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## **FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS**

*Solaris*. Directed by **Pavel Borecký**. (2015). 25 minutes. Colour. Distributed by Baltic Film and Media School, Tallinn University.

A man is sitting at a desk under a single bright lamp in a dark room filled with machine-like noises. He then goes to a large underground parking lot and takes some stuff out of a storage room. An escalator takes him up to the first floor of what is now recognisably a shopping mall. He leaves through the exit in order to wash the massive windows from the outside. But the spectators are not going out with him. They stay inside, observing the last human activities before attendants at supermarket counters and security guards finish their shifts. Then their intimate meeting with the night life of the creature begins. Brightly glistening refrigerator windows in large dark rooms, the terrible noise of a massive ventilation system, a frighteningly silent empty cinema hall, a fountain water, uncannily coloured in purple, in an eternal dance of artificial ebbing and flowing. You watch it until it becomes a blurry blotch of incoherence accompanied by a constant chaotic noise.

The film opens with a quote that plunges the spectator into modern philosophy and ends with a dedication that potentially transcends it into a social critique. Revealing these here would be a bit of a 'spoiler'. It is more important to point out what is in between is neither philosophy, nor social critique. Thinking about how the scenes resonate with the two statements leads to the always present inevitable problems of interpretation and the dynamics between text and image.

While remaining critical of the director for perhaps imposing meaning on his film with this textual framing, I invite the spectator to leave this aside and think about what the film actually does very effectively – represent a mundane place in a very unmundane way. It disturbs the senses. It sharpens your hearing and even annoys it. It makes you want to see the sunlight. It takes you someplace where you start begin to think you should not be, although it is the exact same 'non-place' you have visited numerous times. It gives you the feeling of Samuel Becket's 'Endgame' – there is nothing beyond these four walls and you will have to bear witness.

If the mission of anthropology, whether visual or textual, really is to turn the exotic into the trivial and vice versa, then 'Solaris' is a brilliant piece of anthropology. I watched it for a second time soon after I read a fantastic paper by Alan Klima in which he wonders what we can do in an age where the visual stupefies our perception and our compassion. He searches for an answer amongst a particular group of Buddhist practitioners who use images of corpses to foster the brain, which they understand to be sixth sense, to contemplate and deeply internalise the abject qualities of dead decaying human bodies and body parts. After I saw 'Solaris' I came to realise that what Klima was doing was very intentional and far less theoretical than it first appeared. He presented his potential Western readers with an account of a practice that can make them consider whether, no matter what, in this day and age images really are emptied out of meaning.

I think that this is precisely what ‘Solaris’ manages to achieve. It questions how well we know those boring shopping malls that we see everywhere. It offers a face-to-face meeting with a never sleeping giant. We all know the story about how people thought Lumière’s train would hit them, as they were sitting in the movie theatre. Here, we are dealing with the same shocking effect. Alan Klima suggests that we imagine we are able to perceive all those media images of war, suffering and violence not only visually, but internalise them and then estimate whether nowadays they really cannot foster a deep emotional response. Pavel Borecky makes us feel trapped inside the organism of the noisy giant. For those ready to *feel*, not be *explained* what a shopping mall is, this might be more affective and thought-provoking than a classic documentary. Surely, the main disadvantage of the film is that it may be a complete failure for many people who are not predisposed to its perspective. Overall, I am not sure whether the film amounts to a social critique. But I know that it opens up a path for a new type of social critique. We all *know* that capitalism is wrong. There is a myriad of documentaries about it. I am not sure, however, that we all *feel* it – that we have sensed how unmundane it is and how terrifying its intestines can be. And whether the director will take pity on you and take you out of the beast’s stomach, or will leave you inside as Becket did, you will find out at the very end.

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*Passinho Dance-Off* (orig. tit. *A Batalha do Passinho – Os muleque são sinistro!*) Directed by **Emílio Domingos**. (2013). 73 minutes. Colour. Osmose Filmes.

The film *Passinho Dance-Off* documents the emergence of a new aspect of *funk carioca* culture, practiced by the younger generations of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas. Using tools like the Internet, YouTube and video cameras, boys organize duels in which they combine *passinhos* or dance steps from *frevo*, *lundu*, *samba*, *capoeira*, *hip-hop*, *kuduro* and many other dance styles. The prowess and striking nature of the phenomenon caught the attention of cultural activists Julio Ludemir and Rafael Nike, who in 2011 began organizing live dance ‘battles’ in various favelas of Rio. This phenomenon quickly began to appear on television and spread throughout Brazil. The film captures these first moments, until 2012 when the success of *passinho* was confirmed in various manifestations – a musical called *Na Batalha* (In the Battle) and a band called the *Dream Team do Passinho*, which toured Europe and the US.

This is director Emílio Domingos’ second feature. His first, *L.A.P.A.*, (2008) traced the origins of Rio’s hip-hop scene. In this investigation of the trajectory of the *passinho* dance, he stresses the potential of creative youth who each day confront the absence of the state in the favela, and how this affects the basic rights of individuals. Virtually all the young people involved in *passinho* had dreams of being recognized, hoping this would allow them to improve their quality of life. *Cebolinha*, *Camarão Preto*, *Cristian*, *Bolinho*, *Gambá* and others try to find a way to construct a genuine culture, a culture often

marginalized by the dominant gaze, but which eventually came to be recognized as legitimate, as the film shows, representing a type of resistance from this historically violated group.

According to Leandra Perfects, one of the few girls who take part in the phenomenon and who is also a moderator of a related group on the Internet, the *passinho* raised the boys who dance to a powerful category who are desired by girls in the favelas. For Leandra, 'the girls want to see the boys who stand out and who have power, and in the favela someone with power is either a dancer or a drug dealer.' This may be an exaggeration, but it is true that the careers and fame of some *passinho* dancers exploded when their lives gained exposure. Throughout the film, the boys' descriptions of their experience linked to the love of dance portray hopes for a promising future in which Brazil may be entering. But we realize how much there is to overcome, as is the case when *Gambá* mentions the painful alternative given to him by his boss: 'You choose: either work or dance.'

His decision to dance will provide him some good and glorious days, awards and fame; as he was considered the 'king of *passinho*'. This highly productive youth created innovative dance steps that played with gay mannerisms and elevated them to the category of funk steps. Suddenly, everyone began to dance like *Gambá*. However, in a country that was late to abolish slavery, opportunities are not the same for everyone. The film clearly portrays this contradiction: *Gambá*, a young black favela resident, was murdered for no apparent reason upon leaving a *baile*

*funk* on New Year's Eve 2012; he was in the wrong place yet with the right color.

Perhaps this sad episode is the most illuminating moment in Emílio Domingos' film: the desire to become what one wants is almost always vetoed when one is born with no resources. However, the possibility to resist springs forth constantly when we see art blossoming amidst gunfire and negligence. The film reverses our way of thinking and should be widely seen. The *passinho* created by these young people is a metaphor of the battle for life, of the effort to fulfill one's dreams, of the possibility for social transformation, for the right to protagonism. These youth speak through dance. 'Dancing,' as Carlos Alberto Mattos (2013) affirmed, 'is a supreme way to speak.'

(Translated from Portuguese by Jorge de La Barre, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brazil)

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*The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song*. Directed by **Christy Garland**. (2012). 90 min, Colour. Produced by Chris Bennett and Christy Garland.

'The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song' narrates the daily life of a seventy-year-old woman, Mary, and her family in Guyana. The documentary starts with 35-year-old Muscle and his friend talking about the

increasing prices of vegetables; then Mary, Muscle's mother, enters the scene. She speaks about her broken dream of writing a book of poems and then recites one powerfully for the camera. At that point, her alcoholism is revealed, along with her children's attempts to keep her from it. The rest of the movie mainly portrays Mary's movements through her neighbourhood, her house and her relationship with her family and the broader community.

The film touches on several themes, including the link between poverty, violence and alcohol abuse, the normalisation of violence against women, the experience of aging and intergenerational solidarity in post-colonial societies and aspirations for social mobility among lower class Guyanese. The documentary is a window to settings of daily sociability and entertainment for these Guyanese, such as cock fights and a peculiar singing competition between birds, which give the title to this film.

While accurately and sensitively documenting Mary's and her family's life story from their stormy past to the realisation of their dreams as entrepreneurs, no link is drawn between their story and the wider socio-cultural and economic context of Guyana today. The documentary does not show to what extent Mary's story is a common case in Guyana, nor whether the protagonists' narratives represent a microcosm through which we can reflect upon wider social and political processes in this region. Only well after the beginning of the film do spectators understand that the protagonists are Guyanese (when Muscle happens to mention his ancestry). The documentary is thus a valuable document of a life story,

but does not develop the potential anthropological and sociological contribution of such a deeply researched work.

The close look at Mary's family's everyday life shows that the documentary is based on the meticulous work of building a trusting relationship between the protagonists and the director, and of establishing an intercultural dialogue between different societies. However, some ethical doubts arise when the camera does not stop recording Mary after she had explicitly asked not to be filmed while walking around the neighbourhood looking for alcohol against her children's wishes. Although this choice may be justified, more reflexivity on the director's position towards her interlocutors might have been advisable. While the director's presence is clear in the movie, her voice is hidden. For instance, she asks questions that the protagonists answer and which sustain the film's core arguments, but viewers never know what the questions are. Conversely, we never hear the director's answers to the protagonists' questions. This, rather than contributing to a realistic representation of the protagonists' lives, inserts a bias in the portrayal of the protagonists' stories and conveys a feeling of inequality between the director and her interlocutors as well as a lack of objectivity.

Nevertheless, 'The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song', remains a precious narrative, useful not only to those working on contemporary Guyanese society, but also to scholars, documentary filmmakers and a general audience interested in a biographical account of the long-term consequences of gender violence and alcoholism in lower social classes. The

film is also useful for those working on perceptions of social mobility within developing countries and family strategies for dealing with aging relatives. Since the wider historical and cultural context of Mary's story is somehow taken for granted, this documentary may be more easily accessed by those with a deep knowledge of Guyanese society.

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*Behind The Screen*. Directed by **Aung Nwai Htway**. (2012). 35mins. Colour. Distributed by Yangon Film School.

*Behind The Screen* director Aung Nwai Htway's mother, Daw San San Aye, and father, U Yin Htway, were renowned film actors in the exuberant cinema culture of Myanmar's first decades of military rule. Told through archival footage, film stills, and interviews, *Behind The Screen* is a study of the private rather than public cultural space generated by cinematic labour and film industry infrastructure. The story tracks the evolution and subsequent breakdown of Htway's parent's marriage within the familial environment of the Shumawa studio. Found scenes from films they worked on together illustrate the highs and lows of his parent's turbulent relationship and bitter divorce. Htway's strength lies in his engagement with a dispersed archive of Myanmar moving image media, approached with an archeological zeal that traces the genealogy of his family unit in parallel

with that of Myanmar film history. Htway's parents were loyal to the studio that employed them; the first signs of strain in the young couple's relationship appears when his mother began to feel the urge to work with other producers outside of the studio network that brokered their meeting.

While the re-semblage and imaging of personal history through fragments of film scenes, unedited footage, and stills manages to strike a difficult balance between an engagement with film as both a social phenomena and material object, Htway's use of music to provide broad emotional cues jars with the meditative pace of the film. Similarly, brief reenactments filmed in black and white are extraneous and unnecessary to the film. Except for these slight stylistic details, Htway's perceived goal for the film – to discursively engage with the state-planned use of cinema in the early decades of military rule in Myanmar through the lens of familial division and trauma – is brought to a successful conclusion.

*Behind The Screen* is a three-way dialogue between the narrator-son, the interviewee-father, and the now-deceased mother, conducted through found footage of her film roles. Yet, the snowy static, shaky framing, and generation loss in some of the illustrative film scenes are evidence of another intimate relationship with the video material: that of the archivist. Due to Myanmar's recent combative history, the preservation of the nation's cinematic heritage has required the input of innovative young media workers such as those in the Yangon Film School (YFS), with whom Htway produced *Behind The Screen*. The Berlin-based YFS provides

workshops and training, and was responsible for the restoration of the 1972 film *Ché phawa daw nu nu* (Tender are the Feet), starring Htway's mother Daw San San Aye. This film set a precedent as a rare example of a film restored from a non-celluloid carrier, in this case VHS, and was shown at the 2014 Berlin Film Festival.

In *Behind The Screen*, the archive is an essential element in the recollection of lived and collective memory. At some point the remaining but fragile film footage of Myanmar cinema was transferred to video, thereby extending the lifespan and social life of the images that illustrate Htway's film. When the horizontal static of the video transfer is absent, this often indicates that the illustrative scene was a rush cut, an off-screen moment captured by the camera and not included in the final film. *Behind The Screen* is full of these liminal spaces between the private sphere of cinema studio labor and the public world of film culture, generating moments of reconciliation through an individual's engagement with archival film footage.

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*Tyres*. Directed by **Kyaw Myo Lwin**. (2013). 33 minutes, B&W and Colour. Distributed by Yangon Film School.

In the city of Yangon, Myanmar, old tyres are taken apart and the components recycled in multiple ways. The documentary *Tyres* shows some steps in this process. The first consists in the separation of different layers of the tyre to get to the rubber that is the most flexible part and best for reuse. The different layers

are separated by workers who cut the tyres with simple knives. Part of the rubber is processed locally by people who use it to make buckets and sandals. The steel wire that is removed from the tyres is reused by steel brush makers. These different activities take place in workshops that sit next to each other on the same street and that support each other.

*Tyres* shows these processes in meticulous detail with a focus on the workers' skills. They use basic tools, like knives, chisels, and a whetstone to sharpen the knives. One steel-brush maker has invented his own hand drill and explains with some pride that others may use an electric drill with twice the capacity, but his drill is not vulnerable to electrical blackouts so he never fails to meet an order. With silent admiration the filmmaker regards the skill of the workers and the rhythm of the coordinated movement of hands and feet (feet are used, for instance, like a vise, to hold materials in place).

The focus on the physical aspects of production is both the strength and a weakness of the documentary. The film offers far less insight into the social side of production and the economic information is even scarcer. From a few overviews of a whole workshop the viewer can surmise the number of people working there, and their genders and ages. Consumer items like clothes, watches, a meal of plain rice with no side dishes, a bicycle, a TV, and a bamboo ball reveal their modest incomes. Five workers are introduced with a video portrait, name, job, age and years of experience and from this information the spectator can infer that most began this

work in their teens and have been doing it throughout their lives.

These five video portraits are the only images in colour. Even then, however, the screen is mostly filled by a background of black tyres, which highlights the coloured images of the silent workers. This is just one example of the artistic nature of the film. Another example of the creative quality is the quiet way in which the story unfolds. Most scenes begin with a close-up that leaves the spectator puzzled, and only gradually does the view widen to include more of a workshop, and at most the street. This sequence draws the audience's attention. Yet we never get beyond the tyre cutters' street, and this narrow localization gives the film a timeless quality. The fact that the film was made right in the middle of a dramatic democratization process remains unsaid.

The suggestion of a timeless activity is reinforced by the few words spoken in the film. As the lyrics of an old song express: 'The cycle of life is very long and never-ending. [...] What you want, you don't get, what you don't want, you get'. Or in the words of a philosophical tyre cutter: 'you'll only ever earn enough just to get by' and 'they've got to pace themselves if they want to survive this job'. In a decade or so we will know whether tyre cutting is indeed an unchanging activity or whether *Tyres* will become a historical document of a disappearing craft. Given the global need to recycle resources, it is conceivable that tyre cutters have a future.

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*Power to the Pedals: Wenzday Jane and the Culture of Change.* Directed by **Bob Nesson**. (2016). 32 min, Colour. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources. DVD.

*Power to the Pedals* tells the story of Wenzday Jane, a Cambridge, Massachusetts, resident and her company Metro Pedal Power, a local cargo service that uses only pedal-powered vehicles. The business Wenzday founded is part of a wider movement exploring new horizons in urban life, seeking to integrate the values of sustainability and environmental protection into daily transactions.

Wenzday's initiation into this growing movement arrived with the sense of empowerment she discovered by learning metal-welding techniques, a skill she now passes on to others. She contrasts this with the dependence on welfare and sense of having 'given up' that she witnessed in her parents. Learning these manual skills taught her to see material objects from a 'masterful place' and for her the self-reliance she found in repairing and creating zero-emission pedal-powered vehicles is a fundamental merit of the business model she continues to develop.

Running the business has also raised more mundane issues, as the fundamental social and environmental values of the business compete with its economic viability. The first is discovering the technical limits of moving cargo with pedal-power. The bicycles have proved to be perfectly adapted for short journeys and light loads. One cyclist on a pedal-power vehicle can move up to 600 lbs with their legs alone. With a fleet of seven larger vehicles, three bicycle trailers and three other small cargo bikes, Metro Pedal

Power delivers fresh produce to local restaurants. For these clients, the eco-credentials of the business may be as attractive as its economic advantages. However, a milestone was reached when the company submitted a bid to win a municipal contract to collect waste from the city's many waste recycling drop-off points. Competing against traditional petroleum-fueled trucking services, Metro Pedal Power made economic sense for the city. It increased pick-up frequency, a stated goal, while drastically reducing costs and emissions. The contrast of the comparatively tiny pick-up bicycle arriving at the recycling plant surrounded by huge trucks and bulldozers is striking, yet the cyclist seems at ease and confident in his work.

Wenzday's employees appreciate the decent wages she tries to offer, and the opportunity to work outdoors in a healthy job, but it is also clear that she looks for people who share her vision and who can contribute to its development. Her right-hand man, John, performs the vital task of saying 'no to everything', moderating her slightly idealistic yes to all proposals.

Beyond a dedicated workforce and immediate clients, Metro Pedal Power is part of a wider community of businesses that are committed to a sustainable lifestyle. This incorporates movements such as community-supported agriculture, food co-ops, and those interested in reforming processes like distribution and waste management. Here, Wenzday introduces her own 'inquiry into the nature of business, value, and economy', alluding to issues such as fair salaries, a cooperative model and the need to instil responsibility, pride and a sense of ownership in those

that operate within the network. Her inquiries are not just philosophical, in addition to her regular repair work, she is researching and developing a pedal-powered compost mulcher.

As a long-distance freight train, laden with symbolism, hurtles past Metro Pedal Power's yard, fresh products from a local organic farm are dropped off to be collected onsite by local co-op members or delivered to them by bike. Locals may also have their organic waste picked up, turned into compost and returned to the farm. Thus, pedal power is one link among many in the chain of the 'generative economy', which Wenzday defines as allowing both people and the planet to thrive.

The bicycle has a special place in alternative visions of the city, raising important questions about the impact of society's preferred means of transport, the car, on urban life. As Wenzday asserts, many of our urban journeys can be replaced by pedal power. Over the last twenty years, in many Western countries pro-bike associations (such as Critical Mass) have worked to dislodge the car from its central role in urban planning and develop new kinds of mobility within modern cities. The academic study of cycling cultures has also grown exponentially in recent years and governments and municipalities are funding studies to develop urban plans and respond to public interest in cycling. Examples include the CYCLA (<http://www.proyectociclovias.es>) and Ciclopart (<http://ciclopart.redcimas.org>) projects in Spain; as well as university-led multisite and interdisciplinary initiatives such as Cycling Cultures (<http://www.cyclingcultures.org.uk>) or



cycle boom (<http://www.cycleboom.org>) in the UK.

This growing group of slow-living, Zen-type city dwellers seek to differentiate themselves from the ubiquitous car users and the consumption cycle of non-organic and carbon-heavy food. While the United States ranks second in the world in terms of its carbon footprint per capita, it is also home to many such communities. Not surprisingly, Cambridge, Massachusetts is a veritable hot bed, known as the ‘Peoples Republic of Cambridge’ in reference to its residents’ leftist and liberal tendencies. But in a global context where half of the world’s population lives in cities where cars are still dominant and represent for many a symbol of the ‘developed’ Western standard of living, the question of whether this culture of change can take hold remains pertinent.

The documentary is technically well accomplished, putting little between the viewer and the positive story of Wenzday’s successful alternative business. Yet, the focus on Wenzday’s achievements perhaps takes away from the issues she is still exploring, for example her ‘inquiry into the nature of business’ and her search for the ‘ideal structure’ for trade in the generative economy. This inquiry, although she may not have all the answers, could prove more valuable to the global challenges we face than proving the economic viability of pedal power.

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