Redemption Through the Excess of Sin

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At the back of the frame, the dead husband on the bed—his body, already prepared for burial, overshadowed by the son who stoops, crying over his father's face. In the foreground, the widow cackles with pleasure, her almost toothless mouth widening in a loud peal of laughter. At the back, the dead old man and, at his side, the son busy shooing away the flies that swarm around the dead man's face, trying to push their way into his half-opened mouth. In front, the widow, her empty mouth heavily made up, wearing brightly colored clothes, pleased because the old man died before she did, leaving her free to enjoy herself.

In the foreground of the frame, a small flight of stairs that leads to the front door of a house, with a mangy dog sprawled on the last step. At the back of the frame, a stretch of road and a man walking with slow steps in the direction of the house. All of this in slow motion: the dog is so shrunken that it seems to be part of the steps, while the man, Nelsinho, walks so slowly that he seems to be standing still. Suddenly, rapid movement; after climbing the stairs step by slow step to the last one, just before entering the house, the man gives the dog a violent kick.

These two images—the old woman Amália's laughter and Nelsinho's attack on the dog—comment on the political violence of the moment in which Joaquim Pedro's *Guerra Conjugal* was made, when the military dictatorship that had installed itself in 1964 became increasingly strict after December 1968, with the passage of Institutional Act Number 5. Yet the images also refer to a certain characteristic of Brazilian society, a certain way of covering violence under a veneer of politeness. Amália laughs distractedly,

showing a toothless mouth that could at any moment hang open for an instant, in intimacy, in secret, openly chuckling to herself, anticipating a kind of happiness that has not yet arrived. Nelsinho kicks indifferently, without anger, in an almost mechanical way, like someone trying to push away with their foot some rubbish in the street. These are brief and interior gestures. They are not meant for anyone to see; they are not even to be seen in a mirror. The son, busy flicking the flies from around his father's face, does not see his mother's frank laugh; in the empty street, no one sees Nelsinho kick the dog. These are acts of aggression aimed at nothing in particular, or rather they are aimed at everything, at life in a more general sense. Amália is not upset with Joãozinho. The old woman laughs indifferently; she laughs because she has already stopped feeling the anger she felt towards him when he was alive. She no longer needs to think about how disgusted she used to be when, at the table, he guzzled his soup as if he were eating the last meal of his life. She no longer needs to listen to Joãozinho whispering his last wish to his son, pointing at his wife and saying, "when I die, at my funeral, don't let her kiss me." Nelsinho does not see the dog as a dog; it's just something on the step. He kicks the animal merely to move his foot—gymnastics, stretching, exercise, sport, football with a dog in the absence of a ball. Inside, his girlfriend tries to please him with a tender kiss, and Nelsinho gruffly complains about it: "You're still sucking those mints like crazy." He finds the clothes she is wearing hideous, but when she offers to change, he complains again: "Don't bother, I don't care." This is not violence, but indifference. Or better yet, it is indifference that amounts to violence.

The torture of political prisoners seemed to be diminishing at the time when *Guerra Conjugal* was released. State brutality was taming itself. And the film shows exactly that, violence being incorporated into day-to-day life: simple, everyday gestures thus shrunken to a show of good manners, to a polite discussion that everyone understands. We no longer put up with angry words and a fist in the face. In place of the blow, an interrupted kiss: the mouth pulls back in disgust in the middle of the embrace. *Guerra Conjugal* shows how life was lived at the time through a new kind of intervention. It shows not what, but why things happen. It depicts what happens from its apparent place in a particular space and at a particular time in order to understand what is going on as an integral part of a tradition, a cannibal tradition. It picks up Macunaíma's cry when he arrives in the big city with his brothers Jiguê and Maanape: "now, everyone for himself and God against us

all." This cry is portrayed through images with "a concentration exaggerated to emphasize certain points, surpassing realist convention to arrive at a fundamental form of expression, revealing the essence of things" (*Jornal do Brasil*, 5/6/1974, 2). These words, which Joaquim Pedro used to introduce *Macunaíma* in 1969, could be applied equally to *Guerra Conjugal* in 1974. Through a process of cannibalism, Brazil consumes the Brazilians:

> In fact, in our society men just eat each other. All consumption [can be] reduced in the final analysis to cannibalism. Labor relationships, like those between people, social, political, and economic relationships, all are basically anthropophagus. In the end, those who can eat others do, either through intermediaries or directly, as in sexual relations. Cannibalism institutionalizes and disguises itself. Based on indigenous legend, *Macunaíma* is the story of a Brazilian consumed by Brazil. The legends hold a certain truth, for Pietro Pietra, the biggest man-eater, to give an example, is the typical Brazilian industrialist. Yet, nonetheless, Brazil consumes plenty of Brazilians. (qtd. Holanda, 114)

Brazil was celebrating 150 years of independence in 1972 when Joaquim Pedro filmed the story of the "Inconfidência Mineira" (an early Brazilian movement to free the country from the Portuguese yoke). The film struck viewers as an expression that says in a bitter tone the same things that have been said in *Macunaíma*, anticipating the explosion to follow in *Guerra Conjugal*. Let me give an example: a cut that switches the action from Tiradentes's time to the present day. We are at the end of *Os Inconfidentes*. Tiradentes is about to be hanged in Ouro Preto. At the exact moment when his body is lifted into the air, with the camera at the height of the scaffold, the film cuts to a group of students in the same city of Ouro Preto, in the present—the present in which the film was made, the present of the audience—who celebrate the rebellion of 1779 for its role in Brazil's overall struggle for independence. The connection between the two images is effected by a neat and simple cut. We see Tiradentes at the gallows, and in the next shot the students clap. What is special about the juxtaposition of these two shots is that the viewer (led by the camera from one position to the next) experiences at the same time the point of view of the condemned man (the camera films the students from above, as if it were swinging from the gallows in the square) and the point of view of today's schoolchildren, who applaud the hanging of Tiradentes. We go from the past to the present, from

a staged moment to news footage, from the violence of history to a celebration. The design of the image makes the irony of this immediately apparent, accentuated by sound effects, by clapping, and then by music. The song is "Aquarela do Brasil" by Ari Barroso, in a new arrangement by Tom Jobim that has nothing whatsoever in common with the aggrandizing tone of the national anthem of earlier recordings, but, on the contrary, soars in a playful and carnivalesque manner. *Os Inconfidentes* thus presents itself to the viewer as an investigation, to be read on two levels. It treats a failed attempt to liberate the country (at the exact moment in which a repressive government is commemorating 150 years of independence) in order to ask whether history is repeating itself, to ask whether all of those who dream of living in a free country are not still stuck in jail.

To celebrate 150 years of independence, Joaquim Pedro gives us a film in which nearly all the action takes place in a prison cell, a film about a Brazilian consumed by Brazil: Tiradentes. "The entire history of the conspiracy is seen from the moment of imprisonment," he stated at the time of the film's release,

> ... because we have only the point of view of the documents that exist about the *Inconfidência.* It was only from that point that we begin to be interested in the conspiracy that never happened... action, that remains only in meetings, conversations, discussions. The results of the investigation we made into the documents led us to... the conclusion that Tiradentes really oversaw the others. We were convinced, Eduardo Escorel and I, from examining all the material, that Tiradentes knew what he was doing and tried to use the others. He was the only one who had common sense and who really wanted to start a revolution. The others were more interested in speculating about what might happen. They liked to talk about how things would be, but always at the instigation of Tiradentes, who was more visionary. (*Jornal do Brasil,* 4/15/1972, 4)

Here is another scene to serve as an example: Tiradentes and Maciel are walking slowly, and the camera moves with them. They are filmed in profile, their whole bodies shown on the screen. As they amble, they talk about the natural bounty of the country. Slowly, the camera approaches them until all that can be seen is a close-up of Tiradentes' face, still in profile. Tiradentes stops, lowers his head, takes off his hat, and turning his face to the camera, says: "The Governors are not at all interested in the development of Brazil.

On the contrary, what they want is to keep the people poor and ignorant because that way they can rob them more easily."

When Tiradentes is almost finished uttering this sentence, the camera pans to show Maciel, who is walking behind him and who replies as Tiradentes watches him: "What's surprising is that we Brazilians put up with all this without the least complaint. Wherever I went in Europe, people praised Brazil for not yet having followed the example of the United States and sent Portugal packing, as they did to England."

A cut puts us in front of Tiradentes once more. He is looking straight at the camera again, but this time he is staring deeper, right at the viewer. His voice is different, too, whispering. He talks like someone hiding something, someone telling a secret, as if he were thinking out loud: "That's when it occurred to me that Brazil could be independent, and I started to desire that. It was only later that I began to think how it could happen."

This scene from *Os Inconfidentes*—in which the characters talk to each other and, almost at the same time, talk directly to the audience with another tone of voice and another dramatic register—provides a good example of the overall narrative structure of the film. And, we could also say, here is yet another displaced image portraying the Brazil of the 1970s, the Brazil of the military dictatorship (when there was a repression of a popular dream just like that which motivated Tiradentes' eighteenth-century rebellion) through an image of the country nearly two hundred years before. With dialogues drawn from the "Autos da Devassa"—the official records of the interrogatory of the "inconfidentes"—and from the poetry of the "inconfidentes" Cláudio Manuel da Costa, Tomás Antônio Gonzaga, and Alvarenga Peixoto (as well as from poems by Cecília Meireles), the film is grounded in language. It tries to screen the text with a freedom equal to that which filmic images have to link up with each other and to screen the images with a freedom equal to that with which words in a poem flow. In this way, in a single take, without a cut to separate the two bits of dialogue, Tiradentes and Maciel first appear in the time and space of the "Inconfidência," in the reality/alterity of the film; shortly after Tiradentes appears in another, intermediate dimension, partly in the scene, partly in fictional space, partly away from it all, as if he had jumped from the film into the auditorium to talk with the viewer face-to-face.

The image as text, the text as image. Let me offer another example: an interrogation room. Alvarenga, while being questioned, describes a meeting with Colonel Francisco de Paula. The frame is shot to make it seem that the

audience is right next to the inquisitor. Alvarenga's face occupies half of the screen. In the other half, far removed from the front, at the back of the frame, we see Colonel Francisco de Paula, smiling and in the uniform he wore before being arrested. Alvarenga speaks without moving his face, without looking behind him, with his eyes trained on his interrogator (or on the viewer or on posterity). He is simultaneously describing his meeting with Colonel Fransico de Paula to the interrogator and talking to the colonel. It is as if all the comments made by the colonel during the meeting that Alvarenga is now confessing to, are being spoken by the colonel himself, who is there, in the scene, behind him—memory turned into the present and brought to life, the visible past that speaks in the present. As the colonel talks, he moves from the back of the frame towards a close up.

The bringing together of these two actions (which occur in different places and times) in the same shot is a good example of the way in which the film uses images to support its dialogue. In the same frame the viewer gets a picture of Alvarenga in prison and a picture of Francisco de Paula before the jailing of the *inconfidentes* group. Two different stretches of time, two different scenarios are collapsed into a single shot. In one part of the frame, in the foreground, we see Alvarenga, imprisoned and cowed, with his disheveled hair, wrinkled brow, and dirty clothes. In another part of the frame, in the background, we see Colonel Francisco de Paula as he was before their arrest: well dressed, self-satisfied, arrogant, and optimistic. And the imprisoned character in the interrogation room of the present is talking to the free one in the past. All this enriches our reading of the scene: we are not simply watching a man answer an interrogator, nor are we simply watching two characters talk before being arrested; the two actions are presented concurrently. One qualifies the other. Thus viewers are not informed by a single point of view, be it that of Alvarenga or of Colonel Francisco de Paula or of the interrogator. They follow the scene with greater perspective: they see things that happened at different times combined as if in a perpetual present. They see better than the three characters on scene.

To describe an independence movement that was more a dream than a reality, the film focuses on images almost without action. The characters barely move on the sets. They stay put, constrained by the tight space of the cell. It is the camera that actually moves, free and unencumbered, an invisible character observing the interrogation. The camera acts as it wishes; it acts as we all do when we are in an auditorium in front of a film. In the theater, the

audience watches and hears everything half inside the scene and half outside of it. The audience sees the images as if from a bridge perched between the reality of the film and the reality/otherness in which they themselves live. And they stay there, on this bridge, because on screen what matters most is that invisible character, the camera—which sees and analyzes, which hears and asks—and not the travails of the visible characters.

When Tiradentes is beaten in prison and turns a face covered with blood to the camera, the audience (particularly those who saw the film when it was first exhibited, but not just them) without neglecting the historical context of the film, can return to their own period. They can retreat, in other words, to the things which, behind the murmured phrases and the reading between the lines, were going on under the dictatorship. The audience experiences the scene, the violence of the action, as if it were real, and they experience it, above all, as spectators, the violence of representation. The image grabs and forces open the viewer's eyes because Joaquim Pedro has created a real image, not a reconstitution of the past or an allegory for the present. The scene cannot be reduced to a utilitarian function, nor does it address itself only to the viewer who lived through the period in which the film was made. It provides *an image*, a dramatic scene, an open and independent reality, alternative or not, equal to ours, but produced in reference to it: *a critical image*, more reflexive than reflex. What actually is projected on the screen is not the appearance but the structure of things. Or, in the words of the filmmaker, what appears on screen is "an exaggerated focus to pull apart its elements, surpassing realist conventions and arriving at fundamental expression."

> The principle of composition in all three films, *Macunaíma*, *Os Inconfidentes*, and *Guerra Conjugal* is the use of excess to recover the human: domestic service, the rotten kiss, warts, the open door, arteriosclerosis, the burp, the erotics of the kitchen, senile lust, slaps in the belly, the delirium of ripe flesh, the spiked bed, necrophilic voyeurism, interior decorating, hesitant sex, the asthmatic's cough, and even the final triumph of prostitution over aging indicate, above all, the possibility of redemption through an excess of sinning. (*Jornal do Brasil*, 5/6/1974, 2).

This is a principle of composition that is developed in *O Padre e a Moça* and which, after *Guerra Conjugal*, is continued in *O Homem do Pau-Brasil* and especially—perhaps even most of all—in Pedro's *Vereda Tropical*, an "educational

and mind-opening" story of the absolute impossibility of human contact, translated into a relationship of sex and passion between a man and a melon. The basis of the film is one of those images which—no sooner is it mentioned than the question jumps in front of us—need not even be seen to be imagined, whether through the picture it conjures up or through its means of stimulating the mind. The image is more conceptual than real. What matters is more the absurdity of the situation, of a man who has sexual relations with watermelons, than a direct vision of the situation—more what is suggested than what is seen. It is more about what lies in the shadows, with what is glimpsed and imagined in outline, than it is about something concrete. The film plays with this absurd conceit, this imprecise and disturbing vision, treating the tale with simplicity and an almost neo-realist style. There is nothing fantastic; everything is very simple, with a few overfamiliar details that punctuate this rather unfamiliar story. A young teacher arrives home on a bicycle, dejected, stressed, his face twitching. His mouth is moving as if he were trying to say something, but nothing comes out. He takes the watermelon he has bought at the market and runs with it to the shower, and after washing, takes it to bed. We see a sexual encounter, marked by the man's words as he whispers his feelings, his face pressed against the robe of his lover. We try to guess her feelings as she lays silent, round, green, and covered in talcum and perfume. This is a sexual encounter marked by the snuffling voice of the man and the ironically tender gaze of the camera, which prudishly takes in the scene in the same way tasteful films usually take in love scenes—by trying politely to lower eyes when good breeding demands it. It all starts off very simply, all within the scope of the normal. The teacher washes the watermelon that he has brought from the market. But then he does something quite absurd. He makes a little cut at one end of the melon, nervously gets out of the shower, almost letting the melon fall to the ground, and goes to the bedroom to devour it, sexually, in bed.

Later, we see the teacher talking to a friend. He confesses to her his passion for watermelons while they are traveling by boat (books and notebooks under their arms) between Rio de Janeiro and the island of Paquetá, where he lives. Then we see them riding bicycles around Paquetá ("a beautiful spot to make love," according to the song "The Moonlight of Paquetá," which Carlos Galhardo sings at the film's end). We see the man and his friend walking around the market. She is already convinced of the sexual virtues of fruits and vegetables, and starts examining the possibilities of each one, in search of perfect love. "Educational and mind-opening," Joaquim

Pedro called the film. *Vereda Tropical* is one of four parts of the feature-length *Contos Eróticos*, which was made in 1977 but banned for two years:

> The chronicle of a noble flaw, a lyrical encounter along the escapist footpaths of an imagined Paquetá, a verbalization and shamelessly lewd display of erotic fantasies, *Vereda Tropical* involves the declaration of the genital function of vegetables, the intelligence of flowering maidens, a taste of life, and the poetic finale of Carlos Galhardo. It was great to make, just as I hope it's great to watch: educational and mind-expanding. (*Vereda Tropical*, Press Book)

It is a short film, a little nothing, an extension of the universe of *Guerra Conjugal*. The country starts to open up politically, and, in a rather romantic retreat to the tropical state (clearly present when it gave rise at a certain moment in the nineteenth century to the love story of *A Moreninha*, a classic of Brazilian romantic literature, by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo), a young teacher opens his heart to a friend and confesses, in a muffled voice and with his eyes staring from behind his thick glasses, that as far as he is concerned, the only woman for him is a watermelon. It is the response to a question posed by the French newspaper *Liberation* at a meeting of filmmakers in May 1985: "Pourquoi filmez-vous?" In all seriousness, to produce a text that functions as an image, as a piece of film, Joaquim Pedro always splices this kind of text into his films, concise and demanding, something that although not inserted between images on the screen, is a part of the projection, functioning as an image that prepares all the others and that is structurally linked to them. What Joaquim Pedro said to the French newspaper at the time (four years before his death) has become an image as inseparable from his cinema as any other:

> To annoy the imbeciles. To not get applause after scenes that hit the top of the scale. To live on the edge of the abyss. To run the risk of being exposed before the entire public. So that friends and strangers can really enjoy it. So that the just and the good make money, especially me. Because otherwise life's just not worth it. To see and show what's never been seen before, the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful. Because I saw [Buñuel's] *Simón del Desierto*. To insult the arrogant and powerful when they act like 'dogs in the water' in the darkness of the theater. To have my copyright screwed up. (*Liberation*, May 1985)

The feature films of Joaquim Pedro de Andrade are: *Garrincha Alegria do Povo* (1963), *O Padre e a Moça* (1966), *Macunaíma* (1969), *Os Inconfidentes* (1972),

Guerra Conjugal (1974) and *O Homem do Pau-Brasil* (1981). His eight shorts are: *O Mestre de Apipucos* (1959), *O Poeta do Castelo* (1959), *Couro de Gato* (1961), *Cinema Novo/Improvisiert und Zielbewusst* (1967), *Brasília: Contradições de uma Cidade Nova* (1967), *A Linguagem da Persuasão* (1970), *Vereda Tropical* (1977) and *O Aleijadinho* (1978). He also wrote many scripts that were never filmed, among them *Casa-Grande & Senzala* and *O Imponderável Bento Contra o Crioulo Voador*, texts as deliciously full of images as the films he directed. Images so inventive and critical that they leave us with the sensation that otherwise film just is not worth it.

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