

THE IMPOSSIBLE EMBRACE: *ILHA, TRAVESSIA,* AND BLACK BRAZILIAN CINEMA NOW

Juliano Gomes

Translated by Mark Cohen



Henrique (Aldri Anunciação, left) and Emerson (Renan Motta, right), the protagonists of *Ilha*.

Why were they called men
They were also called dreams
And dreams never grow old
Amid so much tear gas
Stay calm, calm
Calm, calm, calm

—From the song “Clube da Esquina II” (Corner Club 2),
by Milton Nascimento, Lô Borges, and Márcio Borges

The lines quoted above are sung by the character Henrique (Aldri Anunciação) in the feature film *Ilha* (Island,

Ary Rosa and Glenda Nicácio, 2018). *Ilha* tells of the encounter between Henrique, a successful filmmaker; and a young man, Emerson (Renan Motta), who kidnaps the filmmaker and forces him to make a film about his life. *Ilha* follows this singular kidnapping. At the end, it is revealed that as a child Emerson had been Henrique’s pupil in a video workshop program.¹ As the established filmmaker and the young man, who is now a drug dealer, argue over the film on-screen, an abyss of unstable registers is created, structured as a metafilm. The film they are doing together is about themselves making a movie, like an infinite reflex.

This game between an auteurist filmmaker who is established and recognized and his opposite, the passionate amateur filmmaker who has sustained his passion for the

art without any means of support, serves as a sort of proxy for the complex disputes occurring today in the field of black cinema in Brazil. What I want to emphasize is precisely the tension between two paths. One leads to institutionalization and acceptance by national and international circuits, to an absorption into the macrostructures in the field of cinema and culture and, ultimately, liberal capitalism; the other lineage lies outside the law, and is amateur, excessive, improper, unsettling, immoral, and ambiguous. *Ilha* offers an image of this crossroads, which can serve as a parallel to the current situation of a cultural field undergoing a historically unprecedented and violent consolidation. The idea here is to help in formulating tools that can strengthen a community of filmmakers, technicians, critics, curators, and spectators—in and around the Brazilian black cinema—and can in turn cultivate their politically disruptive potential. For this purpose, this text suggests ways to render this crossroads not as a problem to be solved but as a path to be taken, an image of productive tension.

1

Brazil is the country with the largest Black population outside of the African continent, so it is no surprise that this community has played a significant role in the country's cultural history. However, in the cinema its presence has been felt far more on the screen itself than in the traditional film crafts that shape the field: directing, producing, scriptwriting. This is not intended to diminish the immense creative ability of such actors as Grande Otelo, Ruth de Souza, Antônio Pitanga, or Léa Garcia; Pitanga and Otelo, in particular, left such a mark on the films in which they appeared that they may safely be considered “authors,” as their contributions were decisive as creative vectors.

In the decade of the 1960s, there was probably no Black actor anywhere in the world who played a set of characters as openly revolutionary and emancipated as those embodied by Antônio Pitanga in the orbit of the Cinema Novo group. Granting absolute credit to the director as the creative driver of the work would not render a fair account of history and would further corroborate distorted myths of redemptive centralities, such as the emphasis on the author-director as the sole creative force. If black cinema is intrinsically tied to black culture, then its history can be seen as fuller and more multifaceted. It has no original, idealized centrality, for instead it is composed of “multi-form” matter that spans mediums. Its energy must come from where it is not expected.

Nonetheless, the emphasis here is on films with Black individuals in positions of direction and scriptwriting. It is undeniable that the film work of Adirley Queirós and his group, for example, has made an enormous contribution to black Brazilian culture.² However, my focus here is limited to artists who “read” as Black in the Brazilian context in order to explore their long-ignored contributions to Brazilian cinema. The current historical period presents a reasonably distinct panorama with regard to the number of Black filmmakers, in shorts as well as features. In the twentieth century, the Black filmmakers who managed to accumulate a body of work were rare then and forgotten now.³ The number of directors who made only one film or a mere handful of films is striking. Here, then, is the challenge: to conduct a reformulation of a panorama whose conditions are far from ideal but where the level of scarcity has improved. The conditions for such a reformulation shape this text.

The impact of public policies aimed at culture, cinema, and a circuit of revenue decentralization, all carried out in the previous decade by the Workers' Party (PT, Partido dos Trabalhadores), had a decisive effect on the life of Brazil's Black population. Typical of the period were the measures, which relied on the historic presence of Black activists along with the federal government, to incentivize access to universities; these efforts culminated, for example, in the Special Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality (SEPPIR, Secretaria Nacional de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial), created in 2003 and disbanded in 2015.

Many of the filmmakers in this new generation are graduates coming out of the universities, making work straight out of film classes. Many were represented in the historic program “Soul in the Eye” at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2018, in which at least a quarter of the program's films were made by students, including a fair number of first films.⁴ (Editor's note: See Janaína Oliveira's essay in this issue.) Beyond the practically unheard-of fact of Black filmmakers participating together in an international program, many of the films also enjoyed respectable distribution in Brazil and, in some cases, won first prizes in competitions. In previous generations, this never happened—an erasure that has increased the difficulty in unearthing references about such films.

Ilha is a product of the cinema course at the Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia, outside of the capital, which began in 2006. Glenda Nicácio and Ary Rosa met in the course, founded Rosza Filmes, and made three fiction



Found photography in *Travessia*.

features that achieved a level of distinction unthinkable for an audiovisual production coming from anywhere outside of the southeastern region where Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are located and where historically the center of Brazilian film has been concentrated.⁵

As this new generation conquers more space and gains greater acceptance, it runs the risk—much more so than its predecessors—of conforming to the demands of national and international film-festival circuits for a normalized brand of Black visibility. Blackness has now been reinvented as a valuable market commodity. The progress that has been achieved carries with it the necessity of understanding the new challenges that await from the moment “they” let “you” enter.

2

Travessia (Safira Moreira, 2018) is a student film that offers an eloquent example of the tension between an inventive and daring exploration and an adherence to a model of Black visibility that obeys established patterns. In just five minutes, *Travessia* manages to establish a very promising speculative exploration with its investigation of an old

photo, searching its empty spaces and absences through the text of writer Conceição Evaristo.

In the monochromatic photo, a Black woman is holding a white baby, posed in a full-body shot in the center of the frame. She is looking at the lens; the baby is looking down. Her body is not completely facing the camera. Neither her pose nor the background suggest any advance preparation. The atmosphere is one of informality with a certain taste for the captured instant. The lighting of the photo yields little information, for in its bright light, the sky and the baby’s skin seem a flat white, devoid of information. The dark skin of the woman, though, has nuance: the photometric gauge conforms to her skin tone, which leaves the bright parts devoid of details.

On the back of the photo is written the baby’s name, the date, the place—but the Black woman has no name, described on the reverse side only as the “nanny.” The essay film operates through a series of reframings, searching for details, revealing that there is more to see. The poem by Evaristo speaks of “mute voices” while the image is on-screen. If on the photo’s reverse side the woman does not have a name, in the image she does retain her expression, her skin, her look, and a portion of her legs. Advancing beyond the intention of this white family to make a record of their baby, the film shows that there are other things going on in the image. Hers is a Black presence that affirms both a present existence and a historical absence, that asserts a nonbelonging as she returns the gaze. *Travessia* depicts a struggle as staged within a single photograph.

Moreira found the old black-and-white photograph at an antiques fair, and the photographer is unknown. The only information available is that which is written on the back of the photo. Here is the record of a Black woman, her expression, her body; the light is measured for her, evoking a rich set of contradictory questions and feelings. Did someone measure the light on her skin, or is this an automatic photometer at work? There is no way to know. But the rich set of contradictions and interrogations not only demands a denouncing of the historical absence of such records but also, at the same time and with equal intensity, offers up a force of presence that combats absence, a battle between a supposed intention and a material that contradicts it. Her eyes offer an ambivalent expression, a recognition of the history of a country that can be summed up in this image, which speaks and yet is silent. In a little under three minutes, Moreira’s film composes a complex problem in a pulsating form through a single found image.

Following this, after a stretch of black screen, a young woman displays other photos—in color this time—of



A Black family poses in *Travessia*.

Black families, while a voice-over narration explains that color photographs were expensive, and that such images were therefore rarely made by Black families. After this, the same young woman strikes poses that allude to those old, posed photos, with a shallow background that confirms her referencing the earlier imagistic tradition.

Next comes a series of portraits in motion, made by the director, showing contemporary Black couples and families posed for the camera, again following the visual models of the earlier photographs of white families. The Black subjects wear nice clothes, give an appearance of harmony, and face the camera symmetrically. There are no white people in sight. The song “Juana,” by the Cape Verdean singer-songwriter Mayra Andrade, gives the film a tone of tenderness that is ratified by smiles and caresses. After a sequence of contemporary family portraits, the film ends.

The short film advances from speculative investigation to reparative affirmation. Along with the reframings of the found photo is an audio recording of the filmmaker’s mother as well as the reverse side of the image. Moreira adds images that did not exist at the time of the first photo, always with a spirit of wholeness and integrity, and gestures toward a “dignifying grandiosity” through the soundtrack. It is as if the problems of the first half—an

absence of images, archival ambivalence, the obligation to speculate in the face of lacunae—are “resolved” by the present-day pictures of happy, “well-dressed” people.

The title of the film, *Travessia*, refers to a journey or crossing where the traveler overcomes some type of obstacle. The film, opting for a gesture of positive affirmation, ends by emptying of any impact its initial speculative gesture that looked for things where they apparently are not, or for things that, if there, are present only insofar as the audience can produce the necessary degree of attention to make them visible. To be present in the frame is not enough.

Travessia, then, does not change the scene’s mode, or the relations between the visual and the semantic, or those between intention and effect; rather, it substitutes bodies: it moves Black bodies into the same colonial arrangement formulated by those who could pay for photos. The attempt at a counternarrative that can remake the colonial scene has a tone of *nós conseguimos* (“we made it”), of victory and celebration. Thus, the dilemma of the domestication of images for an insurgent Brazilian blackness in cinema is resolved through its being synthetically materialized, transformed into images (though more tender) related to the world of advertising, where a certain “revolutionary impression” grants merchandise a greater symbolic value.



Henrique (Aldri Anunciação) embraces the projected image of Emerson (Renan Motta) in *Ilha*.

In her essay “The Bourgeois Cinema of Boba Liberalism,” Melissa Phruksachart discusses the idea of “messianic visibility” that shapes audience responses to films:

I term this attitude “messianic visibility”: an overinvestment in the idea that insistently normative cinematic identification possesses transformative, even curative, political and personal potential. Messianic visibility offers up cinema as a public fantasy site for identification and self-completion— for “feeling seen”—not just through visual pleasure but through what Sylvia Chong describes as “the reification of a neoliberal consumer category.”⁶

Travessia is an example of just such a film, where a normative imaginary that counts on positive identification as having an automatically transformative and “curative” potential is at work. It is no accident that its images are not radically different from the many advertising images of recent years, through which Brazilian and global capitalism has been searching for new tactics to enable it to continue its principles of uniformization, production of norms, and processes of recolonization.

The dilemma that is facing young Black Brazilian filmmakers today is that, at the same time that the spaces are opening up, the acceptance of black films has become predicated politically on its simplification as a discourse and its adaptability to a liberal agenda that is “inclusive” of cinema events and renewed capitalism. At least since 2016, a large number of Brazilian festivals have programmed debates on cinema and race. In these debates, the hypothesis prevails that historical invisibility is best combatted with a normativized, legible visibility.

The value of films like *Ilha*—along with *NoirBLUE* (Ana Pi, 2018), *Quintal* (*Backyard*, André Novais Oliveira, 2015), and *Vaga carne* (*Dazed Flesh*, Grace Passô and Ricardo Alves Jr., 2019)—is precisely their disruptive potential for the norms governing the legibility of their representational operations.⁷ These are all strange films—unbalanced, digressive, and opaque—that shift register between the amateur and the professional; they refuse to offer comfort even when they openly stage joy. The messianic sensibility prefers easy solutions for complex problems: simple images ready for consumption and redemptive solutions for never-ending lacunae.

3

In *Ilha*, in one and the same film, there is a clash between two film projects made by Black people working in radically different directions. One is embodied by Henrique, a conformist filmmaker absorbed by status quo, whose cinema “lost its passion” and became stagnant. He goes to festivals, wins prizes (including an award for his own film, as shown in one of *Ilha*’s final scenes), is visible and recognized; he has been accepted. On the other hand, Emerson embodies the inventive energy that didn’t succumb to the institution; he is the invisible one, the excessive presence, the one beyond all measure. He is not a “professional filmmaker”; he is a drug dealer, but evidently a very sophisticated one. His practice is informed by a historical and intellectual consciousness, as evidenced by a poster (Glauber Rocha’s *Terra em transe*

[*Entranced Earth*], 1967) on the wall.⁸ And a copy of Fernando Ramos's book on Brazilian Cinema Marginal.⁹ And Marco Antônio Gonçalves's book on Jean Rouch, too.¹⁰

In every shot of the film there is an enormous instability as to whether this is a scene scripted by the characters, a "making of" documentary, or a mixture of the two—not unlike the Cinema Marginal and Rouch films. In one of the first sequences, there is a wide shot of many fisherwomen and then a very tense scene of Emerson choking Henrique, at the end of which Emerson stops, look at the camera, and says, "Cut." An unanswered question, though, persists: Whose point of view am I seeing, that of the filmmaker who succeeded in capturing the shot, or that of the rebellious amateur who seized the reins? Emerson kidnaps Henrique not really to make him follow his commands but in order to work, intensely and contradictorily, in collaboration with him. Every single shot of the film has a different tone, and renders a different form of combative partnership. They form an unstable entity, unlivable in reality but possible in this "unreality."

The film's final image—an impossible embrace between the two protagonists—is paradigmatic. Henrique projects the footage on the wall, and the two hug each other without embracing. Henrique is alive, Emerson is dead, according to the story. Between them, on either side of the image, is an inconceivable space forming a heterogeneous union—one dead, the other alive—in spaces that are different in the image and in life, one visible and one invisible, an image as sad as it is loving. What is at stake is the importance of relations that are established through different ways of being. Two characters from different worlds can be together and separate at the same time; the bond is produced, yet the separation does not disappear. Therefore, the idea of reality becomes a somewhat useless tool here; rather, affirming the paradox is what is crucial to the film's "poethics."¹¹

"What cinema wants from people is courage," says Emerson in *Ilha*, paraphrasing Guimarães Rosa in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*.¹² What Black Brazilian cinema needs today, as a community rather than a brand, is precisely to begin its task of dealing with a phantasmatic, fugitive past, far from idealized projections and heroicizing pioneers; only then can it construct its full political and aesthetic force. Black cinema is disseminated in every gesture by a Black person taking hold of a camera or a sound recorder, whether at the beginning of the twentieth or twenty-first century, hoping that some viewer might see, in that imagined future, the signs that it was possible for them to send under always limited and contradictory conditions.

Now that the conditions have become, historically, a little less limited, when some can gather their films, discuss things together, find affinities and differences, and study what is left of this history, perhaps this moment is the best opportunity ever presented to construct an engaged, creative, and rebellious community. To construct a sociability that can finally enable bonds that were impossible to create in the past: between films and viewers, between directors, between critics and professors, between films and other cultural and artistic materials. The conditions for this flowering—despite the radical neofascist threat of institutional dismantling—were never before so favorable. Amid so much tear gas, stay calm. And above all, do not lack courage.

Notes

1. In recent decades, educational initiatives in the audiovisual area proliferated in schools in all territories across the country. There is an enormous community of film professionals working under the radar who are active in initiatives of this kind, even including the "official" contingent of Brazilian independent cinema, who worked at some point in programs of this type. Further, these initiatives generated a gigantic amount of "invisible," uncatalogued, even never-seen films, the majority of them made in territories with a nonwhite majority. There is therefore an immense "under the radar" black cinema awaiting official recognition. What these films represent, if taken in their entirety, is a valuable history of Brazil, of this historical moment, and of the cinema of both.
2. Adirley Queirós lives and works in Ceilândia, in the periphery of Brasília, where he has been working with the same collaborators, most of them Black men, for over fifteen years. *A cidade é uma só (Is the City Only One?)*, 2011; exhibited at "Veredas: A Generation of Brazilian Filmmakers," Film at Lincoln Center, 2019), *Branco sai, preto fica (White Out, Black In)*, 2014; exhibited at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, 2014), and *Era uma vez Brasília (Once There Was Brasília)*, 2017, exhibited at the Locarno Film Festival, 2017) form one of the most important ensembles of feature films by the same director in this decade in Brazilian cinema.
3. Two living examples are Agenor Alves and Afrânio Vital. Understanding a potential Brazilian blaxploitation movement, as located in the 1970s and 1980s, would require an immersion in the works of these two, whose contributions have not yet been historicized.
4. See the catalog online at <https://iffr.com/en/blog/soul-in-the-eye>.
5. Cachoeira, the city where this school is located, has less than thirty-five thousand inhabitants.
6. Melissa Phruksachart, "The Bourgeois Cinema of Boba Liberalism," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (Spring 2020), 61.
7. *Vaga carne* has also been exhibited under the title *Wandering Flesh*.

8. *Terra em transe* (1967), also at times exhibited under the title *Land in Anguish*, is the third feature by the Bahian director Glauber Rocha.
9. Fernão Ramos, *Cinema marginal, 1968–1973: A representação em seu limite* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987). The Cinema Marginal movement featured filmmakers like Rogério Sganzerla, Ozualdo Candeias, Julio Bressane, Andrea Tonnacci, João Callegaro, and many others in the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s in Brazil. The films of these directors are bold, dense, radical experiments in which they tried to express a deep and extravagant despair that was somehow opposed the more legible aesthetics of Cinema Novo. They represented a new kind of cinematic liberation, rich in atonality, humor, conceptual reflection, and radical deconstruction.
10. Marco Antônio Gonçalves, *O real imaginado: Etnografia, cinema e surrealismo em Jean Rouch* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2008).
11. For a discussion of “poethics,” see Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness toward the End of the World,” in “States of Black Studies,” special issue, *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2, (Summer 2014): 81–97.
12. João Guimarães Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio Editora, 1956; Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1969), 267. “In the living of life, things get mixed up. Life is like that: first it blows hot, then, cold; it tightens, then loosens; it soothes, then disquiets. What life demands of us is courage. What God wants is to see us learning to make ourselves happier in the midst of happiness, and happier still in the midst of sadness! And to be able to do so suddenly, on any occasion, on purpose—through courage. Can it be? Sometimes I thought so. When day dawned.” (Translator’s note: Often considered Brazil’s greatest twentieth-century novel, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* was translated into English by James L. Taylor and Harriet de Onís and published as *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963].)