

HUNGER AND ROTTEN FLESH: CINEMA NOVO, PASOLINI, EISENSTEIN

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Supporting Statement

In 1965, the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha presented his manifesto *Aesthetics of Hunger* (*Estética da fome*) at the V Rassegna del Cinema Latino-Americano, in Genova. For Rocha, hunger was the nerve of Latin American societies, and therefore their cinemas couldn't overlook it: on the contrary, they must turn it into their main topic and aesthetic principle. An aesthetics of hunger couldn't be beautiful, but harsh; couldn't be compassionate, but violent; couldn't satisfy rich countries' "nostalgia for primitivism", but be revolutionary. His own *Black God, White Devil* (*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, 1964), along with other Cinema Novo films such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Barren Lives* (*Vidas Secas*, 1963) and Ruy Guerra's *The Guns* (*Os Fuzis*, 1964), would be the paradigmatic cases of a new national cinema. Cinema Novo was born as a point of difference to those movies coming from Europe and the United States, but to do so, it also kept in mind key filmmakers who dealt or had dealt with stories of hunger: among others, Sergei M. Eisenstein and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Hunger became both a topic and a source for expressive ideas. The first images and sounds in the video essay approach it as a matter of time and repetitiveness: an enormous empty landscape in *Barren Lives*, or the reiterated moan of an old man in Glauber's Spanish film *Cutting Heads* (*Cabezas cortadas*, 1970), give the sense of a scarcity which is both visual (no new images appear) and narrative (the action seems stopped). This way, the scarcity of food finds a correlative in the aesthetics and the story, and a kind of expositive violence (the violence of a negation) is performed.

In some cases, the hunger of the characters is eventually fulfilled with food, and the visual and narrative void is replaced by the image of this particular food. Creating food, or producing it, also entails its irruption in the screen. For this reason, the miracle in Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (*Il vangelo secondo Matteo*, 1964), with the sudden appearance of bread loaves and fishes, acts as an answer to the void in *Barren Lives* and *Cutting Heads*. The same could be said about Eisenstein's *Old and New* (*Staroye i novoye*, 1929): the sexualized cream production produces an explosion of visual movement and abstract images which delight the Soviet proletarians. Considering Pasolini and Eisenstein, we could say that the irruption of food, either in realist or abstract terms, either due to a miracle or result of collectivist production, is a strong response to the scarcity of hunger both in the image (we see something new) and in the story (something new happens).

In the video essay, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* and *Old and New* appear linked with Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (1964). Like Pasolini's work, this film was concerned with Christianity and revolution in the Third World; and it was strongly inspired by the fusion of sexual impulse and food production in Eisenstein's film, particularly in the sequence of the milling of manioc. The mixture of images and sounds in this part of the video essay wants to consider *The Gospel...* and *Old and New* as dreams of the poor shepherds while they are producing food. The multiplication of loaves of bread and fishes, as well as the waterfalls of cream, are desired images that are quite difficult to attain, and the manioc production is finally a failed endeavour. As Eugenio Renzi explains in his text "Rocheisenstein" (2005), comparing

Eisenstein's cream production with that of the manioc reveals that Glauber's images are burdened by a failure: they don't incarnate the victory of collectivism, but the triumph of submissive work.

At that point, I propose a conceptual and aesthetical leap: from the food as a response to hunger to the rotten flesh. We find this flesh in Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's *The Conspirators (Os Inconfidentes, 1972)*: on the one hand, he showed the martyrdom of Tiradentes, a historical rebel who was hanged and cut into pieces by Portuguese monarchy in the eighteenth century; on the other, a propaganda newsreel from the Brazilian dictatorship, celebrating Tiradentes as a big hero in the time the film was done. Putting them altogether, the cuts in the flesh of Tiradentes emerge as a metaphor of the tortures and murders of the Brazilian authoritarian government. In a way, *The Conspirators* evokes Eisenstein's attractions montage in *Strike (Stachka, 1925)*, because of its eccentric juxtaposition of images (the flesh of a historical rebel and the newsreel of the dictatorship), but also because this juxtaposition reveals a strong parallelism between different kinds of violence. In addition, the song *Aquarela do Brasil* gives the sequence a strong ironical tone.

Eisenstein's work on the sudden irruption of blood or meat, be it in the slaughterhouse in *Strike* or in the rotten food in *Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin, 1925)*, creates a strong contrast with the cascades of cream in *Old and New*. These kinds of images influenced Brazilian cinema as well, from Ruy Guerra's *The Guns or The Fall (A Queda, co-directed with Nelson Xavier, 1978)*, where slaughtered animals are used to talk about either religious alienation or bourgeois vampirism, to *Black God, White Devil*, which starts with the close-up of a dead animal's eye. *Strike* and *The Conspirators*, however, not only use these images to create a kind of assault on the spectator, but also to draw metaphors and parallels between different political situations.

In this regard, to end the video essay I propose a last parallelism, one that puts images from *Strike* altogether with the *Aquarela do Brasil* of *The Conspirators*, to explore new paths of the ironical use of archival images undergone by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade. This way, we approach Eisenstein's film from the perspective of the Brazilian one, and propose a final image which doesn't exist in the first: an ominous, blinding, rotten piece of flesh from the martyr Tiradentes, which is far away from the void of hunger, from Pasolini's loaves and fishes and from Eisenstein's cream. With this last image consumption is not an absence, but an excess that is approached politically.

However, we haven't moved far away from the aesthetics of hunger: both the void of the first image and the excess of this last one perform an aggression that assaults the spectator. Replacing the scarcity by the repulsiveness, the violence demanded by Glauber hasn't disappeared, but mutated in order to not lose its power.

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Author's bio

Albert Elduque (Barcelona, 1986) holds a PhD on Social Communication (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2014) and is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the University of Reading, where he works in the AHRC/FAPESP-funded project 'Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method' (short title: IntermIdia). His PhD dissertation was focused in the concepts of hunger, consumption and vomit in political modern cinema in Europe and Brazil, analysing the works by filmmakers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Marco Ferreri, Glauber Rocha and Nelson Pereira dos Santos. His lines of investigation are Brazilian music and film, the aesthetics of political cinema and Latin American cinema. He has done research stays in the Universidade de São Paulo (2011), the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (2014) and the Universidade Federal Fluminense (2015). Since 2016 he is the co-editor of film journal *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*.