

Back to the margins in search of the core: foreign land's geography of exclusion

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Chapter Eight

Back to the Margins in Search of the Core: *Foreign Land's* Geography of Exclusion¹

LÚCIA NAGIB

'The Tagus is fairer than the river flowing through my village,
But the Tagus isn't fairer than the river flowing through my village
Because the Tagus isn't the river flowing through my village.'

Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa's heteronym),
'The Keeper of Flocks'²

'Lampião was great, but he often became small.'
Dadá, in *Black God, White Devil*³

The crisis of the national project in the early 1990s, caused by a short-lived but disastrous government, led Brazilian art cinema, for the first time, to look at itself as periphery and reapproach the old colonial centre, Portugal. *Terra estrangeira* (*Foreign Land*, Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, Brazil/Portugal, 1995), a film about Brazilian exiles in Portugal, is the best illustration of this perspective shift aimed at providing a new sense of Brazil's scale and position within a global context. Shot mainly on location in São Paulo, Lisbon and Cape Verde, it promotes the encounter of Lusophone peoples who find a common ground in their marginal situation. Even Portugal is defined by its location at the edge of Europe and by beliefs such as Sebastianism, whose origins go back to the time when the country was dominated by Spain.⁴ As a result, notions of 'core' or 'centre' are devolved to the realm of myth.



Figure 8.1: Perspective shift in *Foreign Land*: Brazil is reduced to invisibility. Image from *Foreign Land* (Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, 1995), reproduced by kind permission of Videofilmes.

The film's carefully crafted dialogues combine Brazilian, Portuguese and Creole linguistic peculiarities into a common dialect of exclusion, while language puns trigger visual rhymes which refer back to the *Cinema Novo* (the Brazilian New Wave) repertoire and restage the imaginary of the discovery turned into unfulfilled utopia. The main characters also acquire historical resonances, as they are depicted as descendants of Iberian conquistadors turned into smugglers of precious stones in the present. Their activities define a circuit of international exchange which resonates with that of globalized cinema, a realm in which *Foreign Land*, made up of citations and homage to other cinemas, tries to retrieve a sense of belonging.

The poet Fernando Pessoa, a looming figure behind the film's form and content, shows, in the famous verses quoted above, how notions of centre and periphery can vary according to the point of view. But while Pessoa's oxymoronic order secures a central position for the author's native village, in *Foreign Land* the view from abroad enables the realization of Brazil's smallness, despite its great territorial dimensions. In this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate how the dialectic tension between great and small, centre and periphery permeates the film at all levels and accounts for its main qualities.

The Perspective Shift

Foreign Land was one of the first signs of cinematic revival after the collapse of Brazilian film production, following the drastic measures introduced by the newly-elected president Collor de Mello in 1990. As well as freezing the bank accounts of the entire population, the Collor government downgraded the Ministry of Culture to a mere secretariat and closed down several cultural institutions, including Embrafilme, the state production and distribution company which had supported two decades of a burgeoning popular film industry. *Foreign Land* is thus a modest, independent production, in sharp contrast to Salles's previous film, *A grande arte* (*Exposure*, Walter Salles, Brazil/USA, 1991), a commercially ambitious English-language production aimed at the international market. As the director explains,

I was emerging from a much more hierarchical and painful process, from a personal point of view, which was *Exposure*. *Foreign Land* was a true rediscovery of the pleasure of shooting a fiction film with the same lightness and enthusiasm of my documentary filmmaking, which is where I come from.⁵

The film was conceived and developed in a collaborative manner. The script was co-written by Walter Salles, Daniela Thomas and Marcos Bernstein, with additional dialogues by Millôr Fernandes. Salles also contributed to the editing, alongside Felipe Lacerda. Thomas's cousin, Fernando Alves Pinto, then a beginner, was cast for the lead, and other professional actors, such as Fernanda Torres, Alexandre Borges, Laura Cardoso and Tchéky Karyo, were hired on the basis of friendship or reduced fees. Black and white 16mm stock, later blown up to 35mm, was chosen as a more economic and agile format for location shooting. Filming itself was completed in just over four weeks, despite taking place in three different continents (South America, Europe and Africa). This suited the sense of urgency prompted by the national crisis and the need to provide 'an immediate response to what we had gone through in the early 1990s', in Salles's words.⁶

The same black and white 16mm stock, combined with ascetic formalism, had been used by Walter's brother and close collaborator, João Moreira Salles, to shoot his confessional film *Santiago* (2007) in 1992, just before preparation work started for *Foreign Land*. Moreira Salles's documentary, which reflects social and personal crises to the extent that it remained unfinished until 2007, is a radical defence of modesty by means of homage to giants such as Ozu, while calling

for a detailed scrutiny of individual responsibilities towards Brazil's unequal class structure. By exposing its own aesthetic options through self-reflexive voice-over commentary, *Santiago* offers an interesting insight into *Foreign Land's* respectful cinephilia, which draws on Wim Wenders's early unpretentious road movies as well as Wenders's own aesthetic models, such as Ozu, as we will see below.

On the level of the fable, *Foreign Land* is all about defeat and loss of self-esteem. Its storyline combines three basic strands: the nefarious consequences of an unscrupulous government; the fate of an émigré widow, Manuela, living in São Paulo, who dies before realizing her dream to return to her native Basque Country; and the misfortunes of Brazilian exiles in Portugal. The time frame is contemporary, the early 1990s, a moment when economic constraints had turned Brazil 'into a country of emigration, for the first time in 500 years' in the words of scriptwriters Thomas, Bernstein and Salles.⁷

The main character, Paco, represents one of the 800,000 emigrants who left the country during the less than two years of the Collor government. His mother, Manuela, dies of a suspected heart attack when she realizes, from a government TV broadcast, that her meagre savings, meant to finance her trip back to San Sebastián in the Basque Country, have been confiscated. With the death of his widowed mother, Paco is left completely bereft and falls prey to Igor, a Mephistophelean character who offers him a trip to Portugal. He thus becomes unwittingly embroiled in an international diamond-trafficking scheme. In Lisbon, Paco meets and falls for another expatriate Brazilian older than him, Alex, who has just lost her junkie saxophonist boyfriend, killed in a diamond-related dispute. Paco and Alex make their way towards what becomes for them an ersatz homeland, San Sebastián, but end up in the hands of the enemy.

Its formal modesty and defeatist storyline notwithstanding, the film displays a considerable intellectual thrust. The range of cinematic references resorted to includes Welles and *Touch of Evil* (1958) for the camera work, Antonioni for the meditative scenes, Truffaut and Godard's early *nouvelle vague* films for the black and white and location shots, Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) for the lost diamonds at the end, and many others.⁸ Literary citations abound, including Goethe, Euripides, Shakespeare, Vinicius de Moraes and, not least, Fernando Pessoa. Despite his humble origin, Paco, who lives on the earnings of his seamstress mother, intends to become an actor and take the role of no less than Faust in Goethe's classic play. As is well known, Faust is not only Goethe's most ambitious character,

but the protagonist of his most central work, a multigenre, multiform piece, which evolved through the author's life for about sixty years. The figure of Faust is characterized by an insatiable thirst for knowledge, which to a great extent reflects that of Goethe himself and draws to the hero the attention of God and the Devil.⁹ In the opening scene of *Foreign Land*, Paco is rehearsing the verses from which the film title is extracted, and which expresses Faust's delusions of power:

Even now my powers are loftier, clearer;
 I glow, as drunk with new-made wine:
 New strength and heart to meet the world incite me,
 The woe of earth, the bliss of earth, invite me,
 And though the shock of storms may smite me
 No crash of shipwreck shall have power to fright me!
 . . .
 I feel thy presence, Spirit, I invoke!
 Reveal thyself!
 Ha! In my heart what rending stroke!
 . . .
 Let them drop down the golden atmosphere,
 And bear me forth to new and varied being!
 Yea, if a magic mantle once were mine,
 To waft me o'er the world at pleasure,
 I would not for the costliest stores of treasure –
 Not for a monarch's robe – the gift resign.¹⁰

Inspired by these verses, later on in the film Paco will gather courage to face a bunch of powerful enemies and flee with Alex, thus unleashing the chase sequences which drive the plot to a climax. The 'shipwreck' which Goethe's hero remains unafraid of will also re-emerge in Paco's story, acquiring special significance, as we shall see. For the time being, let us note that the Brazilian translation of the verses above, utilized in the film to signify Faust's dream of exploring the world in a magic mantle, employs the term *terras estrangeiras* ('foreign lands') for 'world at pleasure'.

But not only Goethe lies at the origin of the title. Another, more important reference is Brazil's foremost film-maker, Glauber Rocha, who made a famous 'land trilogy' (*trilogia da terra*), which comprises *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, 1964), *Terra em transe* (*Entranced Earth*, 1967) and *A idade da terra* (*The Age of the Earth*, 1981). Glauber's obsession with the national project, as well as his megalomania, are encapsulated in the recurrent use, in his film titles, of the term *terra*, which in Portuguese means at the same time 'land',

'country' and the entire 'Earth'. And indeed his cosmogonic vision of history progressed from the Brazilian land, in *Black God, White Devil*, to Latin America in *Entranced Earth* to finally encompass the whole planet in *The Age of the Earth*.

As well as quoting Glauber's films by using the word 'land' (*terra*), *Foreign Land* re-elaborates crucial aspects of the first two parts of the trilogy, which are *Cinema Novo* landmarks, *Black God, White Devil* and *Entranced Earth*. These films present a dialectical structure which owes to Glauber's pioneering move of drawing on the country's foundational mythology as a means to explain its ongoing political processes. On the basis of sixteenth-century utopian myths, derived from the discovery imaginary such as the belief in Eldorado in the New World and the island of Utopia itself, Glauber developed a monumental imagery to express his heroes' great expectations in contrast with the country's tragic reality.¹¹

Oppositional binaries, inspired by Sartre (*The Devil and the Good Lord*) and Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*), which echo *Faust's* rivalry between God and the Devil, make the core of *Black God, White Devil*. Its protagonist, the rebel cowherd Manuel, is torn between two antagonistic leaders, the religious preacher Sebastião and the outlaw Corisco (the right hand of the famous Lampião), who are themselves alternately defined as good and evil, dwarfs and giants, as in the epigraph above. At the end of this film, shot just before the 1964 military coup put an end to the hopes of the Left, aerial shots of the infinite *sertão* (the arid backlands of the Brazilian north-east) are replaced by images of a vast sea in a famous sequence suggestive of the social revolution. However *Entranced Earth*, shot in the period of disillusionment that followed the military coup, provides a negative sequel to this ending. The film opens with monumental aerial shots of the sea's gleaming silver surface leading to a country of lush forests referred to as 'Eldorado'. But paradise regained is only presented to be immediately deconstructed as a privilege of the ruling classes, while utopianism is blamed for the inequality which has reigned in Brazil from its birth.

Nearly thirty years later, *Foreign Land* revisits Glauber's dialectics as a way of reflecting on a new political crisis in Brazil. According to Salles, at the origin of the film are the photographs of a shipwreck on the Cape Verde coast, taken by Jean-Pierre Favreau. Salles took his crew and cast to Cape Verde to shoot the lead couple in their flight to San Sebastián against the backdrop of this shipwreck.¹² Although at this point in the story Paco and Alex are still unscathed and, like Goethe's hero, unafraid of the world, the metaphorical shipwreck



Figure 8.2: The lead couple is shot against the backdrop of a shipwreck. Image from *Foreign Land* (Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, 1995), reproduced by kind permission of Videofilmes.

indicates their forthcoming defeat. It also provides a visual rhyme to the ‘old ship’ bound for some unknown destination mentioned in the song ‘Vapor barato’ (‘Cheap Steamer’), by Jards Macalé and Waly Salomão, sung by Alex in the diegesis and Gal Costa in the extradiegetic soundtrack. These poetic ship metaphors, however, only gain consistency and historical resonance thanks to Glauber and his maritime imagery, resorted to in a key scene of the film.

Paco and Alex find themselves at Cape Espichel, defined in the film as Europe’s mostst westerly point,¹³ seated at the edge of a precipice beyond which lies the vast open sea. For a moment the sea fills the frame, before the camera drifts back to capture Alex and Paco from behind, looking out to the sea before them. A dialogue follows:

Alex: You have no idea of where you are, do you? This is the tip of Europe. (*Flinging her arms open*) This is the end! What courage, don’t you think? To cross this sea five hundred years ago . . . Just because they thought paradise was there. (*She points left towards the horizon.*) Poor Portuguese. . . they ended up discovering Brazil.

Paco laughs. Alex remains serious.

Alex: What are you laughing about?

Though an unmistakable reference to Glauber, these monumental sea images, connected by the dialogue to the imaginary of the discovery

and Brazil's foundational myths, present a decisive difference from their model in that they are territorially attached to Portugal, rather than Brazil. Through this radical perspective shift Brazil's situation is redefined as periphery and its territory reduced to irrelevant – even invisible – proportions within a global context. As a result, Brazil's foundational myth becomes the butt of a joke.

For Marilena Chauí, one of the effects of the foundational myth at the base of Brazilian authoritarian regimes is to reassert the belief in the country as a gift from God and Nature, whose problems derive from external causes, among them the colonization by Portugal, rather than another (supposedly 'better') European nation (France and Holland are some of the alternative countries which, in the early colonial times, had attempted to capture Brazil from the Portuguese domain without success).¹⁴ By adopting an external point of view, the maritime scene in *Foreign Land* turns this myth on its head and Brazil becomes the bad luck in Portuguese history, rather than the other way round.

With this majestic maritime scene, *Foreign Land* leads a trend in the Brazilian film revival of the mid 1990s of resorting to sea imagery as a way of reconnecting with and revising Glauber's and *Cinema Novo's* national project, thus becoming a foundational film in its own right. There is no lack of examples: *Baile Perfumado* (*Perfumed Ball*, Paulo Caldas and Lírio Ferreira, 1996), *Corisco e Dadá* (*Corisco and Dadá*, Rosemberg Cariry, 1996), *Crede-mi* (*Believe Me*, Bia Lessa and Dany Roland, 1997), *Bocage – o triunfo do amor* (*Bocage – The Triumph of Love*, Djalma Limongi Batista, 1998), *Hans Staden* (Luiz Alberto Pereira, 1999), and even Walter Salles's own *Abril despedaçado* (*Behind the Sun*, 2001).¹⁵

Foreign Land thus defines itself as a direct, though modest, heir of past cinematic milestones. Accordingly, its protagonist, Paco, is characterized as a downgraded descendant of sixteenth-century heroes. Verbal puns and explicative dialogue make such connections explicit. Paco's full name is Francisco Eizaguirre, a surname which Igor (played by the forceful theatre actor Luis Melo) pronounces detachedly as 'Ex-Aguirre', in a reference to Dom Lope de Aguirre, the Spanish conquistador who famously sailed to South America in search of Eldorado. Alongside the historical fact, the relevant reference here is the film *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, Werner Herzog, 1972), which was not only partly shot in Brazil and starred, among others, *Cinema Novo* film-maker Ruy Guerra, but was deeply influenced by Glauber and his megalomania. Igor describes the time

of the discoveries as that of ‘visionaries’, just as Herzog, in his early days, used to be described – and enjoyed describing himself.

Gilles Deleuze has observed the way in which in Herzog’s films, including *Aguirre*, the dialectics of the large and the small result in ‘the sublimation of the large form and the enfeeblement of the small form’, something that characterizes Herzog as ‘the most metaphysical of cinema directors’.¹⁶ *Foreign Land*’s powerful imagery, under the direction of the exceptional cinematographer Walter Carvalho, would certainly stand comparison with Glauber’s and Herzog’s metaphysical visions, were it not for the accompanying self-ironic text through which the hero remains imprisoned within his earthly dimensions. When Igor compares Paco to great names of gold and diamond hunters, this is just a way of enticing the unsuspecting youngster to become a mule in his international smuggling operations. Through Igor’s cultivated speech, which includes mentions of Aleijadinho (Brazil’s greatest baroque sculptor), one learns about a Brazilian tradition, harking back to the colonial times, of smuggling gold and precious stones inside hollow wooden statues of saints (*santos do pau oco*). Igor’s remark leads to the image of the expatriate Miguel, involved in illegal trafficking, hammering onto a wooden saint to extract a bag of diamonds, thus confirming the degradation of current descendants of past conquistadors.

Wenders and the Elusive Nation

The wiping out of the Brazilian nation through a perspective shift offers the film-makers an opportunity to reconnect with Wim Wenders, whose early works are structured upon the character of the modern wanderer in search of an elusive homeland. The Salles brothers, and Walter in particular, are self-confessed admirers of Wenders.¹⁷ Salles’s kinship with the German director can be easily observed in his interest in aimless travellers, reminiscent of the characters in *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*, Wim Wenders, 1976) and *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*, Wim Wenders, 1974). In *Foreign Land*, the option for black and white, though primarily due to economic concerns, is no less tributary to Wenders’s avowed preference for this style in his early films. ‘Life is in color, but black-and-white is more realistic’, declares the cameraman Joe, Wenders’s alter-ego in the film *Der Stand der Dinge* (*The State of Things*, Wim Wenders, 1982). And indeed Wenders made a point of shooting this film, set in Portugal, in black and white as

a form of protest against Coppola, the producer of *Hammett* (Wim Wenders, 1982), who had him shoot this homage to American film noir in colour. Needless to say, *The State of Things* is a decisive influence on *Foreign Land*, with its Portuguese settings and displaced characters lodged in a 'shipwreck' hotel half sunk into the sea. By an intriguing coincidence, Wenders was again exercising his independent filmmaking penchant in Portugal with *Lisbon Story* (Wim Wenders, 1994), at the time when Salles, Thomas and their team were over there working on *Foreign Land*.¹⁸

Homelessness and loss of identity are typical of Wenders's characters, who in their travels are constantly photographing places, people and themselves as a 'proof that they exist'.¹⁹ In *Foreign Land*, the Wendersian photographic proof of identity is translated into didactic images of identity documents, for example when Paco forges his mother's signature in order to withdraw money for her burial, which cuts to a close-up of the late Manuela's identity card. In another passage, Alex, after her boyfriend has spent all her savings on drugs, sees herself obliged to sell her own passport to a gang of Spaniards, who pay a pittance for it because 'it is Brazilian' ('*es brasileiro*'). Another close-up of her Brazilian passport is duly provided. Both Paco and Alex are, in fact, ridding themselves of the 'stigma' of being Brazilian, while looking for a sense of belonging which is nowhere to be found.

Another of the film's common features with Wenders are deserted or estranged landscapes and cityscapes, often adorned with signboards or adverts in the manner of ironic comments. An emblematic example in Wenders's work is the town sign 'Paris' in a Texas desert (*Paris, Texas*, 1984), which is reminiscent of Ozu's shots of shop signs in English to hint at the American presence in occupied Japan. Similar compositions can be found in *Foreign Land*, such as the shot of a huge billboard advertising the underwear *Hope* against the backdrop of the Minhocão, or 'big worm', a dreadful flyover in the heart of São Paulo constructed during the military dictatorship, next to which Paco and his mother live. Rather than 'hope' for the characters involved, what follows is Manuela's death and Paco's trip abroad that ends with his being fatally wounded.

The Invention of San Sebastián

Some apparently random options in the film on a closer look reveal a surprising resonance with both Portuguese and Brazilian history and

mythology. One of them is the choice of San Sebastián as Manuela's birthplace, a city which, in the film, is endowed with a sort of mystic aura, given that she dies before going back there and that Paco also fails to reach it on his escape from Portugal and Igor's persecution. San Sebastián may have been an entirely fortuitous choice, due, for example, to its attractive rocky formations stamped on a postcard found among Manuela's cherished assets – or simply because it is popular among film-makers for its famous yearly international film festival.

However, a few details give it particular significance in this film. Firstly, it is located in the Basque Country, known for its long struggle for independence from Spain and recognition of its own national identity. Its uniqueness is reinforced by the fact that very little is known about the origin of the Basque language, which does not belong to the Indo-European family. Identity, and national identity, are thus coherent, though tacit, links between the place and the film's subject matter.

Secondly, and more importantly, the repetition of the name 'San Sebastián' throughout the film as a leitmotiv leads to unavoidable associations with Sebastianism, Portugal's most important patriotic myth. And indeed on the level of the montage, attentively steered by Salles himself, the first time the words 'San Sebastián' are pronounced by Manuela, the image that follows is a ferry crossing the Tagus, in Lisbon. The viewer is thus introduced to Portugal in connection with (and submission to) Spain, even before the story relocates there, after having started overseas in São Paulo. The overlap of Portugal and Spain through the mention of San Sebastián has a second, more profound resonance in that the Sebastian myth was developed during the period when Portugal was dominated by Spain. This association is endorsed in the film by the definition of Portugal as peripheral to Europe, and therefore to Spain, through a number of dialogue lines. For example: shortly before being killed, Miguel tells Pedro that he is going away to 'Europe' with Alex, and Pedro retorts: 'You'll have to get in Europe first'.

As for Sebastianism, it is a myth perpetuated through a number of religious sects over the centuries both in Portugal and Brazil. Its origin harks back to the episode of the disappearance of Dom Sebastião, 'o Desejado' (Sebastian I, 'the Desired'), king of Portugal, in the battle of Ksar-el-Kebir in Morocco in 1578. Because the twenty-four year old king was the last heir to the Portuguese throne after a long hereditary crisis, his death caused a power vacuum. There followed a two-year

dynastic dispute which was eventually resolved in 1580 with the victory of Philip II, king of Spain, whose army invaded Portugal. In the following year, 1581, Philip II was recognized as king of Portugal, and the country remained annexed to Spain for the following sixty years.

As a result, a belief took shape in Portugal that Sebastian was not dead and would return to redeem the Portuguese people. The essence of Sebastianism can thus be summarized as nostalgia for the lost homeland. In association with it, the Portuguese word *saudade* – normally translated as ‘nostalgia’, but which includes an element of passive waiting and longing – has acquired the quality of a national trait. As the humorous remark of Portuguese novelist Eça de Queiroz goes, ‘*procrastinare lusitanum est*’, or ‘to procrastinate is typical of the Portuguese’.²⁰

António Machado Pires describes Sebastianism as an ‘indolence motivated by the confidence in the King’s return’,²¹ an attitude that leads to inaction and submission to authoritarian regimes, in the same way described by Chauí about the Brazilian foundational myth. In the apt definition by António Quadros, ‘Sebastianism is based on. . . the painful awareness (*consciência infeliz*) of the Portuguese reality. . . and places its bet on the hope of regeneration through a personal savior, a leader distinguished by charisma and fate’. This ‘painful awareness’, according to Quadros, ‘is the foremost and clearest feature of *The Lusiads*’.²² Significantly, Portugal’s greatest epic poem, Luiz de Camões’s *The Lusiads*, about the adventures of the navigator and discoverer Vasco da Gama, is dedicated to none other than Sebastian. Thriving through Portuguese literary history, Sebastianism also marks the *oeuvre* of Almeida Garrett, Father Vieira (who spent most of his life in Brazil) and, not least, Fernando Pessoa, the author of innumerable Sebastianic writings with patriotic undertones, in which Sebastian is defined as the very embodiment of Portugal.²³

Sebastianism was introduced in Brazil in early colonial times and acquired the form of a conservative attachment to monarchy after the establishment of the republican regime in 1889. The famous rebellions of Canudos and Pedra Bonita, focused on by Glauber Rocha in *Black God, White Devil*, were Sebastianist movements, animated by the hope that Sebastian would return in the person of a messianic saviour, redeem the poor and provide them with a fairer homeland.

In Portugal, Sebastianism has deeper roots, which hark back to a time prior to Sebastian’s disappearance. A predecessor of the Sebastian myth is that of the ‘Encoberto’ king, sung by the legendary shoemaker Bandarra in the early sixteenth century. According to the

legend, the Encoberto would emerge from the salt sea mounting an unharnessed horse.²⁴ Euclides da Cunha, the author of one of the most seminal books in Brazilian literature, *Rebellion in the Backlands*, a detailed account of the rebellion of Canudos, records a similar prophecy among the rebels in relation to the return of Sebastian: ‘In truth I say unto you, when nation falls out with nation, Brazil with Brazil, England with England, Prussia with Prussia, then shall Dom Sebastião with all his army arise from the waves of the sea’.²⁵

In Glauber’s *Black God, White Devil*, inspired to a great extent by Euclides’s account, Sebastianism is incarnated by the messianic leader São Sebastião (Saint Sebastian), who utters the apocalyptic prophecy that ‘The backlands will turn to sea, and the sea into backlands’. This slogan leads to the film’s famous closure, in which the revolutionary sea replaces the arid backlands. As we have seen, images of the sea have become, ever since, a privileged cinematic representation of the Brazilian Utopia.

Foreign Land’s chain of references is thus a construction *en abîme*, as it suggests the cyclical recurrence of the search for the lost homeland throughout history. San Sebastián, a city in search of a land, reflects Sebastianism, originated in a time when Portugal had ceased to be an independent nation in the sixteenth century, a situation which comes to inflect the story of Brazilian expatriates in a moment of national crisis in the present. This occasions the revision of the maritime utopia of the discovery, utilized in Glauber’s *Cinema Novo* films as allegories of Brazil’s contemporary problems. In *Foreign Land*, the plight of sixteenth-century discoverers, who risked their lives in search of gold and precious stones, reflects on the lives of current Brazilian emigrants, involved as they are with trafficking in diamonds and drugs.

In its recycling process, the discovery mythology acquires new features and loses a few others. Glauber’s concern was mainly political. He had resorted to the mythology of the discovery as a means of analysing the vicious power structure in present-day Brazil. *Foreign Land* however is much rather about the end of politics, symbolized by the traumatic TV images of finance minister Zélia Cardoso de Mello announcing the freezing of all bank accounts. The disaster to an individual life that ensues – the abrupt death of Manuela – sends the story back from the public to the private domain. As I have pointed out elsewhere,²⁶ the focus here is on individual destinies of middle-class characters, affected by an economic recession, rather than a structural class struggle. While in a Glauber film such as *Entranced Earth* the utopian Eldorado was discarded as part of a baleful foundational

mythology, in *Foreign Land* it responds to a positive belief of the middle classes, endorsed (as a loss) by the enunciation. Glauber's symbolic characters, driven by the urge to change the world, are here replaced by common individuals, moved by personal aspirations. Accordingly, the 'fatherland' gives way to the 'father', politics to religion and revolution to a love affair.

While on the aesthetic level the film-makers are searching for affiliation among the great in Brazilian and international cinema, in the story Paco is looking for his own missing father in the person of his mother's mythical father back in the unattainable homeland of San Sebastián. Manuela constantly remarks on Paco's resemblance to his grandfather, through which the son overlaps with the father in the same way that Jesus equals God by sitting on his Father's right-hand side in the Christian mythology. When Paco, his arms wide open, tries on the clothes that his mother has been commissioned to make, he is compared by one of her customers to 'Christ the Redeemer' (the famous statue on the Corcovado in Rio). Later on he is photographed under a bare stone cross in a public square, in an unequivocal indication of his sacrificial ending. *Aitá* ('father', in Basque) is the last word Manuela utters before she dies. And Paco finally dies in the arms of Alex, the substitute mother, before he reaches the utopian San Sebastián. But here social cinema has already lost touch with reality to enter the realm of the crime thriller genre and its corresponding rules.



Figure 8.3: Paco is characterized as 'Christ the Redeemer'.
Image from *Foreign Land* (Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, 1995),
reproduced by kind permission of Videofilmes.

The Transnational Portuguese

Foreign Land is also fascinating from the linguistic point of view, combining as it does a variety of Portuguese accents and dialectal variations. These often articulate with the images, the music and the editing through aural and visual rhymes. In this respect, Millôr Fernandes's contribution cannot be underestimated. A playwright, cartoonist and brilliant translator, Fernandes supplied the film with a number of puns and self-reflexive dialogue lines which testify to a fine sensibility for linguistic peculiarities.

One of the disconcerting discoveries for Brazilians in the film seems to be the realization that they have been a colonized people alongside the Africans. Such a statement may sound surprising for readers unfamiliar with Brazil's colonial history, as they may not be aware that during the Napoleonic wars, in 1808, the entire Portuguese court, including the emperor, John VI, relocated to Rio de Janeiro, which became the capital of the empire until shortly before Brazil declared independence in 1822. Thus the memory of colonialism, for Brazilians, is not as clear and painful as for those who remained under Portuguese domination until the late twentieth century. In the film, Brazilians are repeatedly reminded of the fact that they are former Portuguese subjects. This also brings forth the awareness that Portugal holds the primacy of the Portuguese language. The following comment by Alex shows how her use of vernacular Portuguese has been denaturalized through the contact with native Portuguese: 'I'm becoming increasingly aware of my accent, that my voice is an insult to their ears'.

Miguel resentfully refers to the bar where he plays saxophone as 'the cabaret of the colonies', to which his friend Pedro, the Portuguese bookshop owner reminiscent of Fernando Pessoa, with his round spectacles and proverbial mode of address, retorts: 'This is a site where there are folks from everywhere, from the *Brasis*, from the *Angolas*, from the *Guinés*, what do you want? This is how it is!'²⁷

The film then proceeds to focus on real Lusophone Africans residing in Portugal who, in the fictional plot, share with Brazilians their semi-legal status. Their spoken Creole Portuguese also offers the Brazilians an opportunity to reflect on the Brazilian vernacular from an external perspective. Daniela Thomas, in the extras of the DVD of *Foreign Land*, talks about the laboratory training she carried out with African immigrants in Portugal in order to become familiar with what she jokingly terms *pretoguês*, a word which amalgamates 'black'

(*preto*) and ‘Portuguese’ (*português*).²⁸ And indeed most non-African Portuguese speakers would need a glossary to decipher the rich vocabulary used in the film.²⁹

Not only are non-Africans puzzled by Lusophone African speakers, but the reverse is also true, as illustrated in this humorous dialogue between Paco and Loli, an Angolan immigrant played by José Laplaine (a Malian film-maker residing in Paris in real life), upon Paco’s return from a night of love with Alex:

Paco: She started it all, you know? Took hold of me and. . . (*embarrassed*) ate me.

Loli: How do you mean?

Paco: She ate me.

Loli: She ate you?

Paco: She ate me.

Loli laughs a lot.

Loli: *A-ka*, Brazilian, so she ate you! Well, I’ll go out tonight and dine on some chick. (*laughing a lot*) Ah, you people are really something. Ah! And it’s us they call cannibals! Ate you. . .

Paco: She ate me and, the morning after, she acted like we’d never met, man. Since I’ve been here the weirdest things keep happening.

Loli: What did you expect from Lisbon, Brazilian?

Paco: I don’t know. . . at least to discover something. After all, they set out from here to discover the whole world.

Loli: (*laughing and pointing to the bridge*) Portugal? It takes them three hours to cross that fucking bridge! You’re kidding!

Various interesting elements can be drawn from this conversation. The first is that native Brazilians do indeed have a past of cannibalism, which was recorded in minute detail by European travellers in the sixteenth century, such as Jean de Léry, André Thevet and Hans Staden. Their accounts supplied rich pickings for late *Cinema Novo* films, such as *Como era gostoso o meu francês* (*How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1971) and more recently to *Hans Staden*. Cannibalism, or ‘anthropophagy’, inspired by the customs of Tupi Indians, was celebrated by the modernist movement of the 1920s and 30s as a component of Brazilian national identity and metaphorically translated into a means of devouring European

culture and exporting it back to Europe in the form of national artworks. In *Foreign Land*, the curious trace of Brazil's cannibal past found in current Brazilian-Portuguese slang, alongside Paco's naive belief in Portugal's grandeur, draws attention to the fact that Brazilians are still attached to the colonial times, while Africans have a more realistic picture of Portugal's current status. The film as a whole conveys the idea that Brazilians have indeed arrived a few centuries late to board the ship to utopia. Pedro, in one of his proverbial utterances of Pessoaan overtones, says to Paco: 'This isn't the right place to find anyone. It is a land of people who left for the sea. It's the ideal place to lose someone or get lost from oneself.'

The mutual contact and contamination among the different Portuguese accents entailed by national and international migratory fluxes again indicates the dilution of one's nation and identity. Paco has a São Paulo accent which sticks out when confronted with the speech of the two other Brazilians who are already settled in Portugal and enmeshed in the circuit of language exchange. Miguel, with his musical ear, feels at ease playing with the local Portuguese accent. He uses the second person singular (unlike Brazilians, who address each other in the third person) and slang typical of Portugal, as well as several Creole terms. In a dialogue with the Portuguese taxi driver and diamond dealer André, both exchange Portuguese and Brazilian accents between themselves, to the point of confusing the viewer as to who comes from where. When Miguel is bargaining with a potential buyer of his diamonds in the back seat of André's taxi, André becomes increasingly suspicious, until he bursts out: 'Are we speaking the same language or what?'

Conclusion

As a whole, *Foreign Land* presents a subtle criticism of the provincial jingoism derived from the Brazilian foundational myth and internal point of view. At the same time it declares allegiance to a certain international, self-critical and self-reflexive cinema, keen on metalanguage and citation. By paying homage to giants in the fields of film and literature, through the filter of Wenders and Glauber, it universalizes the question of the loss of identity, thus reducing and relativizing the importance of the national imaginary.

However, its anti-utopian imagery and text refer to a degraded middle class for whom the comparison of Brazil to Eldorado had made

some sense until Collor's austerity measures put a temporary end to this belief. Rather than the oppressed masses Glauber had focused on, the story here is about characters who led a decent life, with plenty of intellectual and artistic ambitions, before they were forced into exile and lowly jobs, such as waitress in a low-class bar, or even illegal activities, such as dealing in drugs and precious stones. Paco was a physics student at the prestigious University of São Paulo (as the sticker on his bedroom window indicates), who wanted to be an actor, before becoming unwittingly involved with criminals. Miguel was a musician and composer whose current illegal activities are primarily due to the poor reception of his music in exile. Even Alex had musical ambitions, as the viewer discovers at the end of the film, when in a rare relaxing moment she sings 'Vapor Barato' and says: 'This is how I used to be'.

And indeed the social problems highlighted in *Foreign Land* proved circumstantial and easy to resolve. Brazil's political and financial situation soon improved, with Collor's impeachment in 1992 and the establishment of the democratic neoliberal government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1993. The Cardoso government immediately put in place a new film-financing system based on tax discounts, which led to a new boom of films, known as the *Retomada do Cinema Brasileiro* (the 'Brazilian Film Revival'), whose first output appeared in the mid 1990s. The most representative film of this renaissance, awarded the Golden Bear in Berlin and internationally feted as the symbol of Brazil's cinematic revival, was *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, Walter Salles, 1998). In it, the mythic centre which had been lost in Salles's previous film, *Foreign Land*, is regained and clearly identified with Brazil from the film's very title, which in Portuguese means the 'centre of Brazil' as well as the name of a Rio train station.

Central Station is a celebration of homeland rediscovered in the very territory of poverty, the dry hinterlands of the north-east, where Glauber Rocha had set two of his most famous films, *Black God, White Devil* and *O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro* (*Antônio das Mortes*, 1969). As such it turns all the symbolism of *Foreign Land* on its head. A recurrent image in *Foreign Land* is that of sacrificial sons, who lie in the lap of protective mother figures, such as the scene of Miguel in the lap of Alex, shortly before he is killed, and that in which Paco, also in Alex's lap, lies dying from a bullet wound while Alex carries on driving to a hypothetical home in San Sebastián. These Pietà tableaux are reversed when, in *Central Station*, the lost boy's substitute mother finally succeeds in taking him back to his homeland in the

core of Brazil, the north-eastern hinterlands. At this point, the boy Josué identifies with his missing father, not accidentally called Jesus, and offers his own lap to an exhausted mother figure who has triumphantly accomplished her mission. This is the moment when fiction re-encounters religion and the foundational myth, in a radical shift away from Brazil's real history.

Notes

- 1 This essay was originally published in D. Iordanova, D. Martin-Jones & B. Vidal (eds), *Cinema at the Periphery: Industries, Narratives, Iconography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010). Translations of quoted material are provided by the author, unless stated otherwise.
- 2 'O Tejo é mais belo que o rio que corre pela minha aldeia,/Mas o Tejo não é mais belo que o rio que corre pela minha aldeia/Porque o Tejo não é o rio que corre pela minha aldeia'. Alberto Caeiro, 'O guardador de rebanhos', in Fernando Pessoa, *Ficções do interlúdio/1 – Poemas completos de Alberto Caeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1975), p. 60. I used here Peter Rickard's translation in Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971), p. 125.
- 3 'Lampião era grande, mas também ficava pequeno'. See dialogue list of *Black God, White Devil*, in Glauber Rocha, *Roteiros do Terceyro Mundo* (Rio de Janeiro: Alhambra/Embrafilme, 1985), p. 281.
- 4 Sebastianism, which includes a sense of nostalgia for the homeland and the belief in a mythical saviour, is discussed in detail later in the chapter.
- 5 Walter Salles interviewed by Marcelo Carrard Araujo, in Lúcia Nagib, *O cinema da retomada – depoimentos de 90 cineastas dos anos 90* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2002), p. 418.
- 6 Salles interviewed by Araujo, p. 418.
- 7 Daniela Thomas, Marcos Bernstein and Walter Salles, *Terra estrangeira* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1996), p. 5.
- 8 For more on *Foreign Land's* aesthetic models, see commented track of the film in the DVD *Terra estrangeira*, commemorative edition, 1995–2005 by Videofilmes, www.vfilmes.com.br.
- 9 For a study of the embattlement between God and the Devil in Goethe's *Faust*, see Haroldo de Campos, *Deus e o diabo no Fausto de Goethe* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1981), p. 71.
- 10 Quoted from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, trans. Bayard Taylor (London: Ward, Lock, 1889), pp. 14–15, 32. These passages are quoted in the film script *Terra estrangeira* as follows: 'Sinto meus poderes aumentarem, estou ardendo, bêbado de um novo vinho. Sinto a coragem, o ímpeto de ir ao mundo, de carregar a dor da terra, o prazer da terra, de lutar contra

as tempestades, de enfrentar a ira do trovão . . . Os espíritos pairam próximos. Me ouvem! Desçam! Desçam dessa atmosfera áurea e levem-me daqui para uma vida nova e variada! Que um manto mágico seja meu e me carregue para terras estrangeiras! (p. 7).

- 11 For a full discussion of Brazil's utopian mythology in relation to Glauber's works and the New Brazilian Cinema, see Lúcia Nagib, *Brazil on Screen: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
- 12 Thomas, Bernstein, Salles, *Terra estrangeira*, p. 5.
- 13 The true most western point in Portugal (and therefore in Europe) is Cape Roca, not far from Espichel.
- 14 Marilena Chauí, *Brasil: mito fundador e sociedade autoritária* (São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2000), p. 8.
- 15 See Chapter 1, 'Images of the Sea', in Nagib, *Brazil on Screen*.
- 16 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London/New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 185.
- 17 Salles interviewed by Araujo, p. 419.
- 18 See comments in this respect made by Daniela Thomas in interview to Araujo, in Nagib, *O cinema da retomada*, pp. 485–6.
- 19 This line is spoken by Alice, in *Alice in the Cities*. See in this respect Peter Buchka, *Augen kann man nicht kaufen: Wim Wenders und seine Filme* (Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser, 1983), chapter 3.
- 20 Quoted in António Machado Pires, *D. Sebastião e o encoberto – estudo e antologia* (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1982), p. 13.
- 21 Machado Pires, *D. Sebastião e o encoberto*, p. 14.
- 22 António Quadros, *Poesia e filosofia do mito sebastianista: o sebastianismo em Portugal e no Brasil* (Lisboa: Guimarães & Cia., 1982), p. 39 ff.
- 23 See António Quadros (ed.), *Obra em prosa de Fernando Pessoa: Portugal, Sebastianismo e Quinto Império* (Mem Martins: Europa América, 1986).
- 24 Pires, p. 38 ff.
- 25 Euclides da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands*, trans. Samuel Putnam (London/Basingstoke: Picador, 1995), p. 194.
- 26 Nagib, *Brazil on Screen*, p. 21.
- 27 In the original: '*Isto é um sítio em que vem gente de todo lado, pá, dos brasis, das angolás, das guinés, o que é que tu queres? É assim, pá!*'
- 28 DVD *Terra estrangeira*.
- 29 Some of the ear-catching Luso-African terms are: *madjé, xota, wafekia, panco, vadiluka, n'gueta, umbivalé, anhaunbité, kigila, mambo, maka*. They derive from local languages in Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Angola and Mozambique.

Filmography

- A grande arte (Exposure)*, Walter Salles, Brazil/USA, 1991).
A idade da terra (The Age of the Earth), Glauber Rocha, Brazil, 1981).

- Abril despedaçado* (*Behind the Sun*, Walter Salles, Brazil/France/Switzerland, 2001).
- Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, Werner Herzog, Germany, 1972).
- Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*, Wim Wenders, Germany, 1974).
- Baile Perfumado* (*Perfumed Ball*, Paulo Caldas & Lírio Ferreira, Brazil, 1996).
- Bocage – o triunfo do amor* (*Bocage – The Triumph of Love*, Djalma Limongi Batista, Brazil/Portugal, 1998).
- Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, Walter Salles, Brazil/France, 1998).
- Como era gostoso o meu francês* (*How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Brazil, 1971).
- Corisco e Dadá* (*Corisco and Dadá*, Rosemberg Cariry, Brazil, 1996).
- Crede-mi* (*Believe Me*, Bia Lessa and Dany Roland, Brazil, 1997).
- Der Stand der Dinge* (*The State of Things*, Wim Wenders, Germany/Portugal/USA, 1982).
- Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, Glauber Rocha, Brazil, 1964).
- Hammett* (Wim Wenders, USA, 1982).
- Hans Staden* (Luiz Alberto Pereira, Brazil/Portugal, 1999).
- Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*, Wim Wenders, Germany, 1976).
- Lisbon Story* (Wim Wenders, Germany/Portugal, 1994).
- O dragão da maldade contra o santo guerreiro* (*Antonio das Mortes*, Glauber Rocha, Brazil, 1969).
- Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, France/Germany, 1984).
- Santiago* (João Moreira Salles, Brazil, 2007).
- Terra em transe* (*Entranced Earth*, Glauber Rocha, Brazil, 1967).
- Terra estrangeira* (*Foreign Land*, Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, Brazil/Portugal, 1995).
- The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (John Huston, USA, 1948).
- Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, USA, 1958).

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