

Down With Populism

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Cinema as an element in the cultural process should, in the final analysis, be the expression of a civilisation. But which civilisation? Brazil, a country 'in transition,' is indigenist/vainglorious, romantic/abolitionistic, symbolistic/naturalistic, realistic/Parnassian, republican/positivistic, anarchic/cannibalistic, national-populist/reformist, concretist/underdeveloped, revolutionary/conformist, tropical/structuralistic, etc. A knowledge of the oscillations of our culture, so rich in superstructures (given that we are referring to an 'art produced by the elite and very different from the popular art produced by the people') is not sufficient to tell us who we are. Who *are* we? What kind of cinema do we have?

The public doesn't want to know anything about all this; it goes to the movies to be entertained but finds on the screen a national film that demands of its audience an enormous effort to establish a dialogue with the film-maker who for his part is also making a great effort to speak to the people – in another language!

The discussions about this language are extensive and revealing. Cinema Novo, rejecting the cinema of imitation and choosing another form of expression, has also rejected the most facile route of this other language which is typical of the so-called nationalist art: 'populism', the reflection of a political attitude which is typically ours. Like the *caudillo*, the artist considers himself the father of the people; the motto is 'speak simply so that the people understand.'

To my way of thinking, 'creating simple things for a simple people' involves a lack of respect for the public, however underdeveloped it may be. The people aren't simple. Despite their sickness, hunger, and illiteracy, the people are complex. The paternalistic artist idealises popular types as unreal individuals who even in their misery have their philosophy and, poor things, only need to develop a little 'political conscience' so that, from one day to the next, they can turn the historical process around.

The primitivism of this concept is even more harmful than derivative art because the latter at least has the courage to recognise that it is an imitation and to justify the 'industry of artistic taste' through its profit orientation.

Populist art, on the other hand, tries to justify its primitivism through 'good conscience'. The populist artist always maintains 'I'm not an intellectual, I'm with the people, my art is beautiful because it communicates', etc. But what is it that it communicates? In general, it communicates the very alienation of the people. It communicates their illiteracy and coarseness born out of a misery that makes them regard life with contempt.

The Brazilian people always criticise the wretchedness of their life, even while accepting it. In popular music, there are numerous *sambas* that say: 'I have no beans, I'm making soup with stones', 'I'll die very happily on the sidewalk', 'the *favela* is the gateway to heaven'. Populism draws on these sources and relays them back to the people with no more profound interpretation. The people, sensing that the primitive comicality of their underdevelopment is being hurled back at them, find their own misfortune funny and die of laughter.

This explains the success of the *chanchada*,* a genre based on the picturesque misery of the *caboclo*† and the middle class. The success of any theatre of social protest also derives from this.

The populist also defends the thesis according to which 'forms of communication should be used . . . in order to counteract alienation.' But these 'forms of communication' are, as we have already seen, the alienating forms of the colonising culture.

An underdeveloped country isn't necessarily obliged to have an underdeveloped art. It is naive and reactionary to believe that art is offensive. Cinema Novo, sharing the general unrest of Brazilian culture, has rejected populism and thus reduced the possibility of its manipulating the public. Has it opted for the way of the sphinx?

While the problem of communication generates widespread discussion, Cinema Novo discusses the problem of creativity. Are creativity and cinematography reconcilable?

Most observers respond that cinema is an art of communication and that's sufficient. For these observers, *creativity* is opposed to *communication*. But the apostles of communication at any price never question the number of levels on which communication is produced and, above all, what genuine communication is.

Cinema Novo admits to having achieved genuine communication, but on confessing this, it frees itself from the communicative certainty of 'populism'. This certainty is nevertheless a deceiving affirmation, because populism only cultivates in depth the 'cultural values' of an underdeveloped society. These 'values' are worthless; our culture, the product of an incapacity for artisanship, of laziness, of illiteracy, of the political impotence of social immobility, is a 'culture of the year one'. Burn down the libraries then!

* The *chanchada*, traditionally the leading genre of the Brazilian film industry, is a banal and formulaic kind of musical comedy.

† A *caboclo* is a Brazilian of mixed white and Indian blood.

In every film, Cinema Novo begins again from zero, like Lumière. When the film-makers set themselves the task of starting from zero, of creating a cinema with new kinds of plots, acting and rhythm, with another kind of poetry, they throw themselves into the dangerous revolutionary adventure of *learning while they work*, of simultaneously sustaining theory and practice, of reformulating each theory on the basis of each praxis, of conducting themselves according to the apt phrase of Nelson Pereira dos Santos when he quotes a certain Portuguese poet: 'I don't know where I'm going, but I know that you can't go from there.'

The public feels itself pushed toward the movie houses, obliged to 'read' a new kind of cinema: technically imperfect, dramatically dissonant, poetically rebellious, sociologically inexact (official Brazilian sociology itself is inexact), politically aggressive and unsure just like Brazil's political vanguards, violent and sad, even more sad than violent, like our carnival which is more dominated by sorrow than by joy.

Among us, 'new' doesn't mean *perfect*, because the notion of perfection is inherited from the colonising cultures that have defined their own concept of *perfection* according to the interests of a *political ideal*.

The true modern art, ethically and aesthetically revolutionary, uses its own language to resist the language of domination. If the guilt complex of the artists who belong to the bourgeoisie sets them in opposition to their own world, in the name of that consciousness which the people need but don't have, the only way out is to resist all the moral and aesthetic hypocrisies which lead to alienation by means of the impure aggressivity of their art.

Cinema Novo's ambition is therefore considered extra-cinematographic. Cinema, everyone says, is an amusement. Whoever goes to the movies goes to be entertained. No one wants to confront problems at the movies. Art is reserved for the theatre, painting, or poetry. Cinema, on the other hand, costs money. The artistic film-maker is irresponsible, an idiot, an intellectual.

In Brazil, 'intellectual' is synonymous with 'homosexual'. One needs a lot of courage to be an intellectual and, as an intellectual, to seize the power of cinema. I think Brazil is a country with a vital need for cinema and, above all, that cinema will be the Brazilian art form par excellence.

(translated by Julianne Burton)