
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Bloqueio (Block). Directed by **Victoria Alvares** and **Quentin Delaroche**. 2018. 76 minutes. Colour. Produced by Ponte Produções.

In May 2018, a massive truck drivers' strike took place in Brazil. The largest cities in the country had no provisions for nearly 15 days. Gasoline, in particular, was lacking in most urban areas, disrupting daily life and creating a temporality affected by the strike. The film *Block (Bloqueio)* directed by Victória Álvares and Quentin Delaroche takes the viewer into a strike camp in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

The documentary observes the activities carried out at a camp established at a gas station along a highway. The truckers in the film portray themselves as part of a working class amidst a socioeconomic crisis that has led to unsustainable working conditions. If a distribution infrastructure (of which the truckers are part) is only perceived when it fails in its objectives, the strike and the consequent lack of provisions revealed the presence of these workers to the urban population.

In a nocturnal sequence, the trucks become 'houses', creating narrow streets that resemble lower class townships found in the main cities of Brazil. The film shows how these spaces are built and inhabited. Paradoxically, through images that show an exceptional moment in the life of truck drivers, the viewers can see their own daily life. Camp life, which is the norm for workers who spend months away from home, becomes an object of ethnographic exploitation.

The filmmakers become closer to the truckers as the film progresses. The camera's gaze allows us to perceive the processes that lead to the construction of these political subjectivities. The relationship with the national media is a fundamental theme. Journalists from the major broadcasters and their cameras, in particular, are harassed by truck drivers. In contrast, the filmmakers, who followed the strike for three days, and their camera become the strikers' allies.

In the visual narrative, a helicopter is a central agent. It is the subject that represents the state in the broad sense. Hailed as an ally at the beginning of the film, it becomes an enemy of the strikers. One shot stands out, in which a striker angrily throws a bottle at a helicopter. From the visual standpoint, this shot reminds us of an iconic sequence in 'Pirinop. My first contact' directed by Mari Correia and Kumaré Ikpeng, in which natives shoot arrows at a plane flying over the village in the 1970s. The natives show hostility toward this invader as well as a fascination for the great 'bird'.

In this sense, we can see the historical roots of the complex strategies used for the management of subaltern groups. In the first part of the film, the Brazilian army and police are hailed as allies of the strikers through banners that call for a military intervention. Progressively, these entities become the main enemy — the agents that provoke the end of the strike. Visually, the film shows the complexity of the truck drivers as subjects and their ambiguous relationship with power. Paradoxically, we see them in a final sequence, when the state is already clearly their enemy, singing the national anthem. The directors show us these moments without commenting on

them, leaving the complex task of interpretation to the viewer.

The film *Block* is an encounter with these new alterities — these contemporary lower classes that remain under-analysed by anthropologists and who supported the election of the current president of Brazil. In an iconic final sequence that hosts the credits of the film, we see the trucks leaving the camp. This is where we find the only textual comment that the filmmakers propose throughout the film: ‘Five months later, Jair Bolsonaro, a right-wing former military man is elected president of Brazil’. The film *Block* is an excellent visual exploration of the processes that have preceded this moment. Moreover, it can be considered a visual encounter with a logistic infrastructure and its ambiguous relation to urban spaces.

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Koukaki. A Neighbourhood in Transition. Directed by **Zilan Dalgic** and **Ismini Gatou**. 2018. 100 minutes. Colour.

‘The majority of the houses in Koukaki are rented through Airbnb’

‘Airbnb has grown because it is much cheaper than hotels’

‘The financial crisis made Airbnb more attractive’

These are some of the concerns voiced in a recent documentary film by locals residing in the Athenian neighbourhood of Koukaki. The short (just under 10 minutes in length) *Koukaki* was produced in 2018 by the Netherlands Institute at Athens (NIA) and the Athens Ethnographic Film Festival (Ethnofest) and was directed by Zilly

Galdic and Ismini Gatou. The film offers a critical perspective of urban development seen through the eyes of Athenian residents. Koukaki, which is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Athens, underwent significant changes once the giant Californian company Airbnb tapped into the area’s short-term rental market.

The film starts and ends in a visual loop with a static frame capturing three locals chit-chatting on a bench. One carries a supermarket bag. One is petting a leashed dog. The third twirls a pair of komboskini (orthodox prayer rope). Frame by frame, the footage moves from one local resident to another filmed in their typical environment: smoking, talking and sitting in taverns while sharing their thoughts on the district’s transition. The film is much stronger conceptually than visually. The visual medium adds little to the story. There are a couple of long frames that draw the viewer into the *feel* of the neighbourhood, but the camera makes fast jumps from the background to the interviewees, obscuring what exactly the film aims to emphasise and why. The frames are often unstable and some of the footage looks as if it was placed accidentally. For instance, at minute 3:55, a resident asks if he should look at the camera, which is something that could have been edited out. Similarly, the footage covers the Fabrika Restaurant, one of the oldest taverns in the neighbourhood, yet suddenly jumps to a general street view of the neighbourhood, making the viewer wonder why the camera stopped for a few seconds on the restaurant.

Due to its proximity to the Acropolis, Koukaki has changed from a low-key local neighbourhood into a tourist hotspot. The film attributes this change to the expansion

of Airbnb into the short-term rental market. Local opinions seem divided on the subject matter. Some understand this change as a positive development — a sign that the society is evolving. Others see it as a phenomenon strongly connected to the 2008 financial crisis that subsequently propped up the Airbnb industry. Some argue that Koukaki lacks sufficient hotels, while others state that Airbnb provides cheaper accommodations. Indeed, in 2018, when the documentary was filmed, Greece made media headlines for breaking its all-time tourist record — over 33 million travellers visited the country. It is likely that most of these people passed through Athens, even if they were on the way to the islands.

A local resident describes Koukaki as underdeveloped, with about 70% of the shops in the area empty. Towards the end of the film, the viewer learns that this was the neighbourhood outlook about 30 years ago. Nowadays, a different story unfolds and the touristic appropriation of the local housing stock has negative impacts for the resident population: communication is difficult for those who barely speak English; decade-long residents leave their homes and rent them through Airbnb; and residential apartments become unavailable for year-to-year leases. One resident is filmed speaking about a Cypriot investor who has purchased several flats in the area and requested an inadvertent viewing of her apartment.

Parallel cases of foreign investments are currently the norm across Athens. In the anarchist neighbourhood of Exarcheia, similarly located in the central area of the city, a Chinese investor has allegedly bought over 100 flats to capitalise on the short-term leasing market.

Airbnb is a contentious topic in Athens. Data show that incorporated businesses operating multiple rental units comprise almost half of all Airbnb listings in the city. In spite of Airbnb's noble goal of supporting a shared economy, the Athenian short-term rental market has been exploited by large commercial actors with dozens of properties in their portfolio. In many neighbourhoods, such as Exarcheia, political defiance against the Airbnb monopoly is taking root. It remains to be seen whether Koukaki will undertake such forms of resistance in the near future.

Koukaki is a lively documentary. It will most likely be useful to housing activists, researchers, urban planners and public policy makers focused on opposing gentrification and developing affordable housing options.

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Пукнатини (Cracks). Directed by **Dimitra Kofti**. 2018. 55 minutes. Colour.

Based on anthropological research and produced by the Max Planck Institute, Kofti's *Cracks* provides a wry look at the lives of people who are exasperated. Set in Pernik, Bulgaria, precariously employed workers and retirees reflect upon the disappointments they have experienced under communism and capitalism whilst asking what the future might have in store.

Although Kofti's interlocutors discuss their economic situation with humour, the frustration they feel is palpable throughout. 'It seems I've begun to use this word "unfortunately" very often,' comments one

man. ‘Looking at what remains of these factories, indeed one should really regret that they’re no longer working’.

The film ranges widely across the city, jumping between interlocutors who seemingly have no connection with one another save their residency in Pernik. This approach provides plenty of talking-head snippets that underscore the stated thesis that ‘decay and reconstruction, employment and unemployment, debt and migration are all topics of daily concern’. Diverse though the characters are, the refrain throughout their observations seems to be that without an active industrialism, city life becomes empty and directionless.

At a moment when we begin to take degrowth, post-industrialism and a shorter working week seriously, a documentary such as this should give us pause. A proactive, positive embrace of less work, less production and more free time should be the basis on which to build fair, open, sustainable cities. However, as the film shows, economic growth and development provide, if nothing else, a default sense of purpose for a city and its people. Without such a purpose, it is very easy for people to fall through the cracks as cities fall apart. This argument is made through the use of archival footage and first-person testimonials, which suggest that time has somehow slowed down into a long present or even folded back into itself as people have passed from capitalism to communism and back without ‘better times [...] coming’.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film implicitly endorses the role that culture can play in giving people a sense of pride and purpose when work is no longer satisfying. The film both opens and closes with the

dual examples of an audience attending a chamber music concert and a woman who has artfully decorated the earthquake-damaged walls of her apartment. These two acts — one social and the other idiosyncratic — affirm our ability to produce meaning whatever our economic circumstances may be.

However, the circular construction of *Cracks* adds further to the sense of drift and disorientation that is the over-arching theme. Because it is based around interviews with seemingly unrelated interlocutors, it never develops any kind of dramatic tension. This may reflect a feeling that things in Pernik have already happened and are not happening anymore; the city’s stories are in the past rather than unfolding from the present into the future.

As it stands, this makes the film an ambient document of some of the contradictions or ‘cracks’ inherent to global development. Given the candour and insight with which people seem willing to speak, a feature-length follow-up could — if it allows itself to settle upon a personal story — greatly develop the issues that are showing between these cracks.

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(Un)wash. Directed by **Sophie Krabbe** and **Rosa Gelardi**. 2018. 9 minutes. Colour. Produced by Netherlands Institute of Athens (INA).

Presenting Ithaca, a mobile laundry service in Athens, Greece, *(Un)wash* (2018) shows an oft-hidden aspect of life for those who live on the streets — the simple pleasure and necessity of washing one’s clothes.

This is a student film and a first feature. Co-directed by Sophie Krabbe and Rosa Gelardi, this summer school project was produced by the Netherlands Institute of Athens (INA) and the Athens Ethnographic Film Festival (Ethnofest), where it was screened in 2018. The story is simple: the filmmakers interview some of Ithaca's employees and a few of the homeless people who use this service to get their clothes washed in the heart of Athens, Greece.

As the activity of washing clothes in machines — surrealistically set up in urban locations — unfolds before our eyes, the protagonists comment on the importance of cleanliness in emotional and social terms. People come to the mobile laundry because wearing clean clothes is important to them. It makes them happy and grateful. They also come for the feeling of community and solidarity that bonds them to others who gather around or work at the mobile laundry. It becomes quickly apparent that Ithaca provides a service that goes beyond the trivial act of washing, offering a taste of everyday life and a sense of belonging in exchange for a fresh load of laundry.

Interestingly, Ithaca's workers often comment on the importance of cleanliness as a means of gaining control of one's life and a way 'to get back into the system,' which is a phrase that makes a subtle comment on homelessness. As such, this film could easily dialogue with one of the most influential books on social anthropology, *Purity and Danger* (1966), for, as Mary Douglas proposes, 'if uncleanness is a matter out of place, we must approach it through order' (2010: 50). This film could indeed appeal to visual or social anthropologists and urban scholars

alike for the many layers of sociality it evokes as well as for the city it portrays.

The cinematography is meditative, with images at times reminding the viewer of zen gardens. This is especially true of the sequences showing soapy water coming out of the washing machines and spilling onto the dirty pavement. The visual language often uses mid-shots and alternates between eye level and low angles, enabling the sense of closeness and community to shine through. It also makes the city streets and squares stand out as the unlikely backdrop for a very mundane activity that usually occurs indoors, away from prying eyes.

The filmmakers' choice to interview these people in English and use subtitles, when it is obvious that English is not their first language, is questionable. Making them speak in a foreign language flattens the emotional dimension of the interviews and hinders a direct connection with the characters. Moreover, the message remains a bit hazy throughout the film. One is not sure what to think when the credits roll. However, the aesthetics chosen by the directors indicate that it is a labour of love — an ode to the hidden treasures of compassion that the city of Athens and its inhabitants have to offer when times get tough.

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