts of Brazil's military leaders).

The filmmaker had already hinted at his own presence in some of his earlier films. In *Land in anguish*, made in 1967, for instance, Paulo Martins, the main character, is a journalist who faces his need for poetry and his duty as an intellectual involved in politics. The film is set in an imaginary Latin American country, Eldorado, which keeps strong resemblances to the Brazil of that same period,

6. Rocha's private struggles with his sexuality or with drugs might have some relevance, as far as my reading is intended as an approach to his subjectivity on film, and no matter how well-known this issues may have become, especially now that his diaries (which are about to be published) have leaked some revelations to the press, such as his homosexual fantasies.
7. Michael Renov, *"Investigando o sujeito: uma introdução"*, in Maria Dora Mourão and Amir Labaki, *O cinema do real* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005), p. 237

with added references to other Latin American countries – no wonder the film is spoken in Portuguese but Spanish words burst without warning in the midst of dialogues or in the names of the characters, clearly turning Eldorado into a transnational metaphor. And as for the character Paulo Martins, many have referred to him as an allegory of this or that Brazilian journalist, but, as Rocha once confided with U.S. scholar Robert Stam, Paulo Martins was also a metaphor for himself.[8]

In his first short feature films one can detect much of the problematic Rocha experienced in his youth concerning sexuality. In *Pátio* a man and a woman, lying on a checkered tile floor, are unable to touch each other's hands. The woman was played by Rocha's first wife, actress Helena Ignez. In his second film, *The cross on the square*, two men roam around Bahia's colonial quarters until one of them grabs the other's testicles and makes him scream of pain.[9] Rocha claimed the film – one of the first dealing with homosexuality in Brazil — was still immature and was not ready to be shown. This film is now lost, having been seen by very few people at the few screenings it had in Bahia.[10] Nevertheless, a delicate matter such as homosexuality was not at all easy to deal with in the moralist atmosphere of the Brazilian left in the 1960's; one can but imagine the pressure felt by Rocha at the time.[11]

Rocha would also appear in Jean-Luc Godard's *East wind*, shot in 1969 in Italy, portraying himself as a Third World filmmaker

8. Rocha worked many years as a journalist in his native Bahia, and kept writing editorials for Brazilian newspapers throughout his career. In a n article published in the daily Folha de S. *Paulo,* author Carlos Heitor Cony recalls being imprisoned in the same cell with Rocha and other intellectuals back in 1965, after a protest against censorship in Rio. He says that Rocha spent his time writing the first treatment of *Land in anguish*'s screenplay, in the very heat of the moment.
9. Actor Luiz Carlos Maciel recalls that that scene was not in the screenplay, having been improvised by Rocha on the spot. *Geração em Transe* (Rio: Nova Fronteira, 1996), p. 60.
10. Lúcia Rocha, the filmmaker's mother, once told me that one copy of the film was kept by "a Dominican priest in a monastery outside Paris"
11. Such issues are explored by João Silvério Trevisan, *Debassos no Paraíso* (Rio: Record, 2000).

standing at a crossroads with his arms spread (in a rather Christlike figure) and pointing to the possible ways of political cinema.

In *Claro*, however, Rocha's presence is more adamant. He is heard and seen throughout most of the film and, even though we do not hear his name on the screen, in the screenplay his role is named "Glauber Rocha" [11] My point here is that Rocha's subjectivity might be reasonably evident in his early works, but *Claro*'s mise-en-scene points to a practice he would further develop in his last films, such as *Di-Glauber* and *The age of the earth*. In both these films, the last ones he directed before his untimely death in 1981, his presence is made evident, either as in a voice over narration or plainly directing the scene, giving instructions to the cast before the camera.

This practice was to reach its paroxysm in his contribution to the television newsshow *Abertura*, in the late 1970's, that gathered journalists who kept a challenging attitude towards the decadent military censorship of the press. In *Abertura* Rocha "pretended" to interview artists and intellectuals in order to debate Brazilian cinema or politics. Most of the time his gesturing would take over the video, keeping the interviewee out of the focus or in the background – thus making obvious the mise-en-scene that usually levels regular talk shows. At times he would invite unexpected guests, often non-celebrities – such as the parking valet from across the street in order to discuss with him the political situation of Brazil on the eve of the demise of the military dictatorship.

Claro opens with handwritten credits and the face of a Girl, a character played by Juliet Berto who will puncutate the entire narrative with her presence.[12] A howling male voice is heard – he seems to prattle some unkown language, made up of long, wailing vowels. The Girl howls back, walks, hops and dances among ancient Roman ruins, watched by groups of tourists who seem baffled by the

11. *Roteyros do Terceyro Mundo*, org. Orlando Senna (Rio: Alhambra/Embrafilme, 1985).
12. Berto who was quite well-known at the time of the film's production, having worked as one of the protagonists of Godard's *La Chinoise*. In *Claro*'s screenplay she is named "Moça", or "Girl".

filmmaking performance. Little by little, the voices of the Man and the Girl seem to engage in a bizarre dialogue of primal screams.[13] The foreigness of the Girl is stressed by the garment she wears – a poncho, or cloak, such as those worn by traditional Latin American peasants. The gap produced by her presence amid the Roman ruins seems obvious: that "classical" environment, the very hub of the civilization that entailed the process of colonization is suddenly invaded by the disturbing presence of the primal voices of the colonized.

After a few minutes, a new sound interrupts the supposed dialogue of Man and Girl – we hear the second movement of Villa-Lobos's *5th Bachiana*, a piece composed for eight cellos and a soprano voice. That is perhaps the most celebrated erudite piece of music ever composed by Brazilian composer Villa-Lobos, who attempted to find a syncretic link between the popular music of Brazil and the European tradition. Inspired by Bach (hence the name *Bachiana*), this piece features the operatic voice of the Spanish soprano Victoria de Los Angeles – a voice which sings about the birds of the Brazilian hinterland, as if it were that of a hiker who treads a path in the bush and dialogues with different birds.

The soundtrack produces an inevitable differential, one that reframes the impression the "primitive" voices of the Man and the Girl might have caused. For the operatic, high pitched voice of Victoria de Los Angeles is here summoned to engage in a three-way conversation piece, one which attempts to articulate primal utterances with the highly trained vocal apparatus, thus producing an effect of strangeness.[14]

The atmosphere changes again in the sequence that follows, when the *Bachiana* is replaced by another string concerto by Villa-Lobos, turning what was to be a somewhat joyful scene into an *opera*

13. I chose to refer to Rocha's character as "Man", since his name is never mentioned on the screen.
14. That strangeness was probably already in the *Bachiana* itself, even though the etiquette of a proper audience would not allow for that – but who would believe in the operatic, highly educated voice of a rural worker in the backlands of Brazil?

buffa, in which the Man (finally) appears on the screen and pretends to torture the Girl. With fake moves, he kicks the Girl and makes her roll on the asphalt, with the Roman Coliseum in the background. She hardly reacts, he keeps "beating" her, at the same time he – Glauber Rocha himself, we see now — directs the movement of Mario Gianni's camera. Asian tourists who happen to pass by eagerly photograph the performance, in a scene that blends hints of tragedy, traces of comedy and straight direct cinema.

Whatever considerations one could make about these two sequences – whatever obvious allegories one can find in the Girl or in the Man, the oppressed and the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer – all these categories undergo a process of complication and even confusion: Is that a parody of oppression? Whose voices do we hear? What is the role of the landscape in the definition of the characters? Once again, as in many of Rocha's films, more questions than answers arise from the visual and aural images that surround the spectators.

As I noted before, *Claro* unfolds different types of mise-en-scene and filmic practices. Sequences of tongue-in-cheek performances are clearly not to be taken seriously. One example: a handsome American couple argue in despair – he is a repented white Vietnam veteran and she is a black woman who clearly sympathizes with the Vietnamese he killed in action: "You murdered my people!" Such a sketch can be followed by images of newspapers announcing the Vietnamese victory over the United States, thus reframing – or rekeying — what seemed a laughable parody of melodrama into a fragment of true conflict.

In another scene, an elegant European lady, donning a fancy evening gown, addresses the camera and tells her story, over and over – she is a Turkish princess who was brought up in a harem, etc. Her presence suggests the decadence of a ruined Europe, blending her character with the surrounding landscape. In another moment of the film, an Italian burgeois lady is played by a transvestite.

However, *Claro* is not just a collection of funny or repetitious sketches. The film also features fragments of Italian political life of the 1970's. Demonstrations and rallies are shown, people come up

and tell their story in a documentary mode. At another moment, the Girl sits in a balcony facing a square and talks to a woman who describes the working-class neighborhood, the demonstrations and the police brutality. Juliet Berto plays, here, the role of a politically engaged documentary interviewer, one who channels the voice of the common citizen.

Towards the end of the film, the Girl and the Man visit one of Rome's poorest neghborhoods. This is perhaps one of the most intimate and candid appearances of Glauber Rocha on the screen. It is here, for the first time, that the filmmaker presents himself as a full-fledged performer, one who can dismiss the support of a cast of actors and actresses. If, in the opening sequences of *Claro* he interacted with Juliet Berto, in this fragment of the film Rocha takes the scene over, relegating Berto to a supporting role.

The excerpt I want to approach begins with the Man and the Girl running along a railroad station platform. They seem to have disembarked and are leaving the station – even though there is not one train in sight. The soundtrack features a Villa-Lobos concerto entitled *The little train of the caipira.*[15] In this piece the orchestra emulates the sounds of a steam engine, a device that provides the scene with a bizarre atmosphere, since no trains are seen on the screen – and the only train featured, on the soundtrack, sounds like an orchestra. The couple crosses the street and enters what seems to be a Roman shantytown. Once there, Man and Girl talk to the dwellers, as if they were collecting their complaints for a documentary. Rocha oftens turns people around, in order to position them before the camera, which adds to the veracity of the "filmmaking". However, the audience does not hear what they say, and, in a rather melancholy tone, the images suggest a film that was never finished.

The sequence that follows shows Rocha leisurely rocking in a chair, apparently listening to a record player. After a few seconds of an old Brazilian song, he gestures as if to tell someone to change the record – and then we hear Carmen Miranda's voice, singing

15. *Caipira* is a Brazilian term of Amerindian origin, that refers to traditional rural workers and their culture.

Primavera no Rio, an old standard of the 1930's that tells of springtime in Rio, with its colorful flowers and frolicking, beautiful girls. The rather nostalgic atmosphere that settles in is emphasized by the ceaseless rocking of the chair, equalling exile to endless expectation. Nevertheless, the scene is disrupted by a peculiar gadget that Rocha brings into the scene: a telephone. He smokes a cigarette and utters scattered phrases to the mouthpiece:

> The minority of the masses
> Half of the people are revolutionary
> The labour of the masses
> Yes
> Day after day
> Of course, of course, of course
> Everyday
> House, road
> It can also be rhetorical or dialectical

The sequence ends with Rocha singing lively along with Carmen Miranda: "Springtime is the season of love!"

Could these phrases be excerpts of what had been spoken at the shantytown on the previous sequence? Are they simply fragments of the speeches heard at the political rallies depicted in the film? Are they perhaps verses of a poetic performance that picks up its words from the experience of life outside the scope of the camera? These are unanswerable questions. No wonder one of the "verses" refer to the title of the film: "Of course, of course, of course" – or, in Portuguese, "Claro, claro, claro" Why, no: nothing is clear, except for the presence of the filmmaker, his own experience, his own sentiment.

The complex articulation of Miranda's joyful, carnivalesque singing, the rocking chair and, most of all, the quasi-parodic casualness attached to the filmmaker's voice empties the words of their original meanings, portraying the uselessness of a certain political cinema based on the repetition of empty directives. What is the use of repeating the same slogans that were used to pep up the crowds at a

rally? What can be more political than showing the limits of political cinema itself? Rocha's strategy, in a way, renders a gesture of utmost courage, one that runs the risk of throwing his own film in a burning pyre – running the risk of turning the filmmaker into a sacrificial lamb. The presence of the filmmaker, on this scene, casts a totally different light, a different understanding of the film. The scenes of the political meetings, the poignant story told by the lady about the police brutality, even the fake, theatrical sketches depicting runaway Turkish princesses or repented Vietnam veterans – all that seems to be leveled by the filmmaker, who rocks and smokes on a chair, listens to Carmen Miranda and pretends to speak on the phone.

Very little is left over after that.

Near the end of *Claro* we see Rocha sharing a joint with Berto, a candle in the foreground; he feeds her rose petals, straight from his hands to her mouth. It is as if *Claro* had to end with a delicate homage in honour of his star – we are far, here, from the opening scenes, in which Berto was continuously "kicked" by Rocha. These now are images of love and affection. *Claro* is thus the screen record of a love affair, for Berto was indeed Rocha's partner during his Roman exile.

The last sequence of *Claro* is a collage that sums up many of the issues of sex and politics brought up in the film: a collage of juxtaposed images– such as the portrait of Ho Chi Mihn described as "The Victor" on the cover of Time magazine; Playboy centerfolds; glimpses of Italian newspapers headlining one more terrorist attack of the Red Brigades; Berto being made up for a scene that was never shown; fragments of paintings depicting scenes of love and sex. These images refer directly to the world of the 1970's, off screen – where the struggle goes on. And if cinema is capable of (re)presenting the reality that lays there, beyond the boundaries of the screen, the filmmaker seems to remind us that he will only be able to accomplish that task by exploring the boundaries of his own self, exposing either the vulnerability of his politics or yet declaring the certainties of his love.

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