

Research Note: The Townscape through the Eyes of Migrants

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ABSTRACT— *These notes concern the potential of filmic material in approaching different ways of representing the landscape. In short, we are going to argue in favour of film as a tool in studying migrants' perception of the town during the Brazilian urbanization process in the 1950s in that film became a useful way of filling in the gaps left by the lack of historical documentation and the impossibility of direct observation of social agents in their daily lives.*

Keywords— townscape, migration, cinema, popular culture, Brazil

Our objective in these notes is to contribute to the discussion on the bonds between culture and territory, referring it to the sociability of migrants in big cities. We focus on the reproduction of rural patterns in everyday urban life, notwithstanding the changes in space brought by the modernization of Brazilian society in the 1950s. Our departure question is about how migrants relate to each other in the new environment, and we widen this issue to the perception of the townscape, as such representations constitute an important level in the modelling of human relationships. In this paper, we summarize some of the results we achieved in a research on a popular film-maker from Brazil, who describes the everyday life of a migrant couple in a metropolis.

Bearing in mind that there are different ways of representing the townscape and that people have a different sense of spatial order bound to the meanings they assign to places, our study sought to uncover distinctive ways of representing and using the city by those who have freshly moved to big cities from the countryside. Some researchers and technicians tend to disregard the level of landscape representations and its role in migrants' behaviour. An exception to this trend is offered by ethnomethodology, as the difference is recognized as another order – a different kind of organization, but still an order, with another classification of the townscape. Moreover, the issue of diversity in representing the townscape proved its importance in studies on the urban planning in cosmopolitan cities, bearing in mind that collective meanings attached to places can support different sociabilities.

The urbanization process in Brazil during the 1950s provides a suitable scenario for discussing such issues and methods. By that time, the country had been introduced to modernity. The skyscrapers had multiplied and a new middle class had started to adopt new kinds of behaviour and consumption, mainly influenced by American and European patterns. Industrialization also attracted a large number of migrants to the big towns, especially to the city of São Paulo. Given that their values, behaviour and perceptions were quite different from the patterns of modernity, the examining what we understood as the subculture of the migrants in big cities seemed important in detecting possible cultural conflicts related to the planning in cosmopolitan cities.

Various difficulties emerged in this project as it developed. Given that the events didn't occur in the present day, we couldn't use the usual social science research techniques, such as interviews and participative observations. Even the alternative of resorting to historical documentation seemed to us to be insufficient, as by doing this, we would be accessing the points of view of people who seldom came from the popular strata. Thus, the cinematography of that period emerged as an alternative to be explored and a film made by a very popular actor and director in Brazil was taken as an example of cultural conflicts within the city and of some of the meanings bound to the townscape shared by migrants at that time.

The film-maker Amacio Mazzaropi (1912–1981) caught our eye, as the perception of a specific audience segment seemed to identify with his viewpoint. He was successful among people from the countryside and the popular strata, in contrast with the traditional urban middle class, who depreciated his movies. It's important to note that he grew up between a small city and popular neighbourhoods in São Paulo and that his career path, before being introduced to the cinema, included a period as an actor working in circuses.

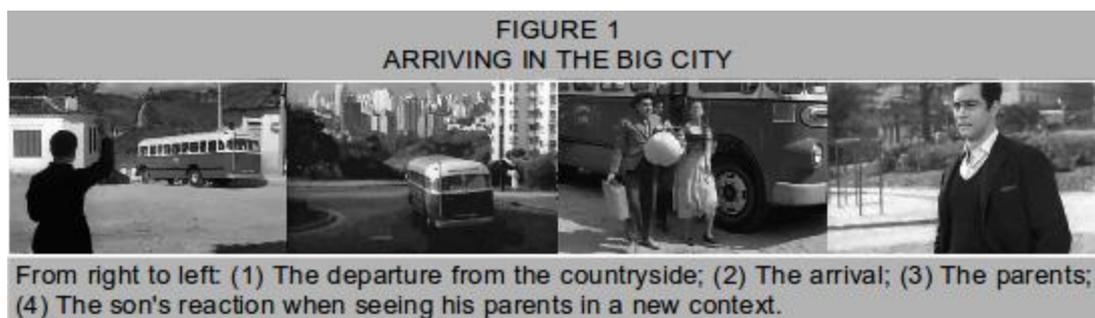
Roughly speaking, one can compare this artist with the Mexican comedian Cantinflas. Both the artists achieved great popularity through the translation of popular culture codes to the language of the mass media. Moreover, testifying to the

identification between these artists and a specific subculture, we are reminded that their success was limited to a socially, culturally and territorially restricted audience. Cantinflas never experienced notable success outside Mexico and Mazzaropi was little known outside São Paulo State.

The restriction of their audiences underlines how these artists were bound to a particular set of values and world views, which reproduces the patterns of their publics. Thus, we assumed the premise that Mazzaropi was using a particular language to speak to those low-income strata, a population segment that, at that time, was composed mainly of people who came from the countryside to the big city. In other words, he was able to build a bridge between the popular culture and the movie industry. His life and activity in circuses, and elsewhere, gave him the ability to present on screen perceptions of the city of whom it had very little record.

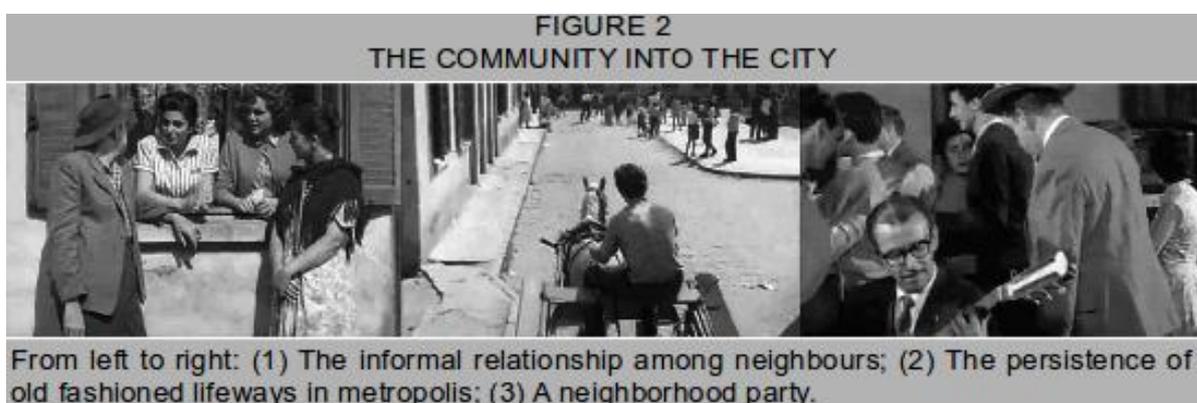
From this director we selected the film *Chofer de Praça* (Taxi Driver), released in 1958. It was appropriate for our purposes, insofar as the narrative covers multiple spaces and kinds of sociability. Our first task was to create an inventory of the places as they were represented in the film. However, the representations only made sense by considering the kind of sociability shown in each of them. Otherwise, it would be difficult to go beyond a shallow contrast between “archaic” and “modern”.

The opening of *Chofer de Praça* clarifies what we are saying here. The sequence contrasts strongly the rural (including small towns) with the urban environment, represented by São Paulo in the 1950s. It shows an old couple catching a bus in a little town. They are going to meet their son, an undergraduate medicine student living in São Paulo. In Figure 1, we can see some takes in which the affective ties from small towns (take 1) are contrasted with the “desert” occupied only by skyscrapers (take 2). The incompatibility of the couple with the townscape is reinforced by the cut that shows the reaction of the son when he sees his parents (takes 3 and 4), so that the cultural diversity had been highlighted.



Formal relationships and impersonality are usually presented as cultural traces associated with modernity. In such a view, personality and affectiveness aren't considered part of modern urban sociability. Theoretically, little attention is paid to what Sharon Zukin (1991) called a vernacular landscape, in other words a place of personal ties among people. They share a specific sense about the space they live in and so the author approaches some parts of cities like New York and London as an anthropological and historical construction.

The narrative of Mazzaropi goes against this tendency. In films by this film-maker, when urban life is pictured, we can see the persistence of community ties in the big cities. In *Chofer de Praça*, for instance, most of the narrative takes place in a neighbourhood shown as a primary group, within which the following elements can be seen: face-to-face and everyday interactiveness, affective ties, and gossip as a kind of informal social control (Figure 2).



Moreover, part of the humour of this film is in using the right code in the wrong place. When a policeman asks the character to present his driving licence, the protagonist appeals for his personal relations with, a priest that knows him. After an argument, he agrees to show the document, but warns that it is hidden in his long johns. It is a kind of attitude that is more aligned to communities based on personal ties than to life in the big cities. The opposite happens when he goes on a first visit to the father of his son's bride. His first act is to show all of his documents to that man he is meeting for the first time. Now he is using the formal code in an intimate situation.

There is some ambiguity in the movie, as the narrative reinforces at some moments the idea of the protagonist not belonging to the townscape. At the end, he and his wife decide to leave the city. Their decision is made when they are prevented from attending the graduation of their son. "This is not for us," the husband says in a sentence that recognizes the social distance between them and modern urban life.

Watching this movie, one is reminded of Jacques Tati, particularly *Mon Oncle* (*My Uncle*, 1958), with arrows printed in the road, indicating the paths allowed. Even in this film, despite their differences, both of them emphasize the contrast in the behaviour observed within a city divided into "modern" and "old" landscapes. When the lens moves from modern avenues and skyscrapers to a distant neighbourhood, we see a townscape built by a blend of many cultures, including different tastes and patterns of behaviour.

In Latin America, the issue of cultural diversity has achieved great relevance in urban studies, particularly in works that highlight the cosmopolitanism of our towns (e.g. VELHO, 2010). However, sometimes it's very difficult to rediscover distinctive cultural patterns of groups who lived in the past, indicating the persistence of the "archaic" within the "modern". We found this possibility by studying films made by an artist rising from popular strata. For that, we use one the fundamentals of discourse analysis, on the assumption that each position in a social structure is attached to a specific set of possible speeches (FOUCAULT, 1981). Our premise was: because Mazzaropi's movies were so particular and attracted specific audiences, we are able to consider them as representative of particular subcultures.

In conclusion, some groups of dwellers in big cities build a geography that differs from that made by urban planners on their clipboards. They resist changes, understand the townscape through others' meanings and classify places by another logic. Put simply, they build a new spatial order, nearing and, at the same time, ignoring places. That's what film editing does.

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