

# WITH THE *ALMA NO OLHO*: NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY BLACK CINEMA

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## note #1

They have an AR-15. We have a camera and we also know how to shoot.

—Zózimo Bulbul

*Alma no olho* (*Soul in the Eye*), a short film directed and performed by Zózimo Bulbul in 1973, constitutes the inaugural gesture of black cinema in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Bulbul's status as a pioneer for Black Brazilian cinema does not reside in historical chronology, because he was not the first Black Brazilian director: José Cajado Filho, Haroldo Costa, and Odilon Lopes were his predecessors in that lineage. His importance lies, rather, in the aesthetic and narrative advances accomplished by his film, which has survived its ostracism—imposed by Brazilian critics and cinema studies through an exclusionary hegemony of almost forty years—to be taken up again as a reference point by a new generation of Black Brazilian filmmakers.

*Alma no olho* was made in a completely independent fashion using the leftover rushes from *Compasso de espera* (*Marking Time*, 1973), a feature directed by Antunes Filho in which Bulbul was the principal actor and script collaborator. In recent years, many analyses have been carried out in the field of black cinema studies on *Alma no olho*, largely devoted to its historical relevance, leaving the inventiveness of its aesthetic gesture somewhat in the background. Frequent note is made of the film's inspirations: the script draws from *Soul on Ice*, the 1968 book by Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver about his time in exile, and the soundtrack consists of music from the album *Kulu Sé Mama*, the 1965/67 collaboration by Juno Lewis and John Coltrane, to whom Bulbul dedicates the film.

In *Alma no olho's* eleven minutes, Bulbul performs a pantomime of the history of Black people between Africa and the diaspora, tracing a saga that begins with a state of freedom as lived on the African continent, passes through the hardships of the Atlantic slave trade, and finally ends with the breaking of all the chains of colonial domination that continued to imprison black bodies and minds in the period following the Abolition—the end of the transnational slave trade, in 1888, in Brazil. On-screen, only his black body, some objects, and a white background are present for most of the film's duration. While the performance is under way, the character played by Bulbul faces the camera at different moments, sometimes in complicity, sometimes with irony, but always defiantly.

By looking determinedly at the camera, Bulbul aligns himself with the extensive political history of black experiences in the diaspora, according to which the act of looking directly at someone is converted into an oppositional gesture of resistance. As bell hooks writes:

[T]he “gaze” has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that “looks” to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the short, Bulbul breaks the white chains that imprison him and moves toward the camera, facing it for the last time, until the white background is no longer visible. The screen then goes entirely black. Beyond resistance, the black gaze as transposed to the screens of Brazilian cinema in such unprecedented form in *Alma no olho* marks a deeper gesture. This gaze that brings the soul to the eye acts as a foreshadowing of the contemporary moment when Black presences, until very recently peripheral if not made invisible, have come to occupy the center

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Zózimo Bulbul in *Alma no olho* (*Soul in the Eye*).

of the most inventive and provocative field of the national cinema's current scene.<sup>3</sup>

#### note #2

I'm gonna stay out here on the margin, and let the center look for me.

—Toni Morrison

If Bulbul's performative inventiveness in *Alma no olho* has become a historical and aesthetic reference, Bulbul's other initiatives throughout his life made him a model of political action in the audiovisual field.<sup>4</sup> He always fought against the under- and misrepresentation of Black communities on-screen, whether in the cinema or on TV; in his acting career, he was well known for his refusal to play roles marked by negative stereotypes and for being active in the preservation of the memory of black cinema through

the production of DVDs containing the works of his generation's pioneers.<sup>5</sup>

Aligned with the ambitions of African filmmakers of his generation—for whom the process of decolonization in the cinema occurs not only with films but with the creation of an exhibition circuit as well—Bulbul at the age of seventy created the *Encontros de Cinema Negro Brasil-África* (Meetings on Black Brazil-Africa Cinema); after his death, it renamed itself the *Encontro de Cinema Negro Zózimo Bulbul: Brasil, África, Caribe e Outras Diásporas* (Zózimo Bulbul Black Film Festival). Staged every year since 2007, the festival initially prioritized the exhibition of films that had been rejected until then by the hegemonic film festivals. Above all, it was a meeting place for filmmakers convening from throughout Africa and the diaspora to interact with each other and their publics.

The success of what Bulbul called the “*quilombo* of cinema” occurred at a moment when his health prevented his seeing it prosper. Bulbul died in 2013, missing out on the

full emergence of a generation that not only took up his legacy but took it further, consolidating the project of black cinema of which he had long dreamed into a reality. Of course, its emergence is also part of a much wider Brazilian context that encompasses the struggle of black movements for the reduction of racial inequality and the widening of access to universities, training, and professional courses that arose from the education policies of the Brazilian government of 2003–16, like the *Pontos e Pontões de Cultura* (Points and Pontoons of Culture) initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

This is all very recent—a fact of which I am constantly reminded as I write these notes on contemporary black cinema in Brazil. It is, indeed, quite a recent realization that black cinema in Brazil is already a consolidated movement.<sup>7</sup> It is a movement so irreversible that it allows me not only to deal with contextual questions of the films’ production but also to perform the exercise of offering reflections on the films’ aesthetic and narrative inventiveness. It is also a recent phenomenon to see black films presented in the circuits of Brazil’s national festivals and analyzed in academic spheres without the look of disdain marked by a Eurocentric (why not say it?—racist) mustiness with which the national cinema elite for decades disqualified the very existence of black cinema in the country. Hence the importance of affirming that the conditions for this dislocation of the center and its movement in the direction of the margin, to paraphrase Toni Morrison, were forged both inside and outside the field of cinema.

### note #3

Can blackness be loved? . . . [I]t can be loved and has to be loved, and it should be defended.

—Fred Moten

Today in Brazil, black cinema is a movement of incontestable reality.<sup>8</sup> Such an affirmation must take into account at least three factors: first, the existence of a flow of production and an increasing quantity of films made by filmmakers who have self-declared as Black; second, the affirmation of black cinema as a shared field, whether through public statements on the part of these filmmakers, the proliferation of festivals and film series, or the rise of academic and critical studies dedicated to this field; and, finally, the existence of an increasingly large public for the films, which is also reflected in the proliferation of festivals, film series, and cinema events.

Nonetheless, it is urgent to reflect on the films’ aesthetic dimensions, leaving in the background (for now) the

contextual analyses that tend to dominate reflections on the theme of black cinema. With something so recent, it is no doubt important to delimit at minimum the markers of historicity in contemporary black film; but it is equally important to move away from the paradigm of verisimilitude that marks studies on black cinema not only in Brazil but all over the world. Beyond the assumed equivalence between film and reality in these films, it is important to understand black cinema as art. As Michael Gillespie demands, “Black film does not represent a closed hermeneutics; it represents a vast abundance.”<sup>9</sup>

While there is no arguing with Frantz Fanon’s perception regarding the centrality of trauma in the lived experience of Blacks, I concur with Moten’s (and Gillespie’s) pleas that this not be the only element in the definition of blackness.<sup>10</sup> Trauma and the experiences of violence and death that indelibly mark black trajectories in the African diaspora will always be present, but cannot be the sole determinant. When thinking about black cinema, it is crucial to look beyond the trauma—or beyond the abyss, as Édouard Glissant would say:

[F]or us, and without exception, and no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown. Beyond the chasm we gamble into the unknown. We take sides in this game of unknown.<sup>11</sup>

As in life, the paradigm of verisimilitude may still be needed, as there is a “potential for infinite expansion” in black experiences in cinema.<sup>12</sup>

### note #4

We think about our skin as a dark room, a place of shadows. We talk often about color politics and the ways racism has created an aesthetic that wounds us, a way of thinking about beauty that hurts. In the shadows of late night, we talk about the need to see darkness differently, to talk about it in a new way. In that space of shadows we long for an aesthetic of blackness—strange and oppositional.

—bell hooks

In 2017, Tessa Boerman, then curator of the International Film Festival Rotterdam, programmed Yasmin Thayná’s short film *Kbela* (2015) in the film series “Pan-African Cinema Today” (PACT).<sup>13</sup> Boerman found the film in an online search, then invited Thayná to the festival; in turn, Thayná proposed exhibiting *Alma no olho* together with *Kbela*. According to Thayná, it was a way both to pay



Diego Paulino's *Negrum3*.

homage to Bulbul and to furnish some level of contextualization regarding “Black Brazilian cinema” for an international public.<sup>14</sup> Impressed with the power of both films, Boerman and cocurator Peter Van Hoof decided to create a bigger film series the following year, for which I was invited as curator.<sup>15</sup> The resulting exhibition in 2019, “Soul in the Eye: Zózimo Bulbul’s Legacy and Contemporary Black Brazilian Cinema,” marked the first time that Bulbul had received an homage in a big international festival and the first time that Black Brazilian cinema was being distinguished in this way outside its own country.

My intention there was to build a panorama of oppositional aesthetic possibilities (as hooks writes) in a way that would avoid the expected and conventional frameworks of black experiences in film, wherein the themes historically consecrated as “properly black” correspond to the paradigm of verisimilitude between black lives and cinema. I proposed five axes to function as a preliminary sketch for reflections about the aesthetic dimensions present in the films of contemporary Black Brazilian cinema: “Oppositional Blackness,” “Fluxus and Reconnection,” “Re-existences,” “Ordinarily and Black,” and “Intensities.” Those axes were not closed categories but lines of possible dialogue with contemporary life and the inventiveness that the films engender. And, as every act of curating is equally

a process of exclusion, there was an immensity of other films that could have been a part of that selection.

In fact, from 2019 to date, the exponential increase in the number of films has expanded the meanings assigned to the axes of “Soul in the Eye” and widened the “strange and oppositional” aesthetic possibilities signaled there. Thinking of the many films that were made afterward (or that did not make the selection at the time), I notice, for example, the expansion of the ideas of opposition and reinvention proposed in “Oppositional Blackness” as they evolved in the rereading of the archival images of the cinema’s black history in Fabio Rodrigues Filho’s *Pressed, Ripped Apart* (2019) and the potential rethinking of “Re-existences” that connect in *Negrum3* (2019), Diego Paulino’s award-winning short, or in *Perifericu* (2019), collectively directed by Nay Mendl, Vita Pereira, Rosa Caldeira, and Steffany Fernanda. Or the explosion of intensities in *República* (Grace Passô, 2020), a short film produced during the period of the pandemic’s social isolation, very perceptively depicts the dystopia of the real that characterizes the act of living in Brazil in 2020.

*República* is a film that faces—and confronts with a sharp retort—not only those who watch it but equally the reality itself in which it is generated. The short—named after a central neighborhood in São Paulo where



Grace Passô in *República*, which she also directed.

Passô lives, together with Wilssa Esser, the film's cinematographer and editor—is one in a set of sixty works that the Moreira Salles Institute commissioned from artists during the COVID-19 quarantine in Brazil; it is the second film directed by Passô, one of Brazil's most important actresses. The result of a creative process that happens almost exclusively inside Passô and Esser's apartment, the story starts with the awakening of a woman (Passô) by a phone call in which an unidentified woman is telling her the news: that Brazil is a dream. In fact, the revelation, received with a lethargic joy by Passô's character, is not only that Brazil is a dream but also that it is going to end at any moment, as soon as the person who is dreaming it wakes up.

Unfolding in a double dimension, *República* uses the metalanguage of a film within a film. The news about the condition of the country was first announced by a shaman, one who in the beginning of the film is seen out the window, shouting in the street, and who then, after the breaking of the fourth wall, appears in the apartment to confront the main character. The appearance of this enigmatic and somewhat frightening shaman produces another curve in the fold of time of this dystopian present that is *República*: Brazil, which for the protagonist was a dream, has never existed at all for the shaman. The phrase declaring that truth, repeated as a chorus, exposes the multiple layers of feelings—of inadequacy and nonbelonging—that exist in a large part of the Brazilian population, especially the Black population, and most especially Black women.

Thus, in this pandemic Brazil of 2020, Grace Passô builds a singular narrative that challenges and confronts

her audience—a gesture that is repeated by the protagonist and her double, the shaman.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, she demands that an expansion of the possibilities for the future be rendered as infinite, given that the frontiers of the present have never belonged to Black people in Brazil. In this sense, *República* expands the aesthetic dimensions beyond prior notions of affection and limitless imagination, whether in everyday life or in creative extrapolation, by integrating the extraordinary into the ordinary, where anything becomes possible.

Although my research continues to map and reflect broadly the aesthetic propositions present in contemporary black production, one of the dimensions that has most interested me is the extent to which the everyday expressions on-screen are fundamental, acting in multiple ways to mobilize an image repertoire of healing.<sup>17</sup> Considering the intensification of violence against black bodies, either directly with widespread episodes around the world of physical abuse by the police, or indirectly due to the structural racism of states that expose black communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, these healing works are more urgent than ever.

But not only that: the films that affirm the revolutionary nature of seeing the daily life of Blacks on-screen are equally imperative.<sup>18</sup> Historically, the black presence in moving images has been an occasion for negative stereotypes. As a consequence, looking historically at the development of black film, a great many films have been dedicated to building counterrepresentations, responses to this negative imaginary amplified and perfected by the

cinema. The central idea of “Ordinarily and Black” is that the everyday, the routine, the not-extraordinary, must be made possible on the screen for Black people for whom “just being”—without heroic or redemptive attitudes, without having to die or fight against or survive racism—just being there and having complex and multifaceted feelings, is a revolutionary gesture. I think, for example, of the Gabriel Martins films *Movimento* (2020) and *Nada* (2017).

In short, thinking about the aesthetic dimensions of films promotes a shift in the ways of knowing that were traditionally devoted to black films. Building on Glissant’s idea of opacity, black cinema becomes “the practice of the social individual not fixed but in relation. It is therefore an inventive practice (of opacity) and not explanatory (of transparency/difference).”<sup>19</sup> This insistence on opacity counters the paradigm of verisimilitude and logic of transparency that have dominated Western epistemologies.<sup>20</sup> With the singularities of these experiences preserved in all their irreducibility, they can invite whoever is watching to engage with modes of enjoyment other than those of verisimilitude.

## note #5

Re-create from coloniality and escape the path that pushes us to death.

—Jota Mombaça and Musa Michelle Mattiuzzi

The trauma of domination’s violence, suffered in confrontations with the West, marks but does not limit artistic expression.<sup>21</sup> The act of looking at the camera—an attitude present in many of the films of “Soul in the Eye,” reverberating out from Bulbul’s inaugural look in his 1973 short—can be understood as an updating by the generation for whom glaring straight at the camera means defying the detractors that intentionally disdained the existence of Black cinema; at the same time, it signifies the fearless confrontation with what is to come.

Black Brazilian cinema in its contemporary movement, then, constitutes what Tina Campt has termed a “refusal practice,” elaborating it as “a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation, i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise.”<sup>22</sup> This is a refusal that, at the same time,

offers a constant and unlimited reinvention. It is a demand for the creation of other futurities.

Author’s note: These notes are part of a larger research work in development since 2009, divided equally between academic activities and curatorial processes conducted for festivals and film series in Brazil and the world at large. The aesthetic relationships between contemporary films and Zózimo Bulbul’s work that are, in a sense, the object of my reflections here are an ongoing focus of research.

## Notes

1. The epigraph is taken from the a statement by Bulbul in 2007 during the first edition of the Encontro de Cinema Negro Zózimo Bulbul Brasil, África, Caribe e Outras Diásporas (also called the Zózimo Bulbul Black Film Festival).
2. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 116.
3. The Brazilian film industry, repeating the model of society, still functions in an extremely elitist way, dominated by a largely masculine and white elite, as attested by studies on gender and race in Brazilian cinema carried out by the Group for Multidisciplinary Studies of Affirmative Action (GEMAA, Grupo de Estudos Multidisciplinares da Ação Afirmativa), <http://gemaa.iesp.uerj.br/infografico/infografico1/>. Black films are concentrated, therefore, primarily in the area of short film, because the difficulty of gaining access to financing means there are still few Brazilian filmmakers who manage to make feature-length films.
4. See, for instance, Kênia Freitas, “Afrofabulações e opacidade: Estratégias de criação do documentário negro brasileiro contemporâneo,” in *Pensar o documentário: Textos para um debate*, ed. Ricardo Laercio (Recife: Editora UFPE, 2020), 68.  
The epigraph that introduces this section is from an interview of Toni Morrison by Elissa Schappell and Claudia Brodsky Lacour for the *Paris Review*, no. 128 (Fall 1993), [www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1888/the-art-of-fiction-no-134-toni-morrison](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1888/the-art-of-fiction-no-134-toni-morrison).
5. The DVDs, collected under the title “Obras raras: O cinema negro da década de 1970” (“Rare Works: Black Cinema from the Decade of the 1970s”), include, besides the film by Antunes Filho already mentioned, the following: *Na boca do mundo* (*In the Mouth of the World*, 1976), by Antonio Pitanga; *A deusa negra* (*Black Goddess*, 1978), by Ola Balogun; *As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro* (*The Romantic Adventures of a Baker*, 1978), by Waldir Onofre; and *Vida nova por acaso* (*A New Life by Chance*, 1970), by Odilon Lopes.
6. For more information on Pontos e Pontões de Cultura, see [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontos\\_de\\_Cultura](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontos_de_Cultura).
7. Not so long ago I was affirming that it was a “project under construction.” See Janaína Oliveira, “Kbela and Cinzas: The Black Cinema in the Feminine from ‘Dogma Feijoada’ to Nowadays,” in *Festival Internacional de Curtas de Belo*

*Horizonte*, ed. Ana Siqueira, Bruno Hilário, Glauro Cardoso Vale, Heitor Augusto, and Matheus Pereira (Belo Horizonte: Fundação Clóvis Salgado, 2018), 257. The catalog is available at [www.festivaldecurtasbh.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/20\\_FESTCURTASBH\\_online.pdf](http://www.festivaldecurtasbh.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/20_FESTCURTASBH_online.pdf).

8. In Brazil, as a legacy of a slaveholder mentality, the debates over race were rendered invisible by decades of Republican [national] history based on the idea, first minted in the decade of the 1930s, about the ethnic composition of the population reflecting some sort of racial democracy. There is not adequate space here to go into this debate at length. I simply want to emphasize that the process of self-affirmation of black identity is a complex theme in Brazilian society; hence the relevance of the recognition of this blackness by a segment of filmmakers. The epigraph that introduces this section is from *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* (Arthur Jafa, 2015). This idea is taken up again here in consonance with the reference to Moten made by Michael Boyce Gillespie in his book *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). Moten again develops his arguments for this relation between blackness and love in “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 737–80.
9. Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 12.
10. See Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” chap. 5 in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).
11. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 8.
12. Freitas, “Afrofabulações e opacidade,” 203.
13. The epigraph that introduces this section is from bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 114.
14. With a duration of only twenty-three minutes, *Kbela* is significant in the history of shorts in Brazilian cinema. Significant for its visibility as one of the two most-watched shorts in Brazil in recent years, with an intense trajectory of circulation both inside and outside the country, it also faced erasure: “[T]he film remained absent from the great majority of Brazilian festivals for a year after its release.” See Amaranta César, “Qual o lugar da militância no cinema brasileiro contemporâneo? Interpelação, visibilidade e reconhecimento,” *Revista Eco Pós: Imagens do Presente* 20, no. 2 (2017): 116.
15. At a time when it is becoming urgent to discuss the processes of decolonization of this place of power that is curating, it must be said that the preparations for this series took place in a nonhierarchical manner and with total freedom.
16. For Portuguese speakers, I recommend watching “Afrofuturism and black cinema in Brazil during the pandemic”, debate on the film made by Kênia Freitas and Tatiana Carvalho da Costa on July 27, 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIDhFSa-2po>.
17. This, too, was expressed in my “Ordinarily and Black” session of nearly two years ago at Rotterdam.
18. Again, this idea shaped the “Ordinarily and Black” session, surfacing at Rotterdam in 2019.
19. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 220.
20. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
21. The epigraph that introduces this section is from Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Carta à leitora preta do fim dos tempos,” in *A dívida impagável*, ed. Denise Ferreira da Silva (São Paulo: Oficina de Imaginação Política e Living Commons, 2019), 25.
22. Tina Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal,” *Women & Performance*, February 25, 2019, [www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt](http://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt).