
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

A Conquista do Oeste [How the West Was Won]. Directed by **Isabel Joffily**. 2023. 27 minutes. Colour.

The west side of the city of Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, has experienced a rapid and unique urbanization process over the past six decades. *How the West Was Won* is a documentary that explores the transformations undertaken in the area with the imaginaries and promises to turn Rio's hinterlands into the modernist utopia of the Barra da Tijuca neighbourhood. Alternating illustrations of the countrified spaces with videos of the new high-rises and condominiums that replaced them, the film takes us through the contradictory images of the creation of a global suburb on top of the faraway emptiness of a chaotic city.

Following the social life of an unsuccessful housing condominium, the film presents the history of the occupation of Rio de Janeiro's west side, from the eyes of its residents, planners and administrators. From the wilderness to a neighbourhood of enclaves, massive infrastructures and large avenues, Barra da Tijuca expresses the ideas of progress being taken by the real estate market and the search for sameness and security. With the use of historical archives mixed with present day cinematography on what the neighbourhood has become, the documentary successfully demonstrates how the Brazilian 'gold rush' for the progress transformed urban planning utopia into a reproduction of an unequal and segregated city.

The Ilha Pura [Pure Island] condominium, around which the screenplay orbits, represents the local take on the global phenomenon of building exclusive

cities. In a neighbourhood that has a Statue of Liberty facing its main avenue, ideas of progress and modernity are confronted by imaginaries of chaos, emptiness or stagnation to present opportunities for the real estate market to produce a global suburb in a country striving for an accelerated growth.

While the images of the Bellagio's water show give way to the empty promises of its cheap imitation, Ilha Pura's grandeur is confronted with its failure. Opposing the substantial projects of preeminent urbanists, the ruins of the city-to-be puts in question the paths of large urbanization processes in the Global South. For those inquiring about the effects of urbanization and the limits of urban planning, the Brazilian version of 'how the west was won' is a relevant example. And as the night falls and the lack of light in most of the thirty-one residential towers of the Olympic legacy indicate emptiness, the question of the future of cities remains.

Through the voices of those responsible for the urbanization of the hinterlands, the documentary sheds light on what is at stake in the process of city making. As an intriguing yet relevant contribution to urban studies, *How the West Was Won* takes us to the backstage of how profit, segregation, ruins and condominiums also produce a neighbourhood.

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The Joker. Directed and produced by **Todd Phillips**. 2019. 121 min. Colour.

The film *The Joker*, set in the early 1980s, tells the story of Arthur Fleck, a failed party clown and aspiring stand-up comedian whose descent

into madness and nihilism inspires the lower social classes to launch a violent counter-cultural revolution against the upper classes in a decaying fictional place called Gotham City. The aesthetics of Gotham City, which is actually New York, add a sense of decay and misery to the plot. This place appears to be always dark and gloomy in order to symbolize the presence of criminality and evil. Arthur, otherwise the Joker, is depressed, and he also suffers of a serious mental disorder that brings him to laugh uncontrollably when he becomes anxious. This condition causes almost everyone in society to reject and look down on him, despite the fact that all he wants is to be accepted by his fellow citizens. In some cases, he is also tortured by people, such as in the scene when he is assaulted by a baby-gang while performing a street show dressed as a clown.

The reduced public investment in health care, a topic that has recently piqued the interest of anthropologists, is highlighted in the film. The Gotham City government's health-care budget cuts resulted in the termination of Fleck's therapy sessions at a public mental health facility. Arthur cannot afford private health-care, and he no longer receives treatment for his psychological problem, which was brought on by his mother's former partner, who molested him when he was a child. Meanwhile, the tycoon Thomas Wayne (the richest man in Gotham) decides to run for mayor promising to restore the funding for public health care and to counter the rise of urban crime produced by social inequalities. Following the assault by the young delinquents, Arthur decides to carry a pistol, which he unintentionally drops on the floor while working as a clown at a children's hospital. After learning about the incident, Arthur's boss fires him. As if that weren't enough, while Arthur is travelling home in his clown outfit, three 'yuppies' from

Wayne Enterprise harass and abuse him in the railway underground. He retaliates by shooting and killing the trio. Arthur is initially heartbroken for his reaction, but this marks the beginning of his transformation into the Joker. As word spreads of the three murders committed by a man dressed as a clown, some interpret the incident as a slur on the wealthy, while others applaud the crime. Thomas Wayne speaks out against it, referring to the working class as 'clowns', a symbol that they quickly adopt. Following this murder, the police investigate, and a violent movement led by people wearing clown masks erupts against the wealthy elite, resulting in Wayne's murder in the last scenes of the film.

Arthur receives an unexpected call from the creators of *The Murray Franklin Show*, his favourite television programme, asking him to appear in one of the episodes. Arthur, however, has the feeling that he was invited not for his comedic abilities but for Murray (the presenter) to continue to make fun of him for the benefit of increasing TV viewers. In a previous episode, Murray had shown footage of Arthur's underperforming at some unknown comedy club and uncontrollably laughing at the worst possible times while attempting to tell jokes. Murray introduces Arthur as the Joker, who enters the show dressed as a clown and is greeted with a large applause. During the show, Arthur who feels exploited and ridiculed, confesses the triple assassination of Wayne's employers in the underground. When the programme's audience turns against him, the Joker, who had originally planned to commit suicide during the episode, shoots Murray multiple times, killing him. As his criminal act is broadcast on national television, for the first time in his life, the Joker laughs genuinely. The gesture enrages the crowd even more against the rich, setting the city on fire. The

Joker is arrested but he becomes a symbol of social protest and upheaval. The film had an impact on real-life demonstrators as well. Following the film's release, protesters around the world wore Joker's masks at various demonstrations against governments, most recently in Hong Kong. For some critics, the Joker represents the new anti-capitalist hero.

When assessing the film's meaning, four major social and cultural considerations emerge. The film begins with elements that are common in Hollywood production and US cinematography, particularly the ideology of the 'American way of Life' based on Puritanism and Calvinism since the time of the Pilgrim Fathers in the 17th century. This ideology which has survived in today's secularized American society is built on unbridled individualism, a world of great loneliness and abandonment in which society's single atoms (individuals or families) must rely solely on themselves and where success, materialism and career are extremely important. This is Arthur's story, where he aspires to be a famous showman despite being abandoned in his mental illness and lacking the strength to rise up and fight in such an individualistic society. It is not surprising that the greatest serial killers in history — often individuals who feel alone, unsupported and resentful — are produced in extremely atomized individualist societies, where growing economic inequality and social immobility are evident as effects of strong market liberalization policies. According to well-known crime agencies, the United States has produced the highest number of serial killers in the world, followed by England.

Another significant factor to consider is the decrease in public health care spending, which has a negative effect on both the quality of life of those receiving social services and the population as a whole, due to the additional

financial, physical and mental strain, which can also lead to antisocial behaviour. It is, therefore, crucial that academics continue to promote the fundamental human right known as the *Right to Health*.

The third point that the film's creator intends to underline is how child maltreatment leads to psychologically unstable and deviant people. According to the WHO, around 1 billion children are abused annually on a mental, sexual, and physical level, which makes it critical to offer public health care for children who are experiencing abuse.

The fourth factor to consider is how this movie invites us to think about a current debate addressing the consequences of mentally unstable peoples having easy access to fire-arms.

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El Lado quieto (The Still Side). 2021.
Mexico/Argentina/Philippines. Directed by
Miko Revereza, Carolina Fusilier. 70 min.

During a conversation with anthropologist Lévi-Strauss in 1998, I, Carmen, heard the statement: 'Documentaries are boring, I like black and white American movies from my youth'. This came to mind as we watched *El Lado Quieto*, a film that explores the ruins of a resort on the coast of Mexico. While some documentaries can be dull, this film is anything but. The use of a naturalistic aesthetic or a narrating voice that knows everything can make a documentary unappealing, as can the use of talking heads in interviews. *El Lado Quieto*, however, is peaceful and calming. It features images of the sea, stones, and even a slug leaving its trail, with no human presence for the first nine minutes except for a cap. As the film progresses, traces of human presence

gradually appear, revealing the profile of tourists who came to this ‘all inclusive’ island resort. This is a narrative about a once effervescent past that now lies in ruins, and how tourist ventures have become disjointed as a result. It explores the fragility of human existence through the lens of memory, which is punctuated by moments of forgetfulness that are brought back to life through the act of storytelling.

El Lado Quieto takes its audience on journey, exploring a mythology while surveying the afterlife of a long-abandoned holiday resort on the Pacific coast of Mexico. The fable of the Siyokoy sea creature serves as propellant to examine the themes of life and decay that unfold in this post-human landscape. The Siyokoy, carried by strong currents from the Philippines, navigates the spectral remnants of this once-thriving resort, providing a unique perspective on the ruins left behind.

The film’s soundtrack is also noteworthy, with well-crafted sounds of the sea and music, and a smooth dialogue between the director and the narrator. In the end, the abandoned hotel is shown in slow tracking shots. The deserted hotel’s skeleton brought to mind Sophie Calle’s exploration of similar ghosts in her exhibition ‘Grand Hôtel Palais d’Orsay’. Broken chairs, dusty sofas and armchairs, and beds are just a few of the objects that still bear the shadows of those who used them. The film explores the traces and ruins that serve as reminders of the delicate balance between remembering and forgetting, which Walter Benjamin referred to as ‘fringes’ decorated by the ornaments of forgetfulness.

El Lado Quieto proposes to dramatize the political and ethical importance of remembrance, highlighting the necessity of keeping the past alive in our collective consciousness. Like Calle’s exhibition, the deactivated hotel in *El Lado Quieto* offers a

poignant reminder of the transient nature of human existence and our impact on the world around us. The slow tracking shots of the hotel are particularly effective, revealing the empty and silent spaces that were once filled with life and activity. The film’s attention to detail and its use of sound further enhance this sense of emptiness, creating an atmosphere that is both haunting and meditative. As the film draws to a close, we are left with the narrator’s thoughts on the possibility that marine creatures may someday replace us on the planet, a dystopian bet on the duration of an ecosystem not necessarily including humans. It is a sobering reminder that everything we build will eventually fall into decay and that we are not as permanent as we may sometimes believe. Without really having it as its main objective, the film leads us to think about today’s mass tourism, the practices and values of tourists, and their consumption — drinks, cosmetics, plastic surgeries.

The film is a stunning exploration of a post-human landscape, and it left a lasting impression on the viewer.

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Rolê - Stories of Brazilians protests in malls. Directed by **Vladimir Seixas**. 2021. 82 min. Colour.

With their air conditioners, escalators and security guards, shopping centres seek to offer their clients a familiar and safe space for shopping without the inconveniences and insecurity of modern city streets. In a society established and maintained through racism,

like Brazil, security generally means monitoring and, whenever possible, keeping out non-white people from the spaces, especially when they are not working. Across Brazil, there are frequent cases of racism against black people by mall employees: security guards that pursue teenagers who were just having ice cream, a cashier that falsely accuses a woman of stealing the products that she had just paid for, a seller that makes racist jokes on the hair of a black girl who was passing by the store.

As we can see in the documentary *under review*, for black people in Brazil, the simple act of shopping can be transformed into a traumatic racist situation. The film shows new forms of protest against the racial discrimination daily perpetuated in those establishments by occupying shopping malls.

The word *rolê* is a usual slang used in São Paulo. It means *to hang out*, and its diminutive; *rolêzinho*, is used to describe the meetings of teenagers, mainly black and peripheral, in shopping malls, especially in the São Paulo metropolitan area in 2013 and 2014. These meetings were organized through the social media and their objective was to gather, make friends, listen to funk music and flirt. However, when the youth arrived at the mall, they were usually received by stores hastily closed and police forces who were there to contain them.

From the protest in the 2000's of activists of the MTS (Landless Worker's Movement), who occupied the Rio Sul Shopping Mall located in a high middle class neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, to the *rolezinhos*, occupations in malls of São Paulo in 2013 and 2014, to the most recent performance and protest promoted by the artist Priscila Rezende with a black women collective, also in Rio Sul, the documentary

explores how a new generation of black Brazilians is thinking and producing, stemming from the past, new ways of being in the city and making politics. Through a wealth of material, including statements, news, archive videos and performances, the documentary portrays the trajectories of three black young Brazilians that took part in recent protests in shopping centres: Thayná Trindade, Priscila Rezende and Jefferson Luís.

Although the title suggests that the main topic of the film is the *rolêzinhos*, the film explores other types and forms of protests against racism in malls. The *rolêzinhos* bear similarities with other forms of black youth occupying malls but also have relevant specificities as a movement deeply linked to funk culture that appear tangentially in the movie. It should be noted that, initially, the *rolêzinho* was not exactly a protest. In its ambition to talk about many things, the documentary fails to focus on the specific characteristics that makes the *rolêzinho* a particular cultural and political movement. Nonetheless, the documentary offers an interesting perspective about new black urbanites and racial conflicts in Brazil.

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