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Notes on the process of *Swinguerra* and on other duels at the margins of the Brazilian Venice

By Hélio Menezes; Translated from the Portuguese by Heitor Augusto.

Twenty kilometres separate Recife’s touristic historic downtown in Pernambuco’s capital from the Ibura neighbourhood, where one can find the Associação dos Moradores da Unidade Residencial 6 (Unit 6 Residents Association). That’s where Cia. Extremo (Extreme Co.), one of many dancing groups located in the outskirts of the city, rehearse their choreography of *swingueira*, a percussive rhythm highly popular in the Northeast of Brazil. That is where I was taken by Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca on my first day in the city, accompanied by members of their small film crew. I had travelled to Recife to look closely at the research and creative process behind *Swinguerra*, Wagner and de Burca’s new film, which features Cia.Extremo as one of its protagonists. Soon I realized I was being introduced to and inserted into a broader and complex microcosmos that both can, yet cannot, fit into a movie. A place where notions of identity and representation, inequality of access to goods and services, methods of shared artistic creation, general understandings of documentary cinema, polyphony, and replication of ethnographic praxis in artistic practices mutually communicate, merge, and influence one another.

Covering such an extensive distance—which feels even longer due to Recife’s chronic traffic jams—the route reveals itself as an area that not only can be measured in terms of kilometres, but also perceived as an abyss representing a profound social and territorial divide. The farther one moves from the beach, the more the landscape changes. The luxurious buildings are replaced by modest houses built on top of one another; the once large avenues now shrink, giving way to narrow streets; the greater the distance, the darker the skin gets and the poorer the living conditions become. At this place, where tourists don’t lay their eyes on, where public services dry out and the rates of police violence and social control are abundant, we find a pulsing city, radically different from the Tourism Bureau advertisements. I saw Recife… it started at Ibura—a large area that runs along the margins of the colourful city seen in the postcards. Recife, due to its rivers and canals as well as its social elite’s colonial fantasies, is known as the “Brazilian Venice.”

The people behind the characters

When we reached the sports court at the back of the Associação de Moradores, we found the members of Cia. Extremo warmed up and ready to rehearse. Aline Linhares, a black transgender

woman who works as a hairstylist, was teaching some moves to Clara Santos, also a trans woman and the newest addition to the team, while Diego Matarazzo, head choreographer, gave general instructions. The ages of the collective’s members range from 15 to 20 years old and most of them are poor, black members of the LGBTQ community. The conjunction of these social marks of difference—race, class, gender, sexuality, generation, social background—represent an acute fact of my country. Brazil has the highest numbers of murders of trans and transvestite people in the world—one every 48 hours. Brazil is also responsible for what could arguably be considered a generational genocide, since we witness the death of a young black person every 23 minutes. These same socially marginalized subjects, who earn a living through low income jobs and temporary gigs, unveiled, at Ibura’s sports court, despite (and due to) their precariousness, another facet of their being: they are artists. Unique and methodical creators, who oblige an intense rehearsal schedule until they individually achieve a long-sought-after dance move and the group as a whole reaches the desired synchronicity.

From where I stand, observing a Cia. Extremo rehearsal, every meaningful detail that emerged out of the exhaustive repetition of gestures, steps, and facial expressions from the dancers was observed, registered, and commented upon by the film crew. The instructions from the head choreographer, the cigarette break, the performances and orchestrated reversals of masculinity and femininity, the backstage dynamics, the make-up time, as well as the shared moment of slipping into rehearsal outfits—all of this would later be converted into the raw material of *Swinguerra*’s screenplay. In the same fashion as in the previous films by Wagner and de Burca, events that may seem superficial to the understanding of the whole phenomenon are filmically treated as equal in value to the shots containing dance scenes. Both filmmakers are interested in these idiosyncrasies as well as accentuating the human being behind the character, unpeeling layers of meaning that make each person or performance utterly impossible to impersonate. Wagner and de Burca’s procedural choices roil and defy contemporary understandings around authorship and (the crisis of) representation, dispatching and blurring the boundaries between good taste and shabby, the sophisticated and the kitsch, fiction and documentary.

“But one must nevertheless insist,” writes the philosopher Gayatri Spivak, “that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.” This assertion resonates in Brazil and it seems to synthesize the perspectival motivations driving Wagner and de Burca’s methods. A determinant and distinctive trait, an authorship signature one might say, of both filmmakers is a long interaction and daily coexistence with the protagonists of their films, so that these subjects become agents implicated in forging their own portraits. With their ability to capture minutia and

complexities concealed behind the visible veneer of social performance, Wagner and de Burca execute what we could call “fictional documentaries,” putting an effort into avoiding the reduction of character-subjects to just one layer of expression or understanding. To achieve such a result one must *go* there and actually *be* there; observe the gestures and details as they unfold; and forge a space for exchange, collaboration, and mutual confidence with their interlocutors.

A duel of rhythms

After having dissected *frevo*, *brega*, and gospel music through *Faz que vai* (Set to Go), 2015, *Estás vendo coisas* (You Are Seeing Things), 2016, and *Terremoto Santo* (Holy Tremor), 2017, Wagner and de Burca have turned their attention to three other local rhythms of mass consumption with *Swinguerra*, 2019. Through distinctive frontal shots and minimal camera movement that mostly serves the dancers, *Swinguerra* represents a continuation of the explorations that both filmmakers have undertaken in recent years on Recife’s popular music landscape, on how the consumption and production of pop culture are intertwined, and on how participants in these scenes take advantage of social media as a platform for visibility and a strategic tool to either overcome the limitations imposed by the music industry or to insert themselves into that machinery. The film’s title echoes these tensions: *Swinguerra* is a junction of two words: “swingueira” (grooviness), itself a bastardization of “swing” with the addition of the suffix “eira” (abundant), and “guerra” (war). It’s a pun meaning “guerra de swing” (swing war), a duel of many rhythms.

The initial plan was to focus on the phenomenon of *swingueira*, a high BPM musical and dance style derived from *samba reggae* that has had widespread uptake among young adults living in the outskirts of Recife and in the Northeast Region generally. As the artists’ field research developed, they realized that the process required that they broaden the film’s horizons beyond just *swingueira*. As their exploration of different dance companies performing *swingueira* deepened and the partnership between dancers and filmmakers tightened, the intimate connections became clear between *swingueira* and two other contemporary phenomenon dominating Recife’s musical landscape: *brega funk* and *passinho do maloca*. *Brega funk* is the combination of *brega*, a melodramatic music genre, and Rio de Janeiro’s up-tempo *funk*. *Passinho do maloca,* on the other hand, is Recife’s interpretation of *passinho*, the roots of which are in Rio de Janeiro’s slums and constitutes a way of dancing *funk* with decisive and agile moves created by *malocas*, Brazilian slang for “thugs”. Commonly used as a pejorative term aimed at

marginalized youth.,*“maloca”* has been reclaimed by these youth, incorporated as part of their identity

Samba reggae, *brega funk*, and *passinho da maloca*, all three genres featured in *Swinguerra* are suited for dancing, with aesthetics and choreographic variations that, in addition to sharing the same audience and space, mutually influence each other. However, there are also precise distinctions. The synchronicity of a large number of dancers moving quickly in space, a distinctive trait of *swingueira*, is emulated, with more nuance, in smaller groups in *brega funk*, whose dance steps act in a theatrical manner as a choreographic storytelling tool. As for *passinho*, it shows a preference for minimal and repetitive moves executed by an even smaller group of people, with the dancers’ feet mostly planted on the ground. Though noticeable, the differences between the styles don’t limit the dancers’ versatility, since they can quickly migrate from one rhythm to another and reform themselves into new dance groups in the process. On Friday, they might rehearse *swingueira* only to dance *brega funk* on Saturday and then go back to *passinho* on Sunday. The filmmakers realized that keeping the rhythms of *brega funk* and *passinho* out of the film’s narrative would imply a narrowed creative versatility of these subjects and miss an opportunity to complexify the universe of the swing war. That understanding led to the incorporation into the film-to-be of three other dance collectives: a *brega funk* group, La Máfia, and two *passinho do maloca* collectives, Bonde do Passinho, and As do Passinho S.A.

Such substantial changes in the film’s structure just weeks before shooting exemplifies a common, if not constitutive, movement in Wagner and de Burca’s creative process. Months of preliminary investigation resulted in a provisional screenplay structure, which later was filled out, rewritten, and updated with what was collected via immersive research and conversations with the film’s subjects-actors. Few elements are pre-established: costume and set design, locations, colour palette, sequence of shots, and other key components are submitted to an extensive process of collaborative creation, negotiating consensus with each participant. Certainly the relationship is not horizontal, but the filmmakers are in a constant pursuit of symmetry. Differing standpoints of enunciation mark the exchanges between the film crew and the subject-actors. The intermediation of cameras, computers, class differences, and technical knowledge of the filmmaking process demarcate a border, both literal and metaphorical. Though present, such separation becomes porous, as a space for open communication is built through exchange, transparency, and a permanent consultation in the decision-making process, even for aspects that may seem irrelevant.

Over “there,” the dancers also make their aspirations heard, disapproving of Wagner and de Burca’s proposals, suggesting new ideas, and changing the storyline. They act. They recreate. Two days after my trip to Ibura I had the chance to witness another moment which I believe helps to enlighten the nuances of that process. Following an afternoon of conversations and rehearsals with the group La Máfia, Wagner and de Burca would meet, for the first time, the “thugs” of Bonde do Passinho. It had yet to be decided if they would become part of the film. Visual artists who constantly navigate in and out of cinema, Wagner and de Burca invited the group to join them and explained the project, which audience it targets, in which context it will be screened, and why the intention was to not indulge in narrative cinema. Henrique Sena, aka MC Fininho (“MC Slim”), the group’s leader, showed some of his choreographies, indicated which dance steps he considered adequate to the project, explained his creative process, and, in a tone of both admiration and wit, made the comment, “I feel like I’m in Hollywood.”

Certainly, terms such as “Venice Biennale,” “art curatorship,” and “close low-angle shot” may not be part of the *passinho*’s dancers’ vocabulary. However, recording dance moves, elaborating choreographies for staging purposes, repetition of gestures in front of a camera, and painting representations of themselves for artistic performances are topics intertwined with their daily lives. In this amalgam, topics such as the groups’ wishes to gain the benefits from professionalizing their work, capitalizing on being exposed to an international audience, learning about the techniques and the aesthetics of filmmaking, and diffusing their creations through a platform with potential to catapult them on the local scene while setting them apart from the other groups presented a strong encouragement to join the project. As pointed out by Eduarda Lemos, aka Tchanna, one of the *frevo* dancers in *Faz que vai* and the protagonist of *Swinguerra*, “pretty soon we’ll become filmmakers.” This temporary role reversal also affects the directors: both Wagner and de Burca have worked as actors in the music videos of some of the groups they have directed. As an old Maori saying, cited by Marcel Mauss, goes: “Ko Maru kai atu Ko Maru kai mai ka ngohe ngohe” (Give as much as you take, all shall be very well).

A fragment of reality slightly dislocated

These points of contact bring freshness to Wagner and de Burca’s films, at the same time they make them possible. The result is a product of the articulation of various aspirations in play by each part, as well as of the dialogic encounter of the perspectives coming from the artists behind the camera with the wishes of the artists in from of them.

Navigating in a permeable border between documentary and fiction, the filmmakers take as a starting point the premise that every narration unavoidably represents a form of fictionalization. Every translation is an act of treason. No matter the level of control or how affectionate one is toward the field of “real,” one cannot totally escape fictionalizing within the limits of language. Wagner and de Burca construct films that act in the field of verisimilitude, while developing artistic practices inspired by ethnographic tools and refusing pretentious truth-finding schemas. We could argue that they execute an audiovisual variation of anthropology: if the ethnographic text is, permanently and indisputably, a controlled act of fiction, a persuasive creation contained within the limits of facts, Wagner and de Burca’s films invert the parts of the equation. They suggest some type of fiction as a controlled ethnography, expanding the factual content through a deliberatively creative, and creating, filmic language. Or to put it in a more synthetic language used by Diego from Cia. Extremo, “this film symbolizes reality.”

There is savviness in such a statement. In effect, the filmmakers introduce us, through their oeuvre, to a fragment of reality slightly dislocated, just as a scientist would isolate an element under their microscope, separate it, take it out of its context, and highlight it only to best reveal, through magnification, its unique attributes and, by induction, the functioning of the whole body. In *Swinguerra*, the audience is introduced to a multiplicity of components that shape the musical scene currently unfolding in Recife. Though similar to reality, there’s a difference of appearance. Two examples: First, the Mickey Mouse drawing that serve as the logo for the Bonde do Passinho becomes a metonymical citation as a graffiti in the movie, in front of which the “thugs” execute, like marionettes, their dance moves. Second, during *Swinguerra*’s creative process, when a final draft of the screenplay was practically completed, Clara, one of La Máfia’s main choreographers, changed sides and joined the group Cia. Extremo. Wagner and de Burca’s lenses captured this “real life” decision as a meaningful chance event, a revealing gesture of the transits happening in the universe of these music genres. The film translates this event through a shot in which Clara, a shy character, roams from the new to the old group, where she now emerges as an easy-going person, a representation closer to the sassy and captivating behaviour of Clara, the person.

Swinguerra plays with the idea of double projection, operating in two channels—left and right. Such an aesthetic premise is explored itself through various ways. Since several scenes were filmed at least twice, with minor variations between the takes, sometimes what is shown on the left screen is slightly different from what we see on the right screen. In other instances, the filmmakers project on the left screen a shot with its countershot simultaneously on the right. Wagner and de Burca also adopt two other radical strategies. One explores fluidity (a character

may cross screens, come from the left and, a split second later, be seen on the right), while the other explores conflict, as the filmmakers adopt a split-screen with each half having complementary scenes, emulating how the street duels are staged, with groups of *passinho* dancers forming a wall facing each other in a provocative manner, watching their counterparts dance. As a mirror room duplicates, twists, and enlarges an image, Wagner and de Burca replicate reality in a fantastical, yet faithful, reflection.

These operations cause numerous effects. By making films that reject being boxed inside impervious categories, forcing us to question the foundation of these classifications, Wagner and de Burca leave the imprint of an innovative approach to documentary cinema, as well as to musical cinema and audiovisual documentation of performance. Their cinema equally reverberates with current conversations surrounding the power of images as a crucial device to both create and dismantle social imagination. In the same fashion as in their previous work, *Swinguerra*’s protagonists are subjects upon which vicious stereotypes of eroticism, violence, and other fantasies about the “hot tropics” are attributed. Such caricaturistic narratives are extensively created and reproduced by both Brazilian and international cinema. Wagner and de Burca’s productions, on the contrary, purge the vice of the adventitious gaze interested in producing synthesis and totalizations of the “Other,” whose existence is real only to those generating such fantasies. Wagner and de Burca’s oeuvre portray complex subjects whose self-representation turn them into characters of themselves. The definitions of performance, presentation, and representation endlessly overlap.

An inherently political dimension runs through *Swinguerra*, though it repudiates a pamphlet-like approach nor does it settle for simple answers to complex issues. Above all, it’s a film about bodies in movement. I’m not talking about non-identifiable and anonymous bodies, but those embodying specific histories and accents. Language-bodies who possess and imprint complex meanings through their choreographic movement: canvases that can be interpreted. In *swingueira* and *brega funk*, there’s such a high degree of difficulty in executing dance moves that there’s no room for hesitation. Body and mind must operate on the same frequency. The *passinho* duels, in which the groups alternate teasing choreographies, reproduce, through feet, torso, and arms, a dialectical logic of thought—of thinking that can be embodied and enunciated. *Swingueira*’s sagacity resides precisely in recognizing the sophistication and complexity of artistic practices which are usually relegated by so-called “good taste” as minor, lacking finesse and insufficient to constitute culture.

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It’s time to go back to Ibura’s Associação dos Moradores da Unidade Residencial 6, specifically to a crucial decision that began to take shape that night and would solidify in the following days, ultimately restructuring *Swinguerra*. At the beginning of each rehearsal, every Cia. Extremo dancer takes a spot, spreading themselves around the court. Tchanna, a young black trans woman, stands in the centre, two steps ahead of the company, and starts the choreography by emulating a military salute. In the background we hear a music whose lyrics echo Tchanna’s signal: “We must honour what’s written on the [Brazilian] flag: ‘Order and Progress’.” In formation, the dancers reproduce the military salute, a gesture that triggers the ensuing choreography. When the piece is finished, Wagner and de Burca join the dancers. Their conversation around which parts of the choreography would best represent the group in the film leads to a unanimous choice of the choreography’s opening segment. One minor change was suggested: that what was performed in “real life” to kick off the choreography would become the film’s final sequence. In an era marked by great social tensions and the political rise of a bellicose right-wing conservatism in Brazil, these bodies in movement mobilize profoundly urgent and contemporary issues. When asked what led them to adopt a patriotic symbol and the army salute as a motto for their choreography, Diego replies to me, “Because it represents power.” Tchanna, smiling, quickly adds, “And here, we’re all powerful.”

I wrote this essay as *Swinguerra* was in post-production. Premiered at the Brazilian Pavilion of the 58th Venice Biennale, what is seen in Wagner and de Burca’s film doesn’t resemble any trait connecting the Italian city to its supposedly tropical version, Recife. What the audience will watch is a powerful perspective of a different Recife, located twenty kilometres distant from the hegemonic colonial centre of the city. A young, pulsing, contradictory, and real Recife—or, as Diego describes it, “symbolized.”