

Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema (Review)

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In the past two years we have witnessed the publication of an increasing number of monographs on discrete Latin-American cinemas, many treating issues, such as national identity and class representation, currently in vogue throughout the field. Ismail Xavier's *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* was one of the most eagerly awaited of these volumes. As a leading scholar of Brazilian cinema, Xavier has published extensively in the past 15 years, in both English and Portuguese. His work is perhaps best known in the U.S. for essays he contributed to Robert Siam and Randal Johnson's anthology on Brazilian cinema and to Manuel Alvarado, John King, and Ana M. Lopez's *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*. However, his extensive work on Brazilian cinema has been nearly inaccessible to scholars and students who don't speak Portuguese. In the present volume, Xavier's close textual analyses and clear theoretical underpinning prove that *Allegories of Underdevelopment* was worth the wait.

As Xavier explains in his preface (vii), the present book grew out of his dissertation, completed for New York University in 1982. From the dissertation, Xavier has published two books in Portuguese, *Sertao Mar: Glauber Rocha e estetica da fome* (1983) and *Alegorias do subdesenvolvimento: Cinema Novo, Tropicalismo, Cinema Marginal* (1993). The publication of *Allegories of Underdevelopment* brings Xavier's cogent theoretical analysis of Brazilian cinema to U.S. audiences in book-length form for the first time. Xavier demonstrates the imbrication of history and politics within Brazilian cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that the filmmakers of the Cinema Novo represented the transformation of their nation in this period through the use of cinematic allegory, linking it closely with the "aesthetic of hunger" of the early Cinema Novo and with other themes of Brazilian culture.

Xavier examines eight films from 1964 to 1970, all made by filmmakers active in the Cinema Novo movement, all produced for theatrical release, and all dealing with contemporary social issues. They all posit some form of aesthetic alternative to the mainstream cinema. Xavier presents close textual readings of these works, steeped in the theoretical questions of their time, and of the scholarly debates about Cinema Novo in the 70s and 80s. The result is a clear, though dense,

explication of the "value and power of allegory as a source of knowledge and as a critical view of history" (6).

Xavier's choice of the six years between 1964 and 1970 situates his argument at the crux of political and artistic changes crucial to Brazil and her cinema. In Xavier's words, these films "express the passage from the promise of happiness to the contemplation of hell that marked their historical moment" (10). In 1964 a military coup ended Brazil's experiment with democracy. Authoritarian rule marked the rest of the decade, intensified by a coup within the coup in 1968. The Cinema Novo films from 1964 to 1968, considered the second phase of the movement, responded to the repressive atmosphere and the reversal of social reforms by analyzing the failure of the left-wing politics they espoused. At the same time, the filmmakers realized that although the early films of the movement had addressed "the popular," attempting to represent the perspective of "the people," they had not been popular in the sense of reaching a wide audience. In response to the coup, Cinema Novo filmmakers concentrated on positioning their social criticism within films that would appeal to the mass audience and would perform at the box office. The 1968 coup brought stronger censorship and harsher repression and filmmakers turned to allegory to express themselves.

Xavier begins with Glauber Rocha, probably the best known of the Cinema Novo directors and the author of "The Aesthetic of Hunger," an essay which presents one of the most important polemics of the movement. Writing in 1965, looking back on the first years of Cinema Novo, Rocha observed that violence is an authentic cultural expression of hungry people and he called for a cinematic style that would articulate the "real" Brazil: her hunger, her discontent, and her lack of hope. Xavier first analyzes Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (1963-64), a film considered to be the embodiment of the filmmaker's aesthetic theory. Chapter 2 examines Rocha's *Land in Anguish* (1967) and chapter 6, Rocha's *Antonio das Mortes* (1969). The emphasis on Rocha derives from the filmmaker's importance within an evolving cinematic movement and his representation of a nation in flux. Rocha's oeuvre contains within it the very transformation of cinematic style that, according to Xavier, occurred between 1964 and 1970.

Black God, White Devil, Xavier argues, bends history and legend to the will of the *mise-en-scene*, borrowing from an oral storytelling tradition, part of the popular culture which Cinema Novo celebrates (40). In so doing, the film form stages its ideology, "attuning its style to the adverse economic conditions governing its production, expressing the basic principles of the "aesthetic of hunger" (40). Rocha continues what Xavier calls "his general diagnosis of the country" (81) in *Land in Anguish*. In this later film, the characters are types or allegories for different segments of the population. Xavier sees this film as a "baroque drama" (89) in which neocolonialism, underdevelopment, and repression transform class struggle into "the aggression against good taste in a search for coherence and unity" (89).

The five other films examined in this book dovetail beautifully with the continuum created by Rocha's work from 1963 to 1967. Xavier shows that as Brazil grew more violent, pessimistic, and financially endangered, her filmmakers reacted with thoughtful, critical films. He positions, for example, Julio Bressane's 1969 *Killed the Family and Went to the Movies* as an allegory of the Brazilian social crisis, a moment in which a violent crime and moviegoing could have been so dispassionately linked as they are in the film. Calling *Killed the Family* exemplary of Brazilian cinema at the end of the decade, Xavier notes that the film placed moviegoing as an experience in which cinema does not consider itself as a good entertainment exterior to the circle of violence that it observes, but recognizes itself as part of the process, an exercise of the look that carries with it the same problematic of love and death that it focuses on (216).

This notion, that film (and filmmakers) wrote itself into the cycle of violence, rather than simply representing it, illustrates the ingenuity and determination of Brazil's filmmakers in a historical moment that saw modernization, oppression, and a political shift to the right. Through his analyses of these eight films, Xavier convincingly charts the "course in which cinema had to work out its own political crisis," explaining the thematization of a "paradigm of failure." Ultimately, Xavier makes clear how Brazilian filmmakers struck a difficult balance between defending and criticizing their nation's path to modernization (262) in films which allegorize the role of the people, the continuing class struggle, and the challenge of recreating a social order.

Ilene S. Goldman is an independent scholar whose articles have appeared in *Jump Cut*, *Spectator*, and the *Chicago Tribune* as well as in several recent anthologies.

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