

PERIPHERAL REALISMS

THE REGIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMIC OF CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

This article concerns the redefinition of realism from the perspective of its impact on contemporary Brazilian cinematography, commenting on and analyzing the stylistic strategies of filmmakers who are situated at the margins of the traditional centers of film production in Brazil. My focus will be on films from the Northeast, and even more specifically those produced in the state of Pernambuco from the late 2000s. For instance, a brief overview of the most recent production by directors such as Gabriel Mascaro, Marcelo Pedroso, Marcelo Lordello and especially Kleber Mendonça Filho shows that this “realist turn” breaks with a naturalist and caricatured tradition of filmmaking in Pernambuco (as it is the case of the previous regional cycle in the state). A more detailed analysis of Mendonça Filho’s *Neighbouring Sounds* (2012) will be helpful to demonstrate under what conditions this rupture occurred and how it is related with the emergence of a peripheral aesthetics of realism.

Since the 1990s, following a tendency towards self-referentiality and metalinguistic artificiality in the postmodern cinema of the 1980s, realism has witnessed a re-emergence. Contemporary cinema has been marked by a return to a form of Bazinian aesthetics that is structured on the integrity of time and space. However, despite common features, the cinematic realism of the late 20th and early 21st century cannot be entirely reduced to a filmic neoclassicism, or even to a revival of Bazinian notions of realism, or Siegfried Kracauer’s ideas about cinema as the amortization of physical reality. Some scholars have referred to the diverse manifestations of contemporary realism as a “cinema of flux,”¹ others have identified an “expressive minimalism”² that operates under the generic rubric of “world cinema,” or transnational world cinema.³

My aim in this article is to trace the reaffirmation of realism from the perspective of its impact on contemporary Brazilian cinematography, commenting on and analyzing the stylistic strategies of filmmakers who are situated at the margins of the traditional centres of film production in Brazil. My focus will be on films from the Northeast, and more specifically those produced in the state of Pernambuco since the late 2000s. Through specific case studies I argue that the renewal of the national film culture in Brazil has been brought on precisely by regional interventions, and to illustrate how contemporary cinema is submitted to a transnational logic. This suggests an interesting paradox: transnational influences promote a new regional order, and end up displacing established hierarchies

between margins and the centre. This does not imply that the notion of national cinema has become obsolete, but it demonstrates the need for analysis that takes into account the changes in cinema's geopolitical imaginary, both in the aesthetic sense, and in the conditions of production.

One significant characteristic of the cinematic realism that emerged at the end of the 1990s is its confrontation with mainstream narrative. In opposition to action-driven films centred on upwardly mobile social classes, this strain of contemporary cinema is often concerned with the banal, with the small lives of small people, with the everyday in the social peripheries, even when sometimes using and referring to techniques and resources from hegemonic filmmaking practices. This preoccupation with the representation of peripheral subjects and allusions to regionalism and localism has become a marker of a contemporary global aesthetics (as said above, we could call it "world culture," "transnational cinema") which needs to be distinguished from an idealistic recuperation of Third Cinema practices.

The strain in world cinema one could call "peripheral cinema" came to prominence with films such as Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (Iran, 1994), Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* (Iran, 1995), Walter Salles's *Central Station* (Brazil, 1998), Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* (Mexico, 1999), Fabián Bielinky's *Nine Queens* (Argentina, 1999) and Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (Hong Kong, 2000). As this list indicates, peripheral cinema is not defined by aesthetic or thematic homogeneity. But in some ways, an adherence to realism unites these films. And most of them undoubtedly go back to the themes and interests of the original Third Cinema (the subaltern, the excluded, the "wretched of the earth"), addressing them, of course, differently, attenuating and subduing the politically engaged tone, and updating the "third-Worldism" that marked many films from 1960s and 1970s. Refraining from explicit political campaigning, contemporary world cinema explores more subtle and hidden aspects of the social fabric, and is concerned with the politics of everyday life, articulating and affirming an aesthetics of the banal. There is thus a shift from the type of allegory that characterized Third Cinema towards more disinterested and disaffected modes of realism.

What particularly interests me in approaching contemporary cinematic forms of realism is the way in which the Barthesian notion of an "effect of reality" can be triggered. In conventional narrative cinema, elements such as wide shots of cities or landscapes, tracking shots of interior sets, or scenes without dialogues, often correspond with long detailed descriptions and superfluous minutiae that Barthes identified as a characteristic of realistic literature. These apparently meaningless inclusions constitute an attempt to achieve a pure representation of the real, namely the effect of reality:

in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity.⁴

The "other realisms" of contemporary world cinema (expressive minimalism, cinema of flux, transnational cinema, peripheral cinema), however, mark an extension, an intensification of the reality effect, up to a point where it occupies the centre of the film, it almost becomes the film itself.

In some cases amounting to a "cinema of tedium," contemporary world cinema frequently relies on the static image, on stupor; on other occasions, it inscribes multiple fragmented actions,

profoundly banal and minimal. This is a cinema of gesture, then: small gestures that advertise some kind of symbolism, foreshadow hidden meaning, but rarely promote straightforward explanation.

In order to assess the films produced in Pernambuco and more specifically in the city of Recife (capital of the state), it is important to stress the continuity between the context of contemporary world cinema that I have mapped above and the local specificities of film production in the Brazilian Northeast. The second half of the 1990s witnessed a renaissance in the audiovisual arts in Brazil. The film industry boomed, while the press and academic discourse identified a *Retomada* (*Retaking*), a very heterogeneous movement that nonetheless had many critics drawing parallels with Cinéma Novo of the 1950s and 1960s. One of the principal characteristics of this phase in Brazilian Cinema was the emergence of multiple peripheral perspectives, not only in terms of content and narrative (which may be considered an extension of the Cinéma Novo project), but also with respect to a proliferation of decentralized modes of production. Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo did not cease to be the chief axis of production and distribution for the industry, but other regions and, more fundamentally, other Brazilian cities (Recife, Fortaleza and Belo Horizonte) have come to be more present in this context. It is also significant that the roles that these peripheral regions have played in Brazilian culture since the late 1990s is much more decisive and prominent than previously, not only in film, but also in popular music (as can be attested by the popularity of musical idioms such as *axé* from Salvador or *manguebeat* from Recife) and in other arts.

It is important to note that this regional renaissance is not unprecedented in Brazil's cultural history during the 20th century. For instance, the state of Pernambuco had been an important centre for film production in the 1920s and early 1930s. The *Ciclo do Recife* (Recife Cycle) movement, resulting in thirteen feature films and some documentaries, or *filmes naturais* (natural films), was one of the most relevant of the regional cycles of silent film in Brazil, represented by filmmakers such as Edson Chagas, Gentil Roiz, Jota Soares and films like *Retribuição* (1923-1924), *Jurando Vingar* (1925), *Aitaré da Praia* (1925) and *A filha do advogado* (1926) being the most prominent of them. A second major phase in Pernambuco's film history was the Super 8 movement in the 1970s, with Firmo Neto, Geneton Moraes Neto and Jomard Muniz de Britto as leading figures producing mostly experimental and alternative films.⁵ By the 1980s, a new generation of film artists came to the fore with video documentaries and short films: Paulo Caldas, Lírio Ferreira, Cláudio Assis, among others. However, it was only in the second half of the 1990s that film production in Pernambuco became properly consolidated, following the mainstream success of *O Baile perfumado* (*Perfumed Ball*, 1996), by Paulo Caldas and Lírio Ferreira, one of the first feature films to be produced in the state after a long hiatus since the *Ciclo do Recife* and the experimental Super-8 Boom of the 1970s.

The emergence of a peripheral filmography in the 1990s was prominently associated with a broader sense of regionalist affirmation, arguably even more evident at the time in popular music, particularly the phenomenon known as *manguebeat* (or *manguebit*). The latter originally referred to a pop music movement (later extended in a more or less fashionable manner to the visual arts, cinema, and a *Zeitgeist*) that emerged in Recife in the early 1990s. One of the basic principles of this aesthetic was eclecticism, combining borrowings from global culture with clearly "vernacular" aspects.⁶ In fashion, for instance, the recurrence of adornments, patterns, and prints from manifestations of popular culture and folklore was noteworthy. A regionalist emphasis is one of the main features of the generation of filmmakers that began their careers in the 1980s and 1990s; examples include *Baile Perfumado* and *Amarelo Manga* (*Mango Yellow*, 2003) by

Cláudio Assis; *Árido* movie (2005) by Lírío Ferreira and *Cinema, aspirina e urubus* (*Cinema, aspirins and vultures*, Marcelo Gomes, 2006). These film's avowed regionalism was frequently combined with a tendency towards naturalism that emphasized the grotesque, especially in the films by Cláudio Assis and Lírío Ferreira. Without ceasing to be realistic, the mainstream cinema of Pernambuco sought to assert a kind of filmic "accent"⁷ through caricature, difference, and excess of local character.

It is precisely in reaction to folkloric localism, grotesque and caricatured Northeastern excesses, the praise of the "hysterical," the popular vein and vernacular realism that the next generation of Pernambucan filmmakers counterpoises a new sensibility of the banal.⁸ Although still committed to regionalist themes and characteristics, more recent films by young filmmakers from Pernambuco break with the excessive folklorism of their older colleagues, straying from the hinterland, abandoning the direct connections with manguêbeat and avoiding the road movie (all of these elements abounded in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s), privileging documentaries and markedly urban realistic fictions.

Most of the new generation of filmmakers, which comprises directors such as Marcelo Pedroso, Gabriel Mascaro, Daniel Bandeira, Tião, Marcelo Lordello and Leonardo Lacca, are in their late twenties and early thirties. Many of them have had a university education, almost all of them graduated from the Communications and Media Departments of the Federal University of Pernambuco. One of the latter is Marcelo Lordello, whose directing career began with the short *Garotas de ponto de venda* (*Selling Point Girls*, 2007), a documentary set in the world of sales promoters in supermarkets in Recife. Tactfully expressing its critique of the perverse (but also absurd) contours of transnational capitalism, the film manages to be simultaneously ironic and delicate, respectful and irreverent:

*Lordello faces a challenge: to show an individual character that seems effaced by the brand for which they work. Distracted looks, moving feet indicating impatience, the moment when the head flies between a client and another – the filmmaker knew precisely how to convey a sense that behind the company's automated speech that these girls adopt and do not get tired of repeating, there is a particular and autonomous subject, working and trying to get ahead with their lives.*⁹

Lordello expanded on the sense of rejection of regionalism and has sketched in a more incisive manner his poetics of banality in another short, this time a fictional one, called *Nº 27* (*Number 27*, 2008), about a boy who has an episode of diarrhea in school and soils his clothes (fig. 1).



Fig.1 – *Nº27* (Marcelo Lordello, 2008)

With its classically composed shots and the teenagers' disaffected performances (suggesting a Bressonian inspiration), *Nº 27* presents an everyday "incident" that transforms into a catastrophe, demonstrating how easily the universe of banality can turn into a territory of horror: the young protagonist, the number 27 in a school list of names, tries unsuccessfully to avoid the bullying by his peers by locking himself up in the school bathroom instead turning everything worse. In spite of the humorous potential of the subject, the use of fixed shots and a general composition that favours claustrophobic angles and silences make no way for laughter and lightness.

Lordello's first feature-length documentary, *Vigias (Watchmen)*, 2010), registers the transformations of late capitalism in Recife, following the nocturnal work journeys of seven janitors/watchmen in middle class apartment buildings, from their arrival at work until dawn. In *Vigias* Lordello broadens his preoccupation with the ordinary, expanded and elongated time, and the unimportant minutiae of common people, accentuating the aversion to baroque caricature, and adopting minimalist traits that feature prominently in a certain strain of Asian and Latin American cinemas since the early 1990s, with the likes of Jia Zhang-Ke, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Martín Rejtman, Lucrecia Martel and Lisandro Alonso, among others, serving as models for the mixture of low key naturalism, long shots and elaborately designed frames.

In 2012, Lordello released his first fiction feature, *Eles voltam (They'll come back)*, 2012), once again about a teenager, this time a girl, left by a roadside with her brother. The contrasts between the comfortable life lead by the protagonist's family and the people she meets in her way are somewhat similar to those presented in the Mexican film *Y tu mamá también* (2002), by Alfonso Cuarón, but the feeling of strangeness is much stronger than a discourse of class difference. In *Eles voltam* there is a high occurrence of long shots (especially in its opening sequence), but as his other films, the open spaces are always in dialogue with the carefully framed details (hands, feet, objects, corners of rooms). Despite its portrayal of the sugar cane plantations and the small coastal towns, there remains no trace of regionalist emphasis. Instead, it focuses on the apathetic protagonist, a sort of young urban zombie among these wide landscapes and the small interiors of both the poor houses that she visits or the tight cubicles of upper middle class mall stores.

From the same production team as Lordello, Leonardo Lacca directed in 2008 a short film called *Décimo Segundo (Twelfth)*, about a young man visiting a friend (possibly a former girlfriend, it is not clear) in an apartment on the twelfth floor (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – *Décimo segundo* (Leonardo Lacca, 2008)

The plot is as simple as that: she makes coffee for him. In Lacca's film, there are no off-screen distractions, there is only the total visibility of the minimal, the long shots of tedium. The effects of de-dramatization and automatic gestures seem to indicate the influence of the expressive

minimalism and the absorption of general traits of contemporary world cinema, almost as if the film had been tailor-made for “artsy” film festivals.

Perhaps the most jarring example of “recifense new wave” is *Amigos de risco* (*Risky Friends*, 2008), the first feature by Daniel Bandeira (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – *Amigos de risco* (Daniel Bandeira, 2008)

Similar to Scorsese’s *After Hours* (1985), this extra-low budget picture focuses on the surprises in ordinary life, the terror of the banal and the melancholy humour of peripheral urbanity through the misadventures of two friends from the lower middle class in Recife. They meet a third friend, a kind of con artist, during a night out in the suburbs. While bringing up local colour (with its accents, the viaducts and peripheries of Recife and the “typical” exotic soundtrack) and aligning itself with a certain tradition of representation of violence in Brazilian cinema, *Amigos de risco* covets the universalism of banality and the appeal of the common, but infusing them with wit and joyousness.

Two other friends from the same production’s company as Bandeira’s, Marcelo Pedroso and Gabriel Mascaro, also comment on the state of contemporary Brazil through the lens of the banal, although with diverse modes of approaching it. In the documentary feature *KFZ 1348* (2008), they trace the history of an old VW Beetle found in a junkyard in Recife. The search for its eight owners, from the *paulista* entrepreneur who first bought it to the junkyard proprietor in the outskirts of Recife, leads them to very different places and contexts in the country, somewhat recalling *In Those Days* (*In jenen Tagen*, Helmut Käutner), a 1947 German drama film with a similar premise. Because of the very nature of its device and the succession of characters and situations that it entangles, the film is not as minimalist as the other examples I mentioned previously; nevertheless it has a lightness of tone that avoids unnecessary ostentation or excessive rhetoric (figs. 4-6).



Fig. 4 – *Pacific*
(Marcelo Pedroso, 2009)



Fig. 5 – *Avenida Brasília Formosa*
(Gabriel Mascaro, 2010)



Fig. 6 – *O som ao redor*
(Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2012)

On his own, Pedroso has directed other documentaries, among them the medium-length *Balsa* (*Ferry Boat*, 2009), chronicling a day on a ferry that carries passengers and cars along the coast of the state of Alagoas. As if incorporating the rhythm of the ride, the film resembles the observational slowness of Jia Zhang-Ke or the Argentinean filmmaker Lisandro Alonso insofar as

it bursts with apathy, while it drifts away. A more disturbing foray into banality is *Pacific* (2009), made exclusively from footage taken by middle class passengers on a cruise ship travelling to the island of Fernando de Noronha (fig. 4).

*The cruise promises seven days of beautiful scenery, free drinks and much, much entertainment for the tourists. Final destination: the paradise of Fernando de Noronha, where they spend the day before returning to the ship for the New Year's party. Along the way, the video cameras do not stop working: each enraptured gaze, each interjection, every dance step and every sip of beer, everything seems to have been registered.*¹⁰

The film engenders narratives from the pre-existing material, a material composed of kitsch, sentimentality, embarrassment and excess. The urge to inscribe their images into a sort of audiovisual universal grammar makes the passengers devote themselves to either precarious copies or even conscious parodies of popular images and genres (Broadway musicals, teen comedies, the film *Titanic*, videoclips, National Geographic, Jacques Cousteau's documentaries, among others). In its complete dependence on images produced by others (Pedroso was not on the cruise and the images were collected by his assistants only at the end of the trip), the film draws attention to the precariousness and clichés of amateur filmmaking, but once assembled these images gain strange and melancholy contours, unveiling the opposite of the banal in its own banality.

Gabriel Mascaro's feature film *Avenida Brasília Formosa* (*Defiant Brasília*, 2010) charts the transformations of a very poor Recife seaside neighbourhood, brought about at the time of Lula's government (2003-2011), and is a particularly productive case study to consider the relationship between the contemporary cinema from Pernambuco and everyday life, and different modes of realism (fig. 5). A modern avenue (which lends the film its title) was built in a favela in the first half of the 2000s, a supposed improvement that eventually resulted in the dislocation of many of its inhabitants to a housing project in another district far away from the sea. Alluding directly and insistently to popular forms of spectacle and entertainment (reality shows, soap operas, *brega* music, Brazilian gospel music), Mascaro devises a fictional narrative with the people of Brasília Teimosa and overlaps the documental registers of his characters with moments in which they are performing the dialogues written for the film. The Argentinian cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo¹¹ has referred to the proliferation of stories of everyday life, and the multiplication of individual memories as signs of what she calls "the subjective turn," especially in contemporary theory, but which also thrive in media discourse with increasing popular interest in reality shows and gossip magazines. Paradoxically, *Avenida Brasília Formosa* constitutes itself almost like an antidote to these very mediatic discourses when it appeals to the genuinely intimate and simple minimal stories (and this also true for most of this more recent film production, not only in Pernambuco, but also from other peripheral centres of production such as Ceará, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul), breaking away from the fake glamour and affirming the beauty and incommensurability of being in the world.

In the beginning of 2013, Mascaro released *Doméstica* (*Maid*), a documentary which explores similar strategies used by Pedroso in *Pacific*. Seven teenagers are invited to film the maids in their households and the director functions simultaneously as curator and editor, but never intervenes in the filming process. This film deepens in a more sophisticated way the political concerns and

the discourse on class relations that were present in most of Mascaro's films, especially in *Um lugar ao sol* (*High Rises*, 2008), about a group of residents of luxury apartments in three Brazilian capitals. Absorbing and at the same time departing from the influence of Eduardo Coutinho's documentaries and João Moreira Salles' *Santiago* (2007), film about the butler of Salles' family, *Doméstica* reveals not only the tensions, affections and disparities between the servants and their young masters, but also the relationships between the filmmaker and his subjects, building an intricate and interesting filmic artefact that addresses themes like work, gender and its own form.

My final example is a film which so far has received the widest international dissemination and success among the films by the new Pernambucan generation of filmmakers: *O som ao redor* (*Neighbouring Sounds*, 2012), by Kleber Mendonça Filho (fig. 6). Slightly younger than his *árido* movie colleagues and older than the filmmakers that started in the 2000s, Mendonça was relatively well known in Brazil previously for his work as film critic and for short films (particularly *Vinil Verde* [*Green Vinyl*, 2004], and *Recife Frio* [*Cold Recife*, 2009], a sci-fi mockumentary). It could be argued that his more mainstream approach to filmmaking (and even his greater familiarity with the world of filmmaking via his activity as a critic, his travels around the world of film festivals and his job as a curator for a local art cinema) puts him closer to established names of Pernambucan and Brazilian cinema than the younger generation, but his refusal to adhere to the regional caricatures of the *árido* movie reveal a work that is not so easily classifiable in terms of generation or cycles, as his predecessors apparently were.

Since its entry in the Rotterdam Festival at the beginning of 2012 and following its Brazilian release in January 2013, *Neighbouring Sounds* has been collecting awards and international critical prestige. There are two recognizable levels in the impact that the film has had, especially in Brazilian media: the first concerns the timeliness and the urgency of its themes (high urban density, violence, rural decadence, the persistence of a slave-owner mentality among Brazilian elites, class differences and the legacies of the archaic sugar cane social order in the contemporary metropolis, to mention a few); the second has to do with a well structured narrative, a formal precision and the details that compose its *mise en scène*.

The film focuses on a group of residents in the district of Setúbal, an enclave of middle-class buildings in Recife. It opens with a collection of archival black and white photos depicting scenes from the sugar cane plantations in Pernambuco, functioning almost like a cinematographic epigraph inspired by Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*, 1933) with Serge Gainsbourg's *Cadavres en Série* as the soundtrack. This sets the tone for a rather sociological stance for the film, that from then on stays in the present and fragments itself in various mini-plots concerned with the daily lives of at least half a dozen protagonists and with an accentuated attention to mood, details and social observation. The ensemble cast is comprised mostly by non-professional actors, the most notable exceptions are the landowner patriarch Francisco, played by W. J. Solha, the housewife Bia, played by Maeve Jenkins, and Clodoaldo, the security guard performed by Irandhir Santos, one of the most visible actor from the Brazilian Northeast in contemporary cinema. But none of them are really famous, soap opera names or even local celebrities (like the *árido* scene used to do with *manguebeat* musicians), what adds a bit more of the sense of proximity to reality, to the everyday life in urban Brazil.

Also differently from previous *árido* movie features, *Neighbouring Sounds* does not resort to the usual images of Recife (aerial shots of its bridges, scenes in its older streets in the city centre with

its colourful colonial churches, derelict buildings or lively and exotic markets, like the city we see depicted in *Baile Perfumado*, *Amarelo Manga* or *Árido Movie*). It opts instead for open shots of the monotonous high rises near the Boa Viagem beach – as if to prove Mendonça’s commentary that bad architecture is very photogenic¹² – and nondescript middle class interiors filled with gadgets and electric appliances. The banality of the street chronicle and the multiple characters threads form the basis of *Neighbouring Sounds*’ critical vision of the city, the Brazilian Northeast and of the country as a whole, as if these minimal elements were the direct instruments for reading the wider context. But, evidently, its preoccupations are not only thematic. It dismisses the framework of the conventional cinematic treatment in favor of a specific tempo, a particular narrative rhythm and atmosphere, but at the same time retaining some traces of popular strategies of genre and plot (vengeance, love, crime, comedy, for instance, are all present, but in very small doses).

The film explores the seemingly undistinguished, modern, vulgar and eventually very ugly (and not in an exotic manner) settings precisely to expose and highlight the tensions, the peculiarities and the historical implications hidden under the apparent normality. There is in *Neighbouring Sounds* a curious articulation between its well marked – and occasionally very obscure – regionalisms and the highly recognizable and universal issues it addresses. The balance between these two realms is performed, among other characteristics, by an ability to combine the mundane and the bizarre, the down-to-earth and the aloof, the “normal” and the extravagant in terms of the characters, their storylines and the settings, in a way blurring and deliberately playing with genre conventions.

Neighbouring Sounds recycled some of the subjects, characters, locations and approaches from his previous short films, especially *Eletrodoméstica* (2005), about a housewife who finds solace in the company of her domestic appliances. But besides these internal quotations, what probably reinforced the international attention and critical acclaim was the ways Mendonça used his diverse cinematographic references. It is clear that the director wanted to show off his repertoire and there are many examples throughout the movie, some of them explicitly connected with the realist classicism, popular genre conventions and the Hollywood mainstream. As in the many wide shots that shows the suburban landscapes of Recife and in the mixture of ordinary settings with a impending sense of horror, the director acknowledged the influence of the low-budget films by John Carpenter,¹³ something that is especially evident in the nightmarish scenes in the second half of the movie. Another probable parallel could be drawn with Robert Altman’s films, especially in relation to their multi-layered plots and profusion of characters. In fact, several critics have stated the similarities between *Neighbouring Sounds* and films like *Short Cuts* (1993) and *Magnolia* (1999) by Paul Thomas Anderson.¹⁴ One could also recognize in the film some western modes, mainly in the way that the security guards are typified and framed, like taciturn urban cowboys, and in the final confrontation between the patriarch and the two vigilante brothers.

But the main references and affinities that *Neighbouring Sounds* has are within the general framework of contemporary visual aesthetics, they are clearly connected with the widespread realism in world cinema as described in the first part of this essay. Whether in the form of allusions or as a general mood, as direct quotations or almost imperceptible details, it is that general accent of contemporary realisms that is implied in the film. When commenting about Romanian cinema in an interview, Mendonça Filho alludes to the notion of the mundane as a driving force for himself and for cinema in general:

I am profoundly interested in the union of film and the mundane. I think the definition of cinema would be to extract the fantastic from the mundane. So, allying with this idea is fundamental to me. The absolute mundane: like people's kitchens, living rooms, laundries... The problem – and this happens in most of realistic movies – is when the mundane is handled in a mundane manner. This never happens in Romanian films.¹⁵

And it is not hard to see the similarities between Corneliu Porumboiu's sense of absurd and humour in the scenes of the television debate in *East of Bucharest* (2006) and in the residents' meeting sequence in Mendonça Filho's film, when various characters discuss the fate of a lazy night porter in a middle class residential building. Or to detect Lucrecia Martel's influence in the composition of the nervous sound atmospheres and the design of strange domestic universes, especially in the portraying of Bia's family. But probably one of the most direct "homages" in the film is to Elia Suleiman, whose nonsensical sketches serve as inspiration for a number of scenes, notably the one in which two sisters fight hysterically over HD television sets, the one with the sudden appearance of a lost Argentinean in the street or the other when a woman descends from a car to vomit in the middle of the street very late at night. There is indeed a profusion of quotations and slightly occluded references, which also involve self-allusions, popular songs, film segments and an occasionally didactic tone, but they do not get in the way of the narrative, even in its multi-layered form.

In relation with Brazilian cinema and more specifically that of Pernambuco, though, the connections are perhaps not that explicit. While *Neighbouring Sounds* draws on some of the features of the *árido movie*, for example when it humorously explores its characters' idiosyncrasies and the local customs, it clearly departs itself from the grotesque or the folkloric. Hence, Mendonça has greater affinities with his younger counterparts, especially in his penchant for the slow paces of most banal episodes of his characters. Instead of their documentary emphasis, however, Mendonça infuses his everyday snapshots with a narrative flair closer to mainstream genre than to experimental cinema even if *Neighbouring Sounds* does not fit straight genre conventions. Thriller, western, urban social drama, horror movie: being a bit each, its narrative seeks to illuminate, reveal and scan violence and paranoia in Brazilian middle classes.

The examination of the issues that are in the centre of Mendonça's concerns – urban tensions, class and race relations, the politics of everyday life – become an intrinsic part of his stylistic approach, at the same time very specific and personal and in tune with the regional developments in Brazilian cinema and the global aesthetics of realism. He reveals, thus, sensitivity to both the aesthetics of contemporary culture and the ethics of the world around it. An interesting counterpart to previous international successes of Brazilian cinema like *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*, Fernando Meirelles, Kátia Lund, 2002) or *Tropa de Elite* (*Elite Squad*, José Padilha, 2007), *Neighbouring Sounds* privileges surprise, curiosity, ambiguity or discretion in the place of the expected clichés of Brazilian society, even when dealing with its very familiar tropes (the discussion on masters and servants, the permeability between classes, even the *jeitinho brasileiro*: they all appear in the film, but always in an unusual way). The resulting style of this option seems to be an affirmation of cinema as an art that compels us to look at the world with new eyes, to rediscover the world (or in this case, to rediscover Brazil). And if in the last few years, the very debate about everyday life and the real and its appropriations in film (both fictional and documentary) seem to be frayed

with overuse and somehow give the impression of overexposure, the idea of banality implied and questioned in films like *Neighbouring Sounds* and the other recent examples from Pernambuco mentioned above resignify in very interesting manners the cinematic effects of reality and different forms of realism. They bring about extensive dialogues between the peculiarities of a regional scene and articulation of transnational modes, styles and circuits, they expand the images of Brazilian cinema beyond the parameters of national symbols, notwithstanding their eventual recurrence.

- 1 Luiz Carlos Gonçalves de Oliveira Jr., *O cinema de fluxo e a mise en scène*, USP, São Paulo 2010.
- 2 Gonzalo Aguilar, *Otros mundos. Un ensayo sobre el nuevo cine argentino*, Santiago Arcos, Buenos Aires 2006.
- 3 See for example: Linda Badley, Barton R. Palmer, Steven Jay Schneider (eds.), *Traditions in World Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2006; Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones, Belén Vidal (eds.), *Cinema at the Periphery*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2010; Denilson Lopes, *No coração do mundo. Paisagens transculturais*, Rocco, Rio de Janeiro 2012; David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas*, Continuum, London-New York 2011; James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*, Reaktion, London 2003; Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam, Rajinder Dudrah (eds.), *Theorizing World Cinema*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2012; Valentina Vitali, Paul Willemsen (eds.), *Theorising National Cinema*, British Film Institute, London 2006.
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