

# *On cinema*

Book

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Preface and Acknowledgements

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## **Glauber Rocha *On Cinema***

### **Preface and Acknowledgements**

It is now 11 years since we first embarked, in 2007, on the project to bring for the first time to the English reader the key writings on cinema by Brazil's most iconic filmmaker and *cinema novo* founder, Glauber Rocha. The project coincided with the launch of the IB Tauris World Cinema Series, which includes among its aims to reveal to audiences around the world the diversity, creativity and originality of thought on cinema produced in languages other than English. A prolific and eloquent writer, Rocha left his thoughts and daily experiences minutely registered in thousands of press articles, letters, manifestoes, poems, novels and plays, many of them available in book form in the Portuguese language, collected in volumes prepared by Rocha himself or by dedicated scholars such as Ivana Bentes, who in 1997 edited *Cartas ao mundo* (Letters to the World),<sup>1</sup> a hefty and precious selection of his international correspondence.

The current collection of articles was facilitated by the fact that publisher CosacNaify, in São Paulo, had just launched, between 2003 and 2006, the most complete, entirely revised, superbly designed and richly illustrated editions of Rocha's three foundational books of film criticism he had himself organized: *Revisão crítica do cinema brasileiro* (Critical Review of Brazilian Cinema, first published in 1963); *Revolução do Cinema Novo* (The Cinema Novo Revolution, first published in 1981); and *O século do cinema* (The Century of Cinema, first published posthumously in 1983, two years after Rocha's untimely death at 42 years of age). Ismail Xavier, Rocha's greatest specialist and foremost Brazilian film scholar, having actively contributed to and introduced these new editions, graciously accepted to select and introduce writings extracted from them that would provide a concise but representative profile of Rocha as a film writer for the English reader. Because CosacNaify was in possession of all copyrights of the materials included in the three volumes, negotiations proceeded swiftly and cheaply, not least thanks to the goodwill and commitment on

the part of CosacNaify's editorial director, Augusto Massi, and IB Tauris's visual culture editor, Philippa Brewster. Another key player was Leslie Bethell, the dynamic director of the then thriving Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies who, on hearing about the project, did not hesitate to offer his support in the form of a grant from his Centre to fund the translation work.

Despite the backing of these cultural and scholarly heavy-weights, a major challenge remained, namely to do justice, in the English language, to Rocha's feverish, visionary and uniquely personal writing style. Rocha's ambition was not restricted to revolutionizing Brazilian and world cinema, but also language, to the extent that from the mid-1970s he started to use his own spelling of Portuguese, even revisiting and adapting to it some of his previous writings. Thus, for example, his groundbreaking 1965 manifesto, 'An Aesthetics of Hunger', or, in Portuguese, 'Estética da fome', was changed to 'Eztetyka da fome'; likewise, the title of one of his books utilised here, *O século do cinema*, was changed to *O Sekulo do Kynema*. Rather than based on a new, coherent linguistic code, Rocha's spelling testified, on the one hand, to his refusal to abide by any standardized practices and, on the other, to a strong visual element stemming from his talent as a draughtsman and visual artist, leading to a preference for the angular 'Y' and 'K' (nonexistent in the Portuguese spelling) and for the alphabet's last letter 'Z'. This, combined with his poetic verve – a ground of aesthetic communion with Eisenstein's ideographic montage and Pasolini's 'cinema of poetry' – inspired him to create synthetic and often hilarious neologisms and puns in his writings which are however, in most cases, untranslatable into other languages.

Again, on the translation front, we were lucky to meet with the willingness of one of Britain's top Brazilian film scholars, Stephanie Dennison, and a competent professional translator, Charlotte Smith, whose work cut through the major linguistic stumbling blocks; but time and money were exhausted before the many lingering queries were resolved. So more time was spent with funding applications with a view to enabling the work to continue. This time it was the Brazilian Embassy in London and the Brazilian Foreign Office in Brasília (the Itamaraty) who came to our rescue with

complementary funding. With this crucial but rather modest help, we managed to lure into the team the brilliant Brazilian world-cinema scholar Cecília Mello, whose magisterial work on this book cannot be praised highly enough. Mello went through the entire text with a magnifying lens that exposed minor mistakes, information gaps and a great number of details that could prove mystifying for a non-Brazilian readership. She then undertook exhaustive research in order to clarify them all in more than a hundred endnotes, in addition to those provided by editor Ismail Xavier for the Brazilian editions; a few extra notes were added by the translators and by myself. Unfortunately, Rocha's creative spelling had to go, but the reader will hopefully recognize in the English prose his particular humour and inventiveness, alongside his uncompromising critical eye, in dealing with the work of others as well as his own.

But this is not yet the end of the story. Quite unexpectedly, CosacNaify closed its doors a few years ago, and the copyrights they held for the Glauber Rocha writings and illustrations returned to the filmmaker's estate, and had to be renegotiated from scratch. Another protracted round of correspondence and funding applications took place until the new acquisition of the copyrights was completed, thanks to a funding contribution made by the Centre for Film Aesthetics and Cultures (CFAC), School of Art and Communication Design, University of Reading, and goodwill on the part of the Glauber Rocha estate. Credit is also due to the Cinemateca Brasileira, in São Paulo, current holder of the Glauber Rocha collection, which granted us cost-free use of the cover image.

After this veritable saga, there are now, at long last, plenty of reasons to celebrate. In fact, this book is coming out as the world commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of May 1968 when politics ruled the day in cinema, and Rocha's work was being discovered and fêted in the United States and Europe for its revolutionary power. In particular in France, where he would go into exile in 1971 with the recrudescence of the Brazilian military dictatorship, Rocha's role as a trailblazer was hailed in unison by critics at the time and symbolically enshrined, in 1969, in a pivotal scene in Godard/Dziga Vertov group's film *Wind from the East (Le Vent d'est)*. In it, Rocha appears standing

on a crossroads with open arms, indicating the direction of political cinema to a heavily-pregnant passer-by and singing verses from Caetano Veloso's Tropicália song, 'Divino Maravilhoso' (Divine and Marvellous). As Godard had sensed, Rocha was himself an artistic and political event, and so is his film criticism, whether on the evolving *cinema novo* production, international idols such as Buñuel, Ford, Lang, Welles, Visconti, or direct interlocutors such as Pasolini and Godard. My sincere and heartfelt thanks go to all those who placed their trust in the risky and painstaking enterprise of translating to English this essential part of Glauber Rocha's unique, 'divine and marvellous' body of work.

**Lúcia Nagib**

**General Coordinator of *On Cinema*, by Glauber Rocha**

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<sup>1</sup> Glauber Rocha, *Cartas ao mundo*, edited by Ivana Bentes, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1997.