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WALTER HUGO KHOURI'S VOYEURISTIC GAMES WITH HIS AUDIENCE IN *NOITE VAZIA*

This paper offers an analysis of Walter Hugo Khouri's most acclaimed but also most controversial film, *Noite Vazia* (*Men and Women*, 1964). The author of the paper discusses *Noite Vazia* in the context of the 1950/60s economic boom in Brazil. Against this background, Khouri's film is examined as an original and far-sighted challenge to the state-ideology which boasted 'fifty years progress in five' and regarded cinema as a means of promoting social progress. A close analysis of *Noite Vazia* reveals Khouri's rejection of such a restrictive cinematographic agenda. The film features an intricate game of looks and glances in which both Khouri's characters, the silent city and also his audience become engaged. Outreaching the bounds of the politically-approved line of thinking, Khouri stages a daring comment on the role of the cinema, and on the universality and persistence of such traits of human nature as voyeurism and lustiness.

Key words: Walter Hugo Khouri, *Noite Vazia*, *Men and Women*, Brazilian cinema, voyeurism

Writing in 1963 Glauber Rocha, one of the founding fathers of Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, accused his compatriot film-director, Walter Hugo Khouri, of escapism, moral ambiguity, deliberate obscurity, and of avoiding confrontation with contemporary social tensions in his films. He charged Khouri with making 'escapist, autobiographical films, (...) films outdated and academic', and concluded provocatively: "If Khouri insists on remaining in the dangerous position of 'the alienated conscious of his alienation', he will be converting himself into an intellectual servile to any state based on lie and injustice" (Rocha 2003: 120). Such a scathing critique of Khouri, at the time already an awarded Brazilian film director, should be read in the context of the over-restrictive and ideologically-informed programme of the early *Cinema Novo*, of which Rocha became one of the major figures and propagandists. Rocha promoted a radical break with previous film traditions. In his own diagnosis of the times, after a period of cinematic crisis in the fifties, dominated by the production of what he regarded as intellectually unstimulating and kitschy popular comedies, *chanchadas*, in the sixties, Brazilian cinematography was entering into a new, profoundly revolutionary period. Cinema Novo was created in the 1950s professedly as a reaction to the Hollywood-modeled mass productions of the Vera Cruz studios and as a search for national cinema. Its main representatives were Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Glauber Rocha, Ruy Guerra, Carlos Diegues, and Joaquim Pedro de Andrade. Deeply rooted in Brazilian culture, Cinema Novo

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films, although boasting international reputation, remain outside the mainstream of the world cinema. Cinema Novo sprang up in the landscape of the economic boom in Brazil, which gave rise to highly progressivist attitudes. A wave of optimism and faith in the future remained undisturbed even by the news of the suicide of President Getúlio Vargas while in office in 1954. His successor, Juscelino Kubitschek, had no difficulty in safeguarding the national enthusiasm. Kubitschek's predominantly economy-driven ideology of social progress encouraged in Brazil dreams of a just and more egalitarian state. What was particularly characteristic of this "Brazilian dream", as Jaison Castro Silva notes, was that it was articulated in a specifically architectural language (Castro Silva 2009). Kubitschek's opening of the futuristic capital city, Brasília, served as a symbol of his bold promises of "fifty years progress in five" (Dennison, Shaw 2004: 81), and was greeted with general confidence. The ideology of development was spread by the Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros (the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies) created by Kubitschek in 1955, which influenced the early phase of Cinema Novo (Randal Johnson 1984: 98). ISEB's propaganda was based on a sharp division between what was defined as the true/genuine Nation on the one hand and the false/sham anti-Nation, on the other. In many ways the true Nation was simply the one that supported Kubitschek's capitalist programme in which a crucial role was reserved for the enlightened and economically-privileged bourgeoisie. Their role was to spread the new ideology among the lower classes chiefly through the medium of cinema. The task for the new national cinema was to oppose the foreign-influenced *chanchadas* and spread the message of the developmentalism to the rural areas. The depictions of rural underdevelopment in early Cinema Novo stem from this agenda. There is no doubt that for a politically-minded Rocha, Khouri's refusal to embrace the cinematic programme of Cinema Novo equalled ideological treason. This was no time for doubting. As Randal Johnson points out:

With the possible exception of Guerra's nouvelle vague-inspired *Os Cafajestes* (The Hustlers, 1962), which denounces the reification of human beings in capitalist society, not a single film of the 1960–1964 period critically examines the contradictions of the bourgeoisie or the supposedly progressive sector that was to lead the country along the road to development. Such a critique would appear only after 1964 in such films as Paulo Cesar Saraceni's *O Desafio* (The Challenge, 1965) and Rocha's *Terra em Transe*, when the failure of the 'populist pact' was painfully apparent. (Johnson 1984: 100)

Released in 1964 Khouri's *Noite Vazia* marks the year of the military coup in Brazil which brought a sudden end to the early enthusiasm and optimism of the "Brazilian dream" (it served as a literal bucket of cold water for the nationalists). In a restrictive military rule which followed, marked by the curbing of civil rights, the disillusioned directors faced a re-examination of their original enthusiasm. Thus, *Noite Vazia* constitutes a point of transition between two periods, and a preamble to a significantly more pessimistic phase within Brazilian cinema. Born in São Paulo, regarded as the most cosmopolitan city in Brazil, Khouri made cosmopolitanism the brand of his cinema, something that earned him many a critique in his homeland. Khouri contested the politicised agenda of Rocha's group located predominantly in Rio de Janeiro and known as 'the nationalists', within a São Paulo-based

cinematographic group, somewhat confusingly described as 'the universalists'. The latter were known for their disregard of the rural realities on the screen as well as their focus on the existential and moral dilemmas of the (upper) middle-classes.

B-listed due to its bold sexual theme, *Noite Vazia* was during many years seen as a lower-category film, professedly 'obsessed' with sex. In many ways *Noite Vazia*, Khouri's masterpiece, remains still largely unknown to the general public. Influenced by contemporary French *Nouvelle Vague*, Italian directors, existentialist literature, and philosophy, Khouri's highly personal *oeuvre* was much more in tune with European trends than with Brazilian cinematic tendencies. It was from such a European standpoint that he was able to gain distance from and challenge the predominating political and social attitudes in his homeland. While *Noite Vazia* does present a highly provocative, sensual, and sex-infused challenge to the dry national ideology, it also aims at a much more universal (and appropriately pessimistic given its existentialist dimension) message about human condition. Khouri himself recognises the sexual interest as the starting point for his film: "I wanted to make a film about São Paulo, with a lot of eroticism, that would talk about sexual impulse and how it affects human behaviour" (Rolim, Trindade 2010). Led or perhaps to a certain degree misled by the author's confession, both the British (*Men and Women*) and the French (*Le Jeu de la Nuit*) translators of the title emphasised the sexual theme, while the original poetic and oxymoronic title is perhaps expressive of deeper existential meanings. *Noite Vazia* literally translates as 'empty/barren night' and stresses man's existential isolation which in Khouri's pessimistic outlook underwrites all larger man-made plans. Despite the unjustly negative interpretation given to the universalist agenda by his colleague-in-office, Rocha, Khouri's film-making features an arguably more realistic answer to the Brazilian social realities.

In a direct challenge to the vision of enlightened *bourgeoisie* propagated by the nationalists, *Noite Vazia* features two well-to-do men, who are infinitely bored with their lives in São Paulo and who spend their time on a continuous night-crawl seeking new sexual adventures. In a thick atmosphere of tedium and of forced and unnatural dialogues (for which the film has been much criticised) Luís Augusto and Nelson set out on yet another night adventure. When, after a number of setbacks, they find two prostitutes, Mara and Regina, all the signs are that the much-sought-after erotic *jeu de la nuit* is about to begin. In what follows, however, the erotic game gradually collapses in a constant premonition of failure. Even before the night begins, there are dark omens of the unfulfilled expectations to come, expressed by the infinitely *blazé* friends:

NELSON: What's the plan?

LUIS AUGUSTO: No plan at all. Whenever we don't plan, best things happen.

NELSON: It's always the same. I'm tired. (...)

LUIS AUGUSTO: I'm looking for something different today.

NELSON: You know it's impossible. Everything ends up looking the same¹.

It is perhaps this recurrent collapse of expectations and the emphatic indecision of the film that proved most unacceptable to the critics. It has been described as "Sombre and

¹ All translations of the dialogues are given by the author and based on the soundtrack.

almost Teutonically pedestrian attempt to pin down a sexual something-or-other. Though striving to be profound and penetrating and meaningful (and Antonioni-esque?), the film succeeds only in being impossibly dull and pointless, full of stares and pauses, and backed by a dark but indecisive note of eroticism” (Monthly Film Bulletin 1966: 75). The influence of the cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni illustrating the existentialist vision of existence as absurd and artificial is indeed undeniable. The film is permeated by a strained self-consciousness giving it a clumsy theatrical quality in which certain scenes become rehearsed over and over again. Luís Augusto’s obsessive search for something different sets such a recurrent theme which gradually assumes dark sexual undertones as he rejects one of his catches admittedly because she is ‘too normal’. Although he is professedly looking for ‘the new’, he begins his erotic adventure by assigning a number to Regina and Mara, allocating them within the row of his recurrent nightly games:

LUIS AUGUSTO: 367, 368.

REGINA: What’s that?

LUIS AUGUSTO: Nothing... 367 and 368.

In Regina’s accurate diagnosis, Luís is a profoundly boring character who seems to find his only pleasure in his erotic fantasies (and perhaps not even that). As the film progresses, the viewer becomes more consciously aware of the fact that Luís is not taking much pleasure from the encounter with the prostitutes:

MARA: You didn’t like it, did you?

LUIS AUGUSTO: Don’t know. I never know whether I like something or not. I’ve got to think about it later. (...)

MARA: So, you don’t really enjoy anything?

LUIS AUGUSTO: No, I guess I don’t. And if I do, it’s not for long.

Gradually, Luís becomes more and more dissatisfied with the situation. While commenting on Nelson’s dislike of women/sexual relations with women, Luís is suddenly asked whether he likes women himself:

REGINA: Do you like them?

LUIS AUGUSTO: What do you think?

REGINA: I really don’t know.

LUIS AUGUSTO: What do you mean by that?

REGINA AND MARA: (laugh)

There are rather confusing signs throughout the film that either both men are homosexuals or that they are impotent and, either way, incapable of drawing full satisfaction from the night. Unable to draw any pleasure from the meeting, Luís’s only obsession is to stay in absolute control of the situation by objectifying the participants of the encounter. He does that by converting the night into a pseudo-theatrical *séance* and by assigning roles to all participants. Only now it becomes clear that while ostensibly asking for the new and the unplanned, Luís has been actually all along staging and directing his play (film?) in which he is carefully picking his actors and making sure that they follow the script. The awkward

'rehearsal' atmosphere of *Noite Vazia*, the strained, unnatural dialogues, the clumsy game of stares, and glances are the result of Luís's struggle to control the plot. He hires two hotel rooms and theatrically ushers the rest in by switching on the lights. He commences bombastically – but is immediately challenged by Regina:

LUIS AUGUSTO: Right, shall we begin? (He approaches Regina) Give me a smile!

REGINA: Here. (Does not smile)

LUIS AUGUSTO: Smile!

REGINA: I don't like to do anything when ordered.

LUIS AUGUSTO: (more complacently) Come on... (Regina smiles)

Regina's repeated questioning of Luís's 'script' unsettles the gender distinctions in the film. Through her active behaviour she positions herself alongside Luís (she frustrates his plans of picking his partner by choosing effeminate Nelson herself before Luís has had his chance to decide). Next to Regina's masculine behaviour, the passive, puerile Nelson, who, despite his weak protestations, always ends up acting his part in Luís's 'film', plays an emphatically feminine role. He is similar in many ways to the notoriously child-like Mara (who both acts as a child, and day-dreams about herself as a little girl).

Financial control over their partners is another common feature which sets Regina alongside Luís. Luís's obsession with money (the true and only source of his power, as Regina rightly notices) is challenged, and counter-balanced, by Regina's handling of the money. She interrupts Luís's game by openly asking to be paid before the night begins. Once paid, she puts all the money in her bag, refusing to give Mara any share in handling the payment. Mara and Nelson (who does not pay the prostitutes at any point in the film), the two child-like, dependent characters in the film are not granted any power drawn from the money possession. Castro Silva notes that Luís Augusto, a money-driven personality, is a clear example of the economically-driven society of the fifties:

His [Luís Augusto's] space is that of organisation, planning, and reason. His character is yet in harmony with the period of hope of his times. There are no signs of a crisis for him yet. His relation to space is that of someone with absolute faith in progress, with all the implications of conquest connected with it (Castro Silva 2009).

However, it is difficult to agree with Castro Silva on the point that there are no signs of the coming crisis for Luís Augusto. In the landscape of the barren night, Luís's confidence and controlling power are systematically deconstructed. Luís does not manage to stage his play. His inner insecurity and anxiety are exposed at his alarm after hearing Regina's nightmare in which she finds herself escaping from an unknown enemy. Behind the mask of devil-may-care confidence, Luís is living out a nightmare of a barren night – of eternal frustration and unfulfillment.

The most striking and provocative theme is *Noite Vazia's* all-pervading voyeurism which constitutes the actual subject matter of the film and also serves as an aesthetic tool. Employing cinema language (including the experimental use of the camera) Khouri palpably illustrates the psychological idea of voyeuristic inclinations imbedded in human

nature. The objectifying, disintegrating look of the two men while they scan their potential ‘catches’ with their eyes in a pub, is masterly rendered by the slow camera movement. The camera slides from one part of the body to the other, dissecting and avoiding complete views. Not only are both male and female characters implicated in this lustful game of looks. The city, aptly named by Castro Silva ‘a cidade do infinito olhar’ (the city of infinite looks) (Castro Silva 2008), is an omnipresent and active voyeur too. It observes through its lively play of lights (which pointedly makes it more ‘alive’ at night than during the day – in the daytime Khouri chooses shots set against the clarity of the sky – thereby rendering the city’s buildings nearly black by comparison). Through the windows of the rented hotel room, the city watches and assists in the most intimate scenes. The deconstructive theme is introduced in the first scenes of the film presenting disintegrating parts of old statues, parts of sculptured human faces and bodies, and the ominous disjointed music. As the film progresses, the theme becomes all-encompassing and nearly-suffocating. Mara voices a feminist critique of the male voyeurism when she accusingly addresses Nelson, who had been watching her lustfully:

MARA: Why do you think men like looking at such things?

NELSON: I’m not sure.

MARA: Oh... And you liked it too, didn’t you?

Mara voices her critique after she has been forced to participate in an act of lesbian love with Regina. After agreeing to take part while the men are watching, she then suddenly changes her mind, scared by Regina’s aggressive look and behaviour. And yet, ironically, Mara, despite her child-like characteristics, is no less implicit in the sexual voyeurism than the others. In one of the following scenes we see her paging through a *Kama Sutra* album with stone depictions of the Indian art of love before she assumes an active role in her intercourse with Nelson. Despite her earlier accusations of male voyeurism, she proves to be as implied in the city’s all-pervading lustful ‘infinito olhar’ as the rest of the characters.

Mara’s preoccupation with her looks introduces a disturbing self-reflexive perception into the film. While Mara is taking a bath and conversing with Nelson (we only see his reflection in the mirror), she tells him how beautiful she looks in the water. In an act of self-voyeurism, Mara puts herself in Nelson’s position and imagines her naked body through male eyes. Regina is not spared self-voyeuristic glances either. When in bed with Luís, she is suddenly terrified when she realises the presence of a mirror in the ceiling. She screams and wants to leave, but Luís forces her to look up and, in a sudden gesture, uncovers the sheets – unveiling her naked body. In what follows, we see Regina lying naked in erotic positions, contemplating herself in the mirror. Luís comments upon waking up:

LUIS AUGUSTO: (smiling) You’re enjoying it, aren’t you?

REGINA: (Continues looking up) M-hm.

LUIS AUGUSTO: Before, you didn’t even want to look!

Paradoxically, what seemed to lead to a symbolic act of self-reflection or even self-revelation collapses in the all-pervading erotic game. The apparently unveiling and revealing gesture results in yet another voyeuristic perception. The possible ‘self-revelation’

is transformed into 'self-voyeurism' since Regina is taking erotic pleasure in perusing her naked body.

Khouri's audience is not spared from the film's omnipresent voyeurism. In the film we see the group watching a pornographic film, while their reflections in the ceiling mirror loom above them. In a somewhat disconcerting shoot, the camera drives in front of the characters, and focuses on the projector's light. By means of thus reversing the roles, the audience now find themselves being watched, while the blinding light and the faces of Luís, Regina, Mara, and Nelson confront them – staring. In what follows, the now 'dead' lightless eye of the projector is shown repeatedly in a 'superclose', silently 'watching' both the characters in the film *and* the audience. This unexpected reversal of roles is perhaps the most emphatic statement of the film's distancing itself from the B-list/porno movies. It also constitutes a comment on the cinematographic art itself in the 1950/60 Brazil. Significantly, the role of the cinema in the 1950s had been rapidly augmenting, until it reached its climax under Kubitschek's presidency, when it became – next to football – the main form of popular entertainment. Although Khouri reverses his camera pointing at his audience and apparently revealing the 'emptiness' of their entertainment, yet he seems to have little hopes of staging a self-revelatory act. Instead, he plays with his audience's own voyeuristic attitudes, while making a more universal statement about human lustiness and voyeuristic appetites.

In *Noite Vazia* Khouri presents a deliberately estranged and distanced view of his native city and through it of Brazilian society at the time of the economic boom. Drawing from European influences, his disturbingly self-conscious and self-reflexive film questions the Brazilian cinematographic trends and the ideologically informed program of the early Cinema Novo. Through re-defining cinema as yet another eye in the all-pervading sexual voyeuristic game in *Noite Vazia*, Khouri implicitly deconstructs the ideologically-defined role of the cinema in 1950s and 1960s. His realistic take on lusty, voyeuristic human nature also highlights his audience's own voyeuristic cinematographic experience.

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VOYEURYSTYCZNE GRY Z WIDZEM W FILMIE WALTERA HUGONA KHOURIEGO *NOITE VAZIA*

Artykuł omawia najbardziej znany, a zarazem najbardziej kontrowersyjny film Waltera Hugo Khouriego, *Noite Vazia* (1964). Autorka analizuje film na tle ożywienia gospodarczego lat 50. i 60. XX wieku w Brazylii. W tym kontekście historycznym film *Noite Vazia* jest rozpatrywany jako wyraz krytyki dominującej ideologii państwowej, która głosiła hasło: „pięćdziesiąt lat rozwoju w pięć”, a kino traktowała jako narzędzie promowania postępu społecznego. Film ukazuje zawiłą grę voyeurystyczną, w którą wciągnięci zostają zarówno bohaterowie obrazu Khouriego, jak i milczące miasto, a także sami widzowie. Przekraczając granice politycznej poprawności swoich czasów, Khouri oferuje kontrowersyjną interpretację roli kina oraz eksponuje uniwersalne i niezmiennie aspekty natury ludzkiej, za które uznaje skłonność do podglądania oraz lubieżność.

Słowa kluczowe: Walter Hugo Khouri, *Noite Vazia*, *Men and Women*, kino brazylijskie, voyeuryzm