

Re-imagining migration: (im)mobility and the return to the sertão in *Suely in the Sky*

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Abstract

The article aims to analyze how the Brazilian film *Suely in the Sky* (Karim Aïnouz, 2006) tackles the issue of migration and (im)mobility in a contemporary context of dispersion and restlessness which seeks to emphasize the subjectivity of the main character rather than a migratory collective impulse. The film also represents a return to the sertão, which, in the 1960s, allegorized the nation in Brazilian cinema, and was nostalgically readdressed in the 1990's. Contrary to these previous moments, however, the film opens for a transnational perspective, which suggests a tension between the nomadic, fluid idea of 'becoming', and the monadic, coagulated fixity of identity. The politics of displacement in this film helps us imag(in)e forms of life beyond normal/tized configurations of identity and belonging.

Keywords

Migration. (Im)mobility. Sertão. Contemporary Brazilian cinema

Migration, (im)mobility and the sertão have been politically imagined in Brazilian cinema since at least the beginning of the 1960s¹, when films like *The Guns* (*Os Fuzis*, 1962), by Ruy Guerra, *Barren Lives* (*Vidas Secas*, 1963), by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and *Black God, White Devil* (*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, 1964), by Glauber Rocha, approximated the themes, calling attention to the issue of hunger and the need to escape from the region and its social-economic discrepancies. Considered to be the pillars of the Brazilian Cinema Novo, these three films had in the sertão one

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¹ In 1953, *Cangaceiro* (*O Cangaceiro*), by Lima Barreto, already depicted errant characters in the vast open lands of northeastern Brazil by showing a nomad group of bandits - the cangaceiros of the title - in their perambulation across the sertão. The depiction of the region, however, was too idealized to fit the adventurous, romantic nature of the narrative, much in the fashion of classical Hollywood films. A huge success in Brazil and abroad - it was awarded a prize in the Cannes International Film Festival - the film gave rise to a series of other narratives focused on the cangaceiros and their savage life in the backlands. Yet, it is only with the Cinema Novo movement that films will begin to politically address the sertão in terms of its social and economic challenges.

of the first and richest thematic sources to tackle Brazilian underdevelopment and social contradictions. It was this specific historical context that also inspired Rocha's famous manifest, "An esthetic of hunger". In the three films, the displacement of the characters is closely related to the issue of hunger in the region. The Guns, for instance, portrays a starving group of people who are compelled to move to a nearby village, where soldiers guard provisions in a storehouse, because they are starving and need to fight for the food. The film overtly associates the violence of the conflict with the violence of hunger itself. Yet it is the latter two films that invest more emphatically on the characters' migration. In Barren Lives, a destitute family wanders in the arid landscape of the sertão in search of better living conditions. Based upon the homonymous novel by Graciliano Ramos, the film brings to light the image of the retirante², a local type of migrant who seeks to escape the catastrophic drought and famine that devastate a wide span of Northeastern Brazil and are aggravated by the economic meager and political disregard which characterizes the region. The retirante is the image of hunger itself, the bare life that stems from the desert landscape of the backlands and drifts towards a utopian future. Migrating, for them, is not an option but an imperative movement towards survival.

In the third film, Rocha's Black God, White Devil, the sertão is the mythical scenery for an allegorical and messianic march towards revolution. It depicts a childless couple – something that evokes the infertility of the land itself – in a teleological journey from the sertão to the sea, as if they were marching from underdevelopment to revolution, from hunger to freedom. In Rocha's film, the trajectory from the backlands to the coast, from the sertão to the sea, allegorizes a march towards revolution for Brazilian people and cinema itself. In other words, the journey to the sea encompasses a teleological movement from the underdevelopment of Brazil, symbolized by the sertão in the film, to the abundant waters of the sea as a promise of a new utopian future for the country and, by extension, for its cinematic production.

The highly allegorical final sequence of the film shows the leading couple finally reaching the coast. Seen from above the sea is totalized, filling the whole screen, in allegorical reference to redemption or a utopian future, while the musical soundtrack reiterates the force of the scene by saying that "the sertão will turn into the sea, and the sea will turn into the sertão" (O sertão vai virar mar, o mar virá (sic) sertão).³

² The term, thus, is situated; it is tied to a Brazilian geographic and socio-economic scenario. It was coined when the catastrophic droughts of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century ravaged the sertão, forcing the local people to flee to more privileged areas of the country. Describing a type of migrant, the word retirante derives from the verb 'retirar' and the noun 'retirada', which refers to the retreat of troops from a battle, thus, suggesting that famine has turned into a strong enemy against which the dwellers of the sertão could no longer fight. They must for necessity wander through the infertile landscapes of the sertão in the attempt to find better living conditions elsewhere. As a genuinely Brazilian historical construct, the retirante was largely represented in Brazilian literature, cinema, music, painting and other artistic manifestations.

³ This prophecy is already anticipated in Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões*, in which he substitutes the word sea with beach, claiming that "the beach will turn into a sertão and the sertão will turn into a beach" (p. 223).

Deeply embedded in the context of the Cinema Novo political agendas, these three films have given important historical meaning to the sertão in our film practice. In the 1960s, they represent the region as the heart of the country's social myopia and underdeveloped situation, but also as the origin, the historical past from which the strength to fight and resist oppositional forces would stem. In the historically placed and nationalistic discourse of the Cinema Novo, thus, the sertão is at once the place that roots and restores our identity and the place from where one needs to flee in order to survive and, by extension, create a new future to the nation. The movement was, then, from the sertão to the great city centers of the country, mainly Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

It is only in the late 1990s that the sertão will be readdressed in Brazilian cinema and it is meaningful that the movement is now inverted, taking characters from the city to the sertão, as in *Central Station* (*Central do Brasil*, 1998), *Arido Movie* (*Árido Movie*, 2005), *Suely in the Sky* (*O Céu de Suely*, 2006) and *Viajo Porque Preciso, Volto Porque te Amo* (*I Travel Because I Have to, I Come Back Because I Love You*, 2009), for instance. While these films seem to convey the return as a 'rediscovery' of the sertão, the context now is mostly of dispersion and restlessness. When the return of the film imaginary to the region coincides with the characters' journey back, the films often portray a generation that has been born in the 'exile', or has experienced life elsewhere, and thus have developed new forms of relationship with the sertão.

Hence, recent configurations of Brazilian cinema portray new imaginative relationships with the national space and its complex production of heterogeneity, producing nomadic characters whose migratory drive destabilizes the notions of home and identity in the name of another type of dwelling: inbetweenness. In the (im)mobility of the cinematic travel (both in the film and of the film), thus, political subjects are construed that resist/welcome nomadic impulses, reconfiguring strategies for living under a transnational order. These films suggest a tension between the nomadic, fluid idea of 'becoming', and the monadic, coagulated fixity of identity. The politics of displacement in these films help us imag(in)e forms of life beyond normal/tized configurations of identity and belonging.

One film that exemplifies the political construction of the return to the sertão focusing on the nomadic trajectory of the main character is Karim Ainouz's *Suely in the sky* (2006). The film tells the story of Hermila, a young girl who returns to her hometown, Iguatu, in the backlands of Ceará, after having eloped to São Paulo with her boyfriend, Mateus. Because life in São Paulo is not as successful as they expected, they decide to go back to Iguatu. Hermila travels alone with their 2-year old son, Mateusinho, as Mateus stays behind to finish some business and arrange the transportation of the products they intend to sell in the open fair in Iguatu. Yet Mateus never makes it to Iguatu, where Hermila no longer feels "at home". Feeling abandoned and displaced in the small town she decides to make money in order to leave Iguatu once again and try life in another big city, now on her own.

Thus, the idea of flux, displacement, crossing and mobility permeates the film and aligns it with the contemporary tendency in Brazilian cinema to explore the

journey and return to the sertão. In fact, Aïnouz's film shares the impulse of contemporary Latin American cinema to dislocate issues of identity and subjectivity in the porosity of frontiers, creating, along the flux of the journey, the two-way path of the border, which synthesizes the space of confrontation, thus intensifying the debate on the production of subjects that are engendered in the transnational network of contemporary cinema.

If we could pinpoint a conspicuous image in *Suely in the Sky*, it would be the title character's perambulation through the streets of Iguatu, in the countryside of the Northeastern state of Ceará in Brazil. Hermila returns to Iguatu, no longer believing in the age-old myth that promises a better life in Southeastern São Paulo, also distrusting the fiction of true love. She moves in order to continue her own stray. The return to Iguatu implies a reversal in the direction that goes from smaller cities to the metropolitan centers (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo), a fruitless attempt to close a cycle by going back to the origins.

However, in Hermila/Suely's case, the trajectory is that of a spiral, not a circle, for the return hurls her beyond that first destination: at the same time that it promotes a reunion, it creates the conflict of inadequacy, displaying her transformation in the experiences of the 'other' and her disapproval of the settings around her, which she no longer acknowledges as hers. She has to keep moving, to continue the flux as a means to revalorize and reconfigure herself, searching for meaning as a contemporary subjectivity, schizo and elusive in the nomadic experience, spread over the continuous movement that resists mere survival.

Hence, the film is marked by the notion of leaving as resistance, as that which refuses to conform, deterritorializing Suely in the vast, mutating horizon of the sky suggested by the title, and which can also be read, in its metaphorical potency, as the ground that provides mobility as confrontation, weaving a web of lives and images that circulate erratically. In Hermila/Suely's empowered obstinacy, she 'gives up' a romantic relationship, renounces maternity and capitalizes on her own body for the relentless desire to leave that place, to leave behind the arid life in Iguatu. The return to the sertão is again marked by the need to leave it behind.

It is no longer the same leaving the sertão as a symbolic stance, but it is now a refusal of the infertile immobility that is strange to the liquid modernity – dynamic and fluid in the journey. The struggle for life here is no longer allegorical but places in the individual the responsibility for her own freedom and utopia. The sertão, here, no longer evokes the complicity of a collective perspective, historically allegorical, but it is fragmented in the individual trajectory. Likewise, granted the regional mark, the accent, the local song Hermila dances to with her friend Georgina, the main character slips easy local affiliations, showing detachment from the place and its – and hers – peripheral existence.

Situated in the sertão of Ceará, the small town of Iguatu is shown as a halfway house, an in-betweenness made up of streets and roads which seem to anticipate the possibility of leaving, and where truck drivers stop to rest before continuing their own journey. Contrary to a vision of the city that denies experiencing the streets in order to observe it from above like a "Sun-Eye, looking down as a god" (de Certeau 92), the

way we apprehend Iguatu is at ground level, in Suely's pedestrian practice, whose experience of space seems to match her own subjectivity, errant and confused, taking place along the walk, a totally different way to survey and construct city space.

It can be said that the sertão here refuses to totalize into the divine gaze that is often expressed in the panopticon of the favelas or presidiums, compressing these spaces in a homogenizing plane before shattering them into labyrinths of 'monsters' against a hoard of Theseus in uniforms (as in *Carandiru*, 2002 and *Tropa de Elite*, 2007, for instance). Conversely, the sertão is shown from a ground perspective, in the experience of walking, traveling, in the characters' transit itself, roaming through the open spaces like in films such as *Baile Perfumado*, *Árido Movie*, *Cinema*, *Aspirinas e Urubus* and *O Caminho das Nuvens*.

Anouïz's film does not explore a totalizing, distanced and depersonified perception of Iguatu, but it offers a gaze that invites affectivity. Like a drifting body, wagging, without clear destination, Hermila wanders through the streets of Iguatu in the confusion of the inadequacy of her own life. In this sense, there is a specific moment where Hermila walks absentmindedly at night and is approached by João, an old boyfriend who still wants to be romantically involved with her. When asked where she is going, Hermila says she is heading home and accepts the ride the man offers her. Then, they set off in the opposite direction she was heading. At this point, the spectator is disoriented: where exactly was she going? Where is home after all? One is led to conclude that she herself does not know where she is going to. Thus floating, exiled, elusive, Hermila seems 'sea-sick' by the movements of the journey against the static Iguatu. She no longer belongs to the city and refuses to settle down in the condition of a mere survivor, suffocated by the routine of washing cars at the petrol station, selling raffle tickets, getting high and going out to dance with Georgina.

Iguatu offers no other experience and this sickening enclosure is far from the ever-changing promise of flux, departure, being-whatever. The anxiety projected in her continuous movement, the implied nomadism, constructs Hermila's deterritorialized subjectivity, like the schizo described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their *A thousand plateaus*. Always in the limits of the road, in the threshold of the asphalt that seems to drive her beyond the frontiers of the local, Hermila's plight is against space, in its peripheral, inert aspect. Leaving becomes her own small revolution, contesting the infertile life in Iguatu; but there is still a negotiation to be made, a strategy that needs to be activated: her self-valorization is reinvented through her body. She reinvents herself, in her trajectory, by raffling her body, which mingles the spheres of subjectivity and economy, but without yielding to the condition of hostage to the latter sphere.

Suely challenges the determinism that places the body of the nordestino as 'resistant' to the naturalist order. Indeed, her body 'resists' in the sphere of capital, but it is (re)politicized in her self-valorizing, drawing what Suely Ronilk calls a "map of possibles" which reinvent and redistribute themselves in the flux, dismantling existing realities and creating others that will also eventually disappear in the flux (89). In Hermila's individual trajectory, there is no space for the conformity with old

connections with the market of pleasure that imposed on the female body redeeming victimizations, as in Fellini's *Cabiria*.

It is because of her subjective territory, which boosts from her deterritorialization, that Hermila decides on a direction in her life, going on a journey that refuses stagnation. She opts for Porto Alegre, the "farthest place from Iguatu", in her own words, as if trying to establish a distance that is not only geographical, but also implies a loss of memory of the life she could not find there. It is noteworthy that her new itinerary sends her to the Southern region of Brazil, bypassing São Paulo, the traditional center of migration for the Northeastern people. Differently from the socializing stigma of the *retirante*, still at work in contemporary Brazilian cinema, *Suely in the Sky* places the issue in a subjective orb: it is up to Hermila to leave. Having understood that the peripheral existence in São Paulo dissolves all utopia, she figures out that staying also suffocates the experience of life, and reduces her to a mere survivor.

Contrary to the *retirante*, a milestone in the history of representations of the Northeastern region in Brazil, Hermila's *sertão*, empty, static, stagnated in provincialism, enclosed in impotence, no longer inspires adhesion to migration as a promise of transformation rooted in the metropolis, but to rhizomatic, nomadic, movement. She wants change and freedom, both manifest in the mobility of the road, the asphalt ground, turned into a metaphor for the sky in the film's title. In Hermila/Suely's subjective wandering, the sky implies a 'minor' utopia, personal, feminine; the destiny is no longer the sea; it is, now, the very ground where movement takes place, it is confrontation and the desire to leave. Far from the older revolutionary dream, tinted with the Marxist strategy of the aesthetics of hunger, and the allegorical sea as a collective, totalizing utopia, *Suely in the Sky* portrays poverty as an isolated subjective condition. Utopia, here, is embedded in the notion of becoming, the constant becoming that the journey offers.

Hermila is severed into a double of herself, metamorphosing into Suely, when she decides to raffle herself off to finance her new trip. Her hairstyle anticipates this double: half blonde, half natural brunette, a sign of the fashion learned in São Paulo, and, above all, a mark of the subjective bifurcation of the journey. The journey transforms, divides the subject in the spaces of identity into here and there, I and other, potentializing the constant becoming of the characters. The journey brings with it the potency to transform identities, expounding changing subjects in the flux of the images that hit the spectator as a deterritorializing potency of affiliation.

The images that open the film, Hermila's memory of life in São Paulo, show her romance with Mateus, a future promise lost in the grainy Super-8 past. The cut that interrupts these memories denies a romantic tone, introducing a white screen that could suggest both the arid *sertão* and Hermila/Suely's infertile passage through Iguatu. The next shot, a full close-up of Hermila's profile, an affection-image, brings spectators close to the character's subjectivity. Actually, throughout the film, a series of close-up shots will eventually suffocate Hermila in Iguatu's arid space.

By the end of the film, the initial close-up is inverted, and we are shown the other side of Hermila's profile on the bus that will take her to Porto Alegre. Suely,

Anouïz's anti-Cabiria, does not look back. She follows another trajectory, we do not know if a happier or a less fortunate one, but one that moves her forwards nonetheless, just like this 'minor' cinema, which, like Suely's small utopia, grows out of singularities, subtleties and affections. Going over borders, frontiers that mark identities, this cinema, like Hermila, slowly but steadily finds its strength, leaving child, grandmother and aunt behind, to set out towards new journeys, to trace new imaginaries lines, in the asphalt road that is Suely's becomings.

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Resumo

O artigo busca analisar como o filme brasileiro *O Céu de Suely* (Karim Aïnouz, 2006) lida com a questão da migração e da (i)mobilidade no contexto contemporâneo de dispersão e inquietação que procura enfatizar a subjetividade da personagem central ao invés de um impulso migratório coletivo. O filme também representa um retorno ao sertão, que, nos anos 60, alegorizava o nacional no cinema brasileiro e foi nostalgicamente reavaliado nos anos 90. Ao contrário desses momentos anteriores, no entanto, o filme abre para uma perspectiva transnacional, que sugere uma tensão entre a noção nomádica e fluida do devir e a monádica e coagulada fixidez da noção de identidade. A política de deslocamento desse filme ajuda a imaginar formas de vida que ultrapassam configurações normat/lizadas de identidade e pertencimento.

Palavras-chave

Migração. (I)mobilidade. Sertão. Cinema brasileiro contemporâneo
