Brazil 2001 and Walter Salles: Cinema for the Global Village?

Jorge Ruffinelli

> Alex: "You have no idea where you are, do you? This is the tip of Europe. (Opening her arms) This is the end." (*Terra Estrangeira*)[1]

> Civil Servant: Ma'am, this is the end of the world... (*Central do Brasil*)[2]

The feeling is romantic; the image, symbolic. At two different moments, in two different films by the same author, two characters find themselves at "the end of the world." It is more a feeling than a geographical certainty; it is more a myth than a real border. In the first case, the character has traveled from São Paulo to a beach in Portugal. In the second, from Rio de Janeiro to the "heart" of the most miserable Brazil: the *sertão* or hinterland. The trip does not matter. It does not matter that the traveler goes to the heart of Brazil or to his Portuguese "origin," because in both cases he gets to "the end of the world." And what does he find beyond that? The void.

Walter Salles, the author of these two films, was referring to the period of crisis that Brazilians experienced under the government of Fernando Collor de Mello.[3] What took place then was a disoriented migration that could only take travelers to "the end of the world." Salles found the best metaphor for the economic stagnation and individual desolation of the period in the image of the ship run aground not far from the coast, as well as in the image of stateless "orphans" embracing in the solitude of the landscape.[4]

There is another epiphany in *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*). When Dora and Josué, already in the Northeast, look for the boy's father they find a multitude of pilgrims who, had they lived in the last century, would probably have been

faithful followers of Antonio Conselheiro. *Central Station* registers them and certifies their existence. But the problem is that the multitude is going toward some place in the desert, they are not leaving Brazil. They are going to worship images at a shrine located in the arid "no man's land" of the Northeast, and they are aiming for a point that contains the entire universe, the *aleph*.

A few years ago, I asked Gabriel García Márquez: "Why do you think moviemakers keep filming in Latin America, when production conditions make that activity an almost futile effort, full of risks and absurdity, without noticeable economic benefits or imponderable artistic celebrity?" García Márquez pulverized my sinuous question with a simple and irrefutable phrase: "Because they would die if they did not." Walter Salles answered a question by Carlos Alberto Mattos in a similar fashion: "I find that the filmmaker has to tell a story as a visceral matter, because he can never stop 'not telling' a story."[5] Brazilian cinema, which had been destroyed by Collor de Mello, was reborn. Instead of dying, filmmakers showed that they were still being consumed by the passion for a young art capable of rejuvenating them even more, by an activity for visionaries, magicians and marvelous inventors of reality.

In the 1990s, Brazilian cinema could not ignore Indigenous ethnicities, but, on the other hand, it could revert its gaze ironically and see *how cinema had looked* at those "objects of study." It was the equivalent of what the black filmmaker Manthia Diawara had done with Jean Rouch: an ethnographic documentary about the ethnographer (*Rouch in Reverse*, 1995). Also in 1995, the tireless Sylvio Back presented *Yndio do Brasil*, documenting how movies had seen Natives since the origins of the medium.

The *sertão*—which Glauber Rocha had portrayed with energy and originality in the sixties (*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* [1964]; *O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro* [1969])—could also not be left out, although naturally the aesthetic in the 1990s was different. Thus Sergio Rezende returned to the *sertão* with an epic gaze in *Guerra de Canudos* (1998), while Paulo Caldas and Lírio Ferreira danced in the excellent *Baile Perfumado* (1996).

At the same time, Sandra Werneck explored love affairs in *Pequeno Diciónario Amoroso* (1996). Domingos de Oliveira did the same from a male perspective in *Amores* (1998).

Murilo Salles turned his eye toward marginalized people in *Como Nascem os Anjos* (1996), as did José Joffily in *Quem Matou Pixote?* (1996) and Tizuka

Yamasaki in *Fica Comigo* (1996). In 1994, farce and parody were applied to Brazil's colonial history in *Carlota Joaquina, Princesa do Brasil* (Carla Camurati), while contemporary history, including the guerrilla, appeared in Sergio Rezende (*Lamarca* [1994]), and Bruno Barreto (*Que é isso, Companheiro?* [1997]). Nevertheless, very few of these films, which are only examples, reached huge international audiences. On the other hand, Walter Salles' *Central Station* far exceeded box office expectations, and it is thus worth examining why.

One tends to confuse the roads toward international cinema with the search for a widening public and market. Both can coincide, but not necessarily. These roads, we know, intersect, are sinuous and can cross one another. Many seem to arrive at the same point, but they go to different places. Thus the difficult distinction between *popular* cinema and *populist* cinema. The search for an audience is legitimate. What is not legitimate, we also know, is sacrificing the artistic integrity of a work for the sake of obtaining a box office hit. A popular cinema is sometimes confused with a populist cinema, and the test that differentiates between them is the author's intention.

If these questions are posed from a theoretical standpoint, there would be others made from concrete data. For example, how can one understand that in an important United States festival a director as "national" as Francis Ford Coppola would choose *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (*Black God, White Devil*) from among 4000 films from the whole world,[6] or that Martin Scorsese would write with profound admiration about *O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro* (*Antonio das Mortes*)?[7] When did Glauber's "universalization" come about?

Was it through the previous inverse operation that Glauber Rocha transculturated the films of John Ford and Orson Welles in order to create his own? This hypothesis is seductive. As Ángel Rama observed, referring to literature in his seminal *Transculturación Narrativa en América Latina* (1983), the concept of *transculturation* is the dialectical process whereby peripheral cultures appropriate, actively and selectively, elements of a central culture. Rama thus substituted the traditional—and simplistic—notion of the theory of influence. In this sense, Coppola's and Scorsese's "acknowledgment" of Rocha could be a return road, a *re-acknowledgment* of active elements in their own culture which have been transformed by the Latin American élan.

Brazilian cinema of the nineties did not stop being *national*, nor did it stop speaking to its natural audience, which could understand its historical,

social, political and everyday codes. *Quem Matou Pixote*? would be incomprehensible for an audience foreign to the real facts recounted by journalism, or unaware of Hector Babenco's movie that had made the character and actor famous, all within the social context of underage delinquents in the streets of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. By the same token, *Que é isso, Companheiro*? would be incomprehensible to an audience alien to the experiences of the period of military dictatorship to which the movie refers.

Yet, not everything depends on the historical context. Some parameters are related to the superstructure of "genres," which allows one to move beyond local and national "frontiers," since it deals with particular elements of narrative functions. When traditional interest in problems and thematics is displaced by structural and narrative elements, "genre" comes across like an ideal form of transnational reception. National characteristics then stop being obstacles and begin to function like foreign "accents" in the same language. Thus, in a successful genre like the police thriller, national variants (like the French *cine noir*, the Italian political variant, the superaction films from Hong Kong, the British whodunit, and the American street cinema) are accepted without the genre's losing any of its identity.

Precisely due to the complex relation between public and melodrama, and also because of his use of and recourse to the police thriller, Walter Salles' films are an interesting source of debate. The discussion of the audience seems not only pertinent but fascinating when a film stands out because of its having overcome its "nationalism" and having conquered audiences beyond its national borders. This pertinence and interest emerged in a conversation among various Brazilian critics (Ivana Bentes, Carlos Alberto Mattos, José Carlos Avellar) with Walter Salles, regarding *Central Station* and its conquest of non-Brazilian audiences (in addition to its notable critical and box office success in Brazil). A first problem considered in the dialogue entails distinguishing what is spontaneously popular from "populism."

Salles defends himself from any implication of populism, from deliberately looking for an audience. In the following response he denies any sign of *calculation* or *deliberation*:

> I find that he [the director] cannot think about the public. All hypotheses that include a calculated point of departure seem suicidal to me, because that calculation will be implanted in the film, do you see? To do something with a

specific end is really a suicidal act. I find that telling a story is a visceral issue, because you can never stop 'not telling' a story.

His interviewers insist, and so does Salles: "If you were to ask me: 'did you depart with that emotional voltage to make that film?' I would answer: 'No. I did not know that I would get to that result.'"

Later:

Really, behind your questions there is one that might be simpler or less articulated: why are people moved by the film? The answer might be: because I was moved making the film. I was not afraid anymore and did not seek the distancing that I imposed on myself in the first film. I tried to approach and like those characters, and a moment arrived in which the characters would do things and I would try to serve them.

In any case, the remarkable reception that *Central Station* received with different audiences allowed Salles to make a sharp analysis of the stimuli that conquer audiences. It was not a matter of national *cinema* but of national and specific *publics*. Mattos asked if the reception of *Central Station* in the United States corresponded to "a certain image that is expected abroad from Brazilian cinema, from Brazil." Salles responded:

I find the question very interesting because I myself was not hoping for the kind of reception that the film had. Now, I find that that happened in the United States due to a clear fact, an exhaustion of the theme of violence, an exhaustion of all the possible inflections of the Tarantino's universe in which the issue of cynicism is essential and elemental. Strangely the film fit within what American newspapers called 'the new humanism,' which was the theme for this year's Sundance. Before getting there, I noticed that the film went against the current, and that it was actually in a synchronic flux. Well, that on one hand. On the other, I find that there is a pluralization and diversification in what gets to United States' cinemas today. Films that a few years ago would not have been distributed there are starting to appear... That denotes a change, a reaction to the issue of transnational image. Every time there is an imposition of a mass image, there is a counterflow, which also explains the space conquered by Iranian cinema, [or by] a Chinese fifth generation.

Salles has worked in documentaries, thrillers and melodramas. His are various paths that, without his "taking into account" *a priori* a potential or real public, brought him closer or distanced him from different publics.

His first feature film was the most obviously international or "transnational." Spoken in English, with Americans as main actors, its result was mixed. Nevertheless, that road was not new. Other Latin American filmmakers (Luis Puenzo, Héctor Olivera, Christine Lucas, Carlos Sorin, Luis Mandoki, Luis Llosa) had followed that same path, almost always with disappointing results. Salles' film, released in 1991, was based on a novel by Rubem Fonseca and was titled *A Grande Arte / Exposure*. Well done from a technical point of view, at no moment did it convince anyone that its director had felt comfortable with that hybrid enterprise.

In *A Grande Arte / Exposure*, Peter Mandrake is an American photographer who lives in Rio de Janeiro. He is writing a book on the poverty and violent lives of young people, while at the same time a serial killer murders women, leaving a knife scar on their faces. For a while, *A Grande Arte* seems to link the violence of those killings (filmed in interiors) with the miserable street life. But this is not a social film but rather a violent thriller, respectful of the genre's norms and more akin to the action films of American television.

That is why Rio de Janeiro generates little interest as the scenery of the story. Bolivia generates more attention, as do the great dusty plains of the frontier, in a sequence that is among the best in the film. Mandrake's profession links him to a young prostitute, and when she is murdered after she confesses to him that she has been threatened, it also links him to the world of guns and drugs. When the young woman dies, her killers think that she gave Mandrake a diskette with information about their operations, and he becomes a new target to eliminate. As soon as she gets to Rio de Janeiro, the beautiful Marie, Mandrake's young archaeologist girlfriend, also becomes a victim. One night two killers rob them, stab Mandrake and rape Marie.

Mandrake recovers from the wounds and decides to learn how to fight with a knife and avenge the death of the prostitute, as well as Marie's rape and the aggression he suffered. He looks for Hermes, an expert in handling knives, so that the latter will pay him an old debt with his training. Hermes does train him, but Mandrake does not know that his trainer also works for the head of the drug dealers, the elegant Lima Prada, who among other things is the prostitute's killer.

The film gets its characters from the surroundings in which they exist. But the secondary characters seem to have come out of a circus. These include Zakkai, a midget who is the owner of a whorehouse; Chink, a giant Bolivian gangster; and Rafael, a sadistic exterminator. Although everyday life is presented as "documented" in Mandrake's photographs (the connection to the cartoon hero "Mandrake the Magician" should not be lost), the film does without that life and takes all capacity for illusion out of that environment. It is as if drug dealing and weapons were an international institution that is neutral and similar everywhere, oblivious to specific social circumstances. The film chooses to concentrate on the American character, with the stereotyped story of his ritual preparation as a "hero." As was to be expected, Mandrake finally confronts (and overcomes) the major Enemy, the knife Master, and the brains of the criminal gang. The artistic failure of *A Grande Arte* was not determined by the genre itself but rather by its use of an abstract and neutral quality.

The second path taken by Walter Salles, *Terra Estrangeira* (with Daniela Thomas as co-director), insisted on the thriller genre, but this time it was placed culturally at the heart of the political circumstances of Brazil and Portugal in the nineties. That was his initial seal of legitimacy, which began by allowing him to find a public that belonged to the same horizon of experience as the author, that is, a *generational* public. In this sense, a particular and original stylistic inflection, with a visual and musical lyricism that emerged from culture itself, was linked to a more "authentic" thematics. Salles and Thomas appealed on a double level: it was the same linguistic and historical culture (Portuguese) and, at the same time, two different countries and national cultures were put together, Brazil and Portugal. The film's locations were circumscribed even more to that of just two cities: São Paulo and Lisbon. Regarding photography, the directors opted for the "unpopular" use of black and white. In music, they made accurate use of the Portuguese *fado*, whose melancholy charge as a musical genre was perfectly in tune, as it were, to the story. The camera was released of its support and became agile and fluid, always at the service of the story. The aestheticism turned out to be well received and *Terra Estrangeira* brilliantly told a story of emotion, thrills, and melancholy.

The precise date at which the story of *Terra Estrangeira* begins in the two countries and cities mentioned is important because it indirectly declares, from the beginning, that this is not a conventional thriller but rather an

original meditation on Brazil, its origins, identity, and history. By linking two distant places synchronically, Salles and Thomas allowed their story to alternate the "parallel lives" of the main characters in two lines, until their meeting in Lisbon. Thus, in São Paulo, where Manuela and her son Paco live, the events of March 1990 were a historical date: the moment when the new government of Collor de Mello initiated the economic downfall of the country, with the freezing of savings accounts, money controls and other measures that threw Brazil into chaos and generated a palpable emigration due to economic conditions. The humble seamstress of Basque origin, who had gathered her life's savings to return to her parents' land, cannot take the fatal news she hears on television, and dies. In disaster the only thing left to Paco—who is twenty-one, has a theatrical vocation, and reads *Faust*—is solitude.

At the same time in Lisbon, Alex, twenty-eight years old, makes a living as a restaurant waitress and is unhappy with her companion Miguel, an unemployed musician who verbally mistreats her and steals her money to buy drugs. Actually Miguel is an indicator of the European "crisis." A bar musician without a job, he is one of the Europeans "without a future," surviving a bohemian life of drugs and smuggling. (Another of the indicators of the European "situation" is the group of Africans crammed in a building whom Paco meets on his trip to Lisbon).

Paco meets Igor at a bar during his despairing wake for his mother. Igor, an expansive antiquarian, later invites Paco to see his business, and shows him the most dissimilar and oldest objects he owns, assuring Paco that they contain Brazil's complete history from the time of the conquerors. National history has been reduced to that: a bunch of objects in an antique store. Igor hires Paco to take a Stradivarius to Lisbon, since it is convenient for the young man who is on his way to his mother's little town, San Sebastian, in Spain. But Paco does not know that he would also be smuggling hidden diamonds. It is then that an unforeseeable and tragic adventure begins, because his contact in Lisbon is Miguel, who betrays his own contacts, who kill him before Paco's arrival in Lisbon. That mix-up nevertheless causes the meeting between Paco and Alex after the deception, a trip to the coast, the loss of the diamonds, the chasing of the youths by the French delinquents and even Igor himself, and at the same time the unexpected affective relationship between Alex and Paco. It is a love story lived by losers, immigrants and persecuted.

On the road to the border with Spain and San Sebastian, Alex and Paco stop at an inn, where Igor and an accomplice reach them. In the surprise meeting, Igor is badly wounded and his accomplice dies. Alex leaves in her car for San Sebastian, with Paco dying next to her due to a bullet in his stomach. The moving final sequence—when Alex begs Paco not to sleep (that is, not to die), desperately promises to take him "home," and clumsily and sweetly sings a *fado* by Gal Costa that they had heard together—fuses individual and collective histories, intimate vision (within the car) with exterior vision (the aerial sequence of the road and the car), and the song that Alex sings with Gal Costa's voice (suddenly, the actress' voice is replaced by the singer's in the soundtrack, in a subtle and poetic symbolic transition).

The beach (the film's initial image) is the final point of the world, as Alex explains in the phrase I quoted as an epigraph. Departing from that metaphor-allegory this movie can be understood as a story of borders, of migrations and exiles toward a *u-topica*. Even more, some Angolan immigrants live next to the Lisbon hotel where Igor had told Paco to wait for his contact. Although they are on the periphery of the story, they are part of that universe of constant changes in the world, in search of better economic opportunities. But even though they have gone from Africa to Europe (or to Portugal, at least), the Angolans live huddled in a boarding house: there is no future for them either. Loli, the Angolan whom Paco quickly befriends, asks him what he was looking for in Lisbon, and the dialogue immediately turns allegorical: "I came here... at least to discover something. Wasn't it from here that people left to discover the whole world?" Nevertheless, Lisbon is "the ideal place to lose someone or to lose oneself," as Loli answers. The captivating motive of the movie is finding something in the wrong time. Utopia, the place without a place, the "ideal place," makes Paco find a twinkle of love, of sexual happiness and passion. The return "home" (either to the maternal San Sebastian, or to Lisbon, from where the elder left "to discover the world") turns out to be impossible. But the movie bets its high melancholic charge on the Faustian desire for the absolute, and on the intuition of having touched it at least for an instant.

Terra Estrangeira was the path toward a more open and secure cinema, which allowed its authors to easily overcome the conventional limitations of the genre. At the same time, they employed the photographic texture of black and white as a tribute to the best French and American *film noir*. After *Terra Estrangeira*, it was possible to speak of the poetry of the image, which Salles started to control and manage with captivating emotion and beauty.

A third path took Walter Salles even farther into the heart of Brazil, with a moving story of endless searches: *Central Station.* In some aspects, this movie could be related to *Terra Estrangeira*: they are both *road movies*, and in both the characters are persecuted. They also differ. *Central Station* opens up to a hope that the "closed" story (due to the limitations of the "lyrical" police genre and even due to the historical circumstances of the period represented) had prevented *Terra Estrangeira* from achieving.

Based on the theme of a search for a father by the child who never knew him, Salles builds a simple story, yet one that is full of nuances and resonances. Although in its second half the movie centers on the trip undertaken by Dora and Josué to the *sertão* (a "mythical" space in Brazilian cinematic culture), it is not by chance that *Central Station* starts with a powerful collective image: the impressive human mass coming out of the trains in Rio de Janeiro's Central Station, as if they were leaving jail, or were in a horse race toward an unpredictable end. It is also not random that that general take is continued in close-ups of humble characters who verbalize their desire to communicate to a letter writer, Dora. She is a former grammar school teacher whose job is to use her knowledge to edit on paper the oral letters that the illiterate dictate to her. But Dora is no Good Samaritan at all. She plays a cynical and sinister game. When she returns home, tired from her journey, she meets with her neighbor Irene, and together they read and "select" the letters, most of which wind up in the garbage or in a drawer that Irene calls "Purgatory." Thus, most of the anxieties and humble dreams of the people never unfold.

In his third feature, Water Salles wanted to tell, through cinematic images, a story that came from a single idea: *a letter that does not arrive at its destination.* The letter is the one that Ana, Josué's mother, writes to the child's father (who disappeared nine years before), telling him that his child is anxious to see him. Ana dies in a traffic accident at the doors of the Station. Like many other kids, Josué becomes an orphan, thrown to the voracity of the streets, to robbery, to a quick death (execution) by the "parapolice," or possibly to become an involuntary donor of vital organs in an illegal and sinister international market. In that context, Dora, far from being the best mother substitute, is the child's main antagonist. Yet, the story of *Central Station* is also that of her redemption, and in this sense the movie has been understood as a humanist film.

It is interesting to notice how Salles rereads one of his favorite directors, John Cassavettes, for example. When the repentant Dora rescues Josué after

selling him to Pedrão for a thousand dollars, and flees with the child to protect him from the assassin, she is recreating the character Gloria from John Cassavettes' *Gloria* (1980). The viewer can find the same type of verbal antagonism between the mature woman and the child, who argue at every minute and reproach one another mutually, exactly like in *Gloria*. And in both cases the initial relationship is transformed: for Josué, the meeting with a friend, grandmother or substitute mother; for Dora, the redemption through which she recovers her generous and affective fibers in a world that does not have many of those values left.

The film becomes a road movie from the time the two characters leave Rio de Janeiro. Time and again, with different vicissitudes, Dora and Josué go on to Bom Jesus do Norte, and at the end of that road they meet with believers, fanatics and pilgrims (all of which are in abundance in the hinterland), until they are submerged in a great liturgy, in a human mass that goes toward a vestry wallpapered by hundreds of photographs and personal objects. The scene is almost out of the fantastic, and the film uses it as a framework of thousands of wishes, hopes, and collective utopias in which Dora and Josué seem to get lost, at least for a few hours. They re-emerge nevertheless in an image of beatitude, especially when at dawn of the next day Dora wakes up from her faint in the child's arms in a sort of inverted *Pietà*.

The story does not conclude with Josué's meeting the father he sought, but with the discovery that he has two half-brothers. The final sequence contains another cinematic re-reading by Salles. When Dora leaves the following morning, without saying goodbye, she writes that "goodbye" in the form of a letter (the first she is to send without being an intermediary). At the same time Josué, after awakening and noticing Dora's absence, runs uselessly to try to catch her, like the child (Joey) behind Shane, in George Stevens' *Shane* (1953). All they have left is a duplicated photograph, which both look at the same time, as a memory fetish or a defense to combat the necessary forgetfulness.

Paradoxically, the route taken by *Central Station*, the route that made it an example of a humanist movie, includes another road. That road, if not secret, is at least lesser known, which explains the need for redemption implied at the end of the film. Although that road is autonomous in itself, it has another story behind it, the story of a discovery. And that story has to do with a Polish émigré and with a woman in prison. They are Franz Krajcberg and Socorro Nobre. Without them, *Central Station* would probably not exist.

In 1995, Salles discovered Franz Krajcberg, or at least "discovered" him for moviegoers, with his documentary *Franz Krajcberg: O Poeta dos Vestígios* (*Franz Krajcberg: The Poet of Vestiges*). Krajcberg, born in Poland, lived and suffered through the European war, during which his mother died. Emigrating to Brazil around 1948, Krajcberg decided to isolate himself from the world of men little by little, due to his deep disappointment with human destructiveness. The problem is that he found that destructiveness again in Brazil, with the exploitation of natural resources, the *queimadas* (literally atavistic "burnings" of great and lasting effect in the forest) and deforestation, frequently caused by what Krajcberg himself calls "headless progress."

Then, Salles filmed a short documentary, *Socorro Nobre*. This excellent film was the origin for Salles' 1997 fictive feature *Central Station*. Just as *Central Station* arose from the idea of a letter not reaching its destination, *Socorro Nobre* bases itself on a letter that did get to its recipient, but that could just as well have not. In one way or another, the letter meant a change in destiny. That is why *Central Station* begins by registering the circumstances of the letter's recipient, the sculptor Franz Krajcberg, to whose extraordinary work Salles devoted the five-segment television documentary, *Franz Krajcberg: O Poeta dos Vestígios*. His story is the same, but we find a more optimistic view of it in *Socorro Nobre*. Krajcberg's experience is unique, despite having come from the collective suffering of the Second World War. As he briefly tells it in the documentary, he was born in Poland, lived in a ghetto, and lost all his family in 1940. In the ghetto, he suffered deprivation and daily contact with death.

Once the war ended he fled from a people devoted to demonstrating the "superiority of its race," isolated himself from humans, thought about suicide, and finally found in Brazil the peace that he could not find in Europe. "There is another side to my life" he warns, because in the nature of the Amazon and the Matto Grosso, and later in Bahia, he jubilantly discovers the "forms" that inspired his sculpture: "I was so happy I wanted to dance when I found those marvelous plants." His sculptures are thus based on a return to humanity through nature, and also because of his sudden conversion into an ecological crusader. Just as he found the model for all possible forms and colors, he again found the destruction of what is natural in the brutal *queimadas* with which men continue to destroy nature in Brazil. As a result, and as a manifestation of rebellious and radical art, Krajcberg devoted himself brilliantly to make art from the "vestiges" of arson. What remains of the destroyed nature can give an idea of what is lost every day.

Krajcberg adds that he received hundreds of letters because of his ecological and artistic activities. But one that impressed him deeply arrived from the women's prison in Salvador. It was from a woman called Socorro Nobre who had been sent to jail for twenty-one years. This prisoner had read a report on Franz Krajcberg published in the weekly magazine *Veja*, and she wrote to the artist explaining her own need for redemption, having an example in his own redemption after the European horror. This had inspired her in the same way; she wanted to change and had started to do so, with the dream of finding her lost liberty some day.

After starting with images of Krajcberg enjoying the beautiful liberty that nature gives him (he runs and plays with his dog at the seashore, sinks his hands into the waves) the film moves to the prison. A brief transition fuses the sound with the visual image: while images of Krajcberg are shown, the soundtrack lets us hear the voice of Socorro Nobre reading the initial letter she had sent to him. From that moment on, the documentary alternates the open and renewed world of Franz Krajcberg with Socorro Nobre's prison world. The documentary turns the voice over to the woman, who speaks and expresses ideas and thoughts in brief flashes, amidst a series of "punctuations" or visual pauses. Instead of a conventional "report," Salles cuts the filmed interview and replaces what could have been the use of jump cuts or fade ins and fade outs with instants of silence and a black screen. This mechanism allows him to "isolate" fragments of Socorro Nobre's story, and even to emphasize ideas: "One has to dream, once in a while." At the same time, with remarkable photographic work, the documentary "discovers" forms in the rain, in washed clothing hung out to dry, in the faces of women. This is seen even (since we are speaking about film images) in the extraordinary use of silence with which the camera briefly halts on the static expressions of women, reflecting the silent wait for time that jail is.

The letter to Krajcberg was instrumental for Socorro Nobre's own existential transformation, and eventually for her parole. As the documentary notes in a final caption, at the start of 1995 Socorro Nobre was paroled and "lives with her three sons in the interior of Bahia." The documentary ends with brief shots of a meeting between Nobre and Krajcberg. Nevertheless, the almost magical "story" of the letter that had a good end is continued in *Central Station*. At the start of this movie, Socorro Nobre "acts" like the first person that sits in front of Dora's table to dictate a letter to her. It is a moving self-referential game, and a scene that captures or exemplifies once again the philosophy of cinematic creation that Walter Salles has had the fortune to put

into practice. It is the philosophy of a cinema that influences lives, a cinema that starts becoming an *event*, a *reality*, even before getting to the screen and moving its viewers. As shown by the lives of Krajcberg and Nobre, it is not in vain that *Central Station* is a story of redemption.

In 1998, Walter Salles made still another film, but the international path was already established, and others had to travel it to get to him. *O Primeiro Dia* (1998) was made for an international series in which directors from different countries would imagine in one hour the moment of transition from the twentieth century and the millennium. For this reason the story arrives at the final minute of December 31, the end of the twentieth century. Once again there are two parallel stories and two characters that will meet. The woman is a teacher of sign language; the man is a convict in jail. Ironically, the film soon makes clear that there is no communication between the woman, whose job is in the field of communication, and her partner. One day he decides to leave her, and does it by leaving her a goodbye note. She goes into a crisis, cannot stand the loneliness and change, and decides to commit suicide.

In the meantime, the convict manages to escape with the help of his jailers, by means of an assassination contract that he must complete. He actually gets his freedom in exchange for killing a best friend, which he does. He immediately flees upon noticing that he has been merely the executioner and that his liberators have decided to eliminate him. He escapes and finds refuge on the roof of a building. A meeting place. The last minutes of the year are approaching and the citizens of Rio de Janeiro are getting ready to end it with fireworks. The man then sees a woman who is approaching the parapet to kill herself. He prevents her from doing so, while fireworks go off as if in a "spectacle." Beings in a borderline situation, fleeing from imaginary and real ghosts, they end up celebrating the moment, the meeting, and the possibility of sexual pleasure, which seemed to be a closed road in their lives. The following morning, the beach awaits them. She bathes while he waits for her seated in the sand. His pursuers find him, and when she emerges from the sea he is dead. Some lives are saved, others are lost.

O Primeiro Dia is a brief and yet a perfect film. It does not leave any room for melodrama. Everything happens unexpectedly and fleetingly. Very few times has Brazilian cinema been able, as in this case, to show with so much brilliance the precariousness as well as the force of life. Like Josué, with *Central Station* and with *O Primeiro Dia*, Walter Salles himself "returned home." Georg Lukács used to say that the universal can only be achieved through the particular. That is the best lesson learned by Walter Salles in his

short career, and the best lesson he can give to Brazilian cinema in order that it can be authentically international without ceasing to be national. May it become a cinema for the global village of the second millennium.

Notes

[1] Alex: "Você não tem nem idéia de onde você está, né? Isso aqui é a ponta da Europa. (Abrindo os braços) Isso aqui é o fim!"

Daniela Thomas, Marcos Bernstein, and Walter Salles 67.

[2] "Funcionário: Isso aqui é o fim do mundo, dona..."

João Emanuel Carneiro, Marcos Bernstein, and Walter Salles 90.

[3] See Walter Salles, "Terra à Vista," *Terra Estrangeira* 5.

[4] "How does a film come about? In the case of *Terra Estrangeira*, at the beginning, there was only an image: of a couple adrift, stuck on a deserted beach like a ship stuck in the sand. A little later, the image materialized in the cover of a book by Jean Pierre Favreau. Oddly, it was at that moment that we were sure that the film would also exist" (*Terra Estrangeira* 5, my translation).

[5] Carlos Alberto Mattos, Ivana Bentes, José Carlos Avellar 7ss.

[6] In 1997, the San Francisco International Film Festival asked some famous filmmakers for their personal selection of films among the four thousand that the film festival had shown throughout four decades. The only Latin American movies chosen were two by Glauber Rocha. Lourdes Portillo chose *Antonio das Mortes* and Francis Ford Coppola chose *Black God, White Devil* (*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*). An example of the French reception: Salles is the only Latin American director consulted in a survey on "1990-2000, Une Décennie en Question" by *Cahiers du Cinema* 452 (Jan. 2000).

[7] See Scorsese.

Walter Salles' Filmography

Several documentaries on popular music and musicians: *Chico no País da Delicadeza; Visão do Paraíso; Caetano Cinqüenta Anos*, etc.

A Grande Arte / Exposure. Alberto Flaksman (Paulo Carlos de Brito Production), 1991.

Franz Krajcberg: O Poeta dos Vestígios. Rede Manchete-Vídeofilmes, 1995.

Socorro Nobre. Vídeofilmes Mini Kerti, 1995.

Terra Estrangeira. Co-dir. Daniela Thomas. Produced by Movi Art, Secretaria para o Desenvolvimento do Audiovisual, Riofilme (Flavio Tambellini, Brazil; Antonio da Cunha Telles and Maria João Mayer, Portugal), 1995.

Central do Brasil. Vídeo Filmes (Brazil), co-prod. Arthur Cohn Production—MACT Productions (Paris) and Rio Filme (Rio de Janeiro), 1997.

O Primeiro Dia. Co-dir. Daniela Thomas. Hart & Court, 1998.

Le Premier Jour. (A longer version of *O Primeiro Dia*, 80 minutes.)

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