

## Terre Verte

By Patrick Zapien

There is a now quite famous moment in Les Blank's documentary on the making of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, *Burden of Dreams*, in which the narrator quotes the German director as stating that, "Everyday life is only an illusion, behind which lies the reality of dreams." Not a bad slogan for a modernist program, one that could just as well have been written by Baudelaire or Breton, and which, to my mind, cuts to the core of Jonathas de Andrade's *Olho da Rua* (*Out Loud*), a short film shot in the Brazilian city of Recife, in the country's impoverished Northeast Region, with a cast of homeless non-professional actors. But although the actors play themselves, it is clear that the film depicts an idealized view of leisure. I don't mean to say that *Olho da Rua* has a merely romantic view of the social class it takes as its object (although a certain degree of romanticism is undeniable here), but that the film creates its portrait of lumpenized leisure by arranging a series of images whose rhythm and sequence suggest a symbolic relationship between the structure of the film and the structure of life itself.

The film depicts a day of leisure—a Sunday (or so I gather from the feast day atmosphere of the communal meal and some snippets of overheard conversation, as well as the fact that Sunday is the traditional day of rest in Catholic countries, still often the only day one does not work)—in a public park in the city's center. Eight acts structure the narrative, which is little more than the playing out of the day itself, its passing, for as Bazin notes, "[in film] the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were."<sup>1</sup> By becoming the occasion for a work of art—its substance, both content and form—the film's Sunday is made to stand for any and every Sunday. The film's Sunday becomes Sunday *as such*—the ideal of Sunday, seen in its place within the total reproduction of life. In the beginning of the second act, a man sings, "I'm back, Recife, nostalgia brought me by the arm . . ." Sunday is a dream that recurs week after week without end, immutable: an image of paradise promised.

The first act serves as an introduction to the film's cast. One by one, in a gesture that recalls the myths of Narcissus and Actaeon (thematizing both seeing and being seen), each actor takes a turn to look in a mirror lodged between the branches of a large, mossy tree at the edge of a pond. As they gaze at their reflection, the actors perform the small, innocent rituals of an uncertain vanity: adjusting their hair; tugging at the fit of their clothes; smiling, squinting, and caressing their faces. The camera moves forward, slowly approaching the mirror so that the actor's reflection gradually fills the frame while their body recedes from view, exchanged for its image.

From here on, it becomes clear that the film is less concerned with creating an ethnographic document of the people it depicts than with presenting an image of self-image, one in which the

---

1 □ André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", in: *Film Quarterly Vol. 13 No. 4*, Berkeley 1960, p. 8.

illusory quality of an actor's performance of self reveals, perhaps involuntarily, the real crisis of individuality that it intends to mask (for one has to ask whether the self that allows one to survive conditions of extreme poverty can be a true or authentic expression of the individual forced to make do). Walter Benjamin's high estimation of film as a critical aesthetic medium was not based on its greater naturalism than theater but on the camera's ability to enter the illusion of the work and capture the actor's unconscious reactions to the situation constructed: what goes beyond the performance as surplus action becomes the real content of the film, its driving purpose. The actors don't only play a version of themselves in *Olho da Rua*, they act at their acting as well and in such a way that the indications of confidence or doubt that flash across their features are never so clear. Is the feeling theirs or another's? Is it real or feigned for the camera? Do they themselves know?

This gesture repeats for the closing act of the film, "Olho no olho [eye to eye]." The actors line up as at the end of a play; the camera pans, and they meet its gaze. Again, they smile and stare, some waving or blowing kisses farewell, while others make themselves serious, with daggers for eyes. But what makes the deepest impression are the moments just after the camera passes them by, as the actors drop their expressions and turn away from our view, called back to the life they otherwise live. By beginning and ending the film with this acknowledgment of the actors as actors, de Andrade allows their estrangement to be seen and felt, blossoming on the margins of the film, where it makes contact with the world it reflects.

In an interview about the work, Jonathas de Andrade recalls that he was commissioned to make a film with a sense of urgency during the COVID pandemic. That *Olho da Rua* is the result seems peculiar. De Andrade cites the precarity of the homeless as well as the harsh policies of the Bolsonaro regime as motivating factors, but the resulting work is hardly a call to action, even if the film's seventh act consists of a public airing of grievances (the actors themselves seem unsure of the efficacy of the slogans they repeat so adamantly—in the end, with passions riled, the discussion cuts off, and the actors jump in the pond to cool off). The film is urgent only in the sense of Walter Benjamin's famous epigram for the Surrealists: "They exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds."<sup>2</sup> The everyday character of the film, the sense of eternal recurrence that accompanies each event that makes up the day—such as cooking, eating, or sleeping—is the film's urgency—the urgency of wasted life.

In this it resembles less a work like Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* than it does Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The even, almost democratic application of points of color that create the stultifying atmosphere, suffused by Ennui, of Seurat's seemingly idyllic painting has a counterpart in the persistent drumbeat of Homero Basilio's soundtrack for *Olho da Rua*, which washes over each scene of the film, insisting on the feverish, dreamlike quality of events. What happens in the film is set apart from the normal course of time by forming part of an artwork. The camera mirrors the world, but the reflection produced becomes its own distinct

---

2 □ Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism", in: *Selected Writings 2.1*, Cambridge, Mass./London, England 1999, p. 218.

image. Thus the happiness that can exist in an artwork is not the same as that of reality; like a memory, it is something extracted from life, refined by the thought of what life is *not*. There is a dialectical relationship between labor and leisure because one produces the need of the other: “It’s the violence of a plate with no food!” as we hear in Act III—“Comunidade.” The dream of an endless Sunday belongs to a world in which work has become a means without end. Ultimately, the problem posed by *Olho da Rua* is that everything seems capable of change but does not: “I’ll work early in the morning, tomorrow is Monday.” And so it goes on . . .