

# Time and device in Cao Guimarães' films

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Cao Guimarães's films reflect in an exemplary manner the encounter and circulation that is becoming more intense between documentary and contemporary art, domains which until recently were distant and even mutually hostile. Filmmakers that work mainly with documentary are now creating installations in galleries and museums, at the same time that artists are expanding their creations onto the field of documentary images. Cao Guimarães's five feature-length films are strongly marked by photography, experimental films and video installations, which the artist has carried out since the early '90s. The fact that his last documentary *Andarilho* was chosen for the opening of the 27th São Paulo biennial [2006] is yet another clue to the fertile porosity of frontiers between these two artistic fields.

In the artist's movement from one field to the other, two aspects become emphasised: firstly, the silent observation of the world practiced in photography and in experimental films, which has been so well appropriated by the filmmaker in his depiction of workers in jobs which are becoming extinct [*O fim do sem fim*], a hermit [*A alma do osso*], three drifters [*Andarilho*], or time going by in small cities from the interior of Minas Gerais [*Acidente*]. Secondly, the invention of devices for producing his work, an operation used in some short films and installations and retrieved in the realization of films such as *Acidente* and *Rua de mão dupla*.

Through such key procedures the artist engages with aesthetic, ethic and methodological characteristics of documentary filmmaking in order to depict solitary characters most often at the margins of capitalist modernity, even if pierced by it; that is, approaches for filming the "other", a key issue of documentary tradition. He thus finds, in his own particular way, a certain contemporary cinema composed of long tracking shots made by filmmakers who believe that film is constituted more by space-time blocks than by images in themselves [such as reduces characters, situations, locations, and expands the use of long tracking sequences to follow the hermit. The film gradually unveils the fact that even apparently isolated existences are traversed by key issues of the current world, such as the media, money and the logic of the spectacle: after witnessing solitude throughout a significant portion of the film, we see that the hermit is also a tourist site. It's as if a rupture with the "social" were no longer possible: the spectacle constitutes the world and the film itself ends up forming a part of that logic, albeit displacing it – the hermit becomes an image which therefore comes to circulate in the world.

## Game and device

*Two-way Street*, a film initially conceived as a video installation for the 25th São Paulo biennial in 2002, and *Accident*, carried out in collaboration with Pablo Lobato, were both produced with the idea of unfolding as a device. For the first film, Cao Guimarães invited six people from Belo Horizonte's middle class to participate in an unexpected experience: divided in couples, they would exchange houses for 24 hours; having been given a digital video camera each, they would film whatever drew their attention in the other person's house, with the aim of "elaborating a mental image of the other by means of their intimacy with the other's objects and domestic universe". At the end of their sojourn they would give a declaration to the camera explaining how they imagined this "other" to be. Hence, the director does not film or direct, but rather he conceives of a game, handing out the cards, determining the rules and choosing the players, providing cameras, transport and food. He supplies the necessary and leaves the pitch. In this case, the director is dealing with a scheme that implies his absence of control over the footage, thereby allowing for an "aesthetic retreat" – although not so much from the film, since it is, after all, his device as well as montage – but from the images and sounds that his film will be composed of, attributing to six other individuals the task of filming and self-directing.

The device that "triggers" the filming of *Accident* is somewhat more conceptual. The filmmakers do not possess, in the beginning, any particular interest for a concrete aspect of reality. It's as if there were, before anything else, an immense issue of life floating in mid air, prompting the filmmakers to wonder how one can relate to the world *vis-à-vis* so many possibilities – of so many films already made, so many readymade images – without ever succumbing to chaos or clichés. Or as J. L. Comolli would say "what to do to make a film happen"? Cao

Guimarães and Pablo Lobato chose to attach themselves to words: they therefore create a poem-device with which they start filming. The words are not randomly taken from a dictionary; however – had they been it would be an entirely different film.

The chosen words are names of cities from the state of Minas Gerais, researched on the internet. They selected one hundred and printed them out. Spreading the papers over the table, they began to play with the words. Sounds, meanings, plasticity, reverberations: this device provided the script, as opposed to any prior knowledge of the cities' realities [which, in fact, they mostly ignored]. They finally reached a poem composed of 20 names, which evokes a fable of love and pain: *Heliodora*, *Virgin of the Rock*, *Joyful Awaiting*, *Hyacinth Watery Eyes*, *Between Leaves*, *Irons*, *Palms*, *Juices*, *Ebbtide*, *Footsteps*, *Father Peter Open Field*, *Effervescence Uncovered*, *Shots*, *Stumbles*, *Flatness*, *Red Waters*, *Aching Fields*.

The poem-device therefore becomes the image-making machine and acquires, like every device, a certain power over the filmmakers. It decides where they will film; withdraws from them the right to refuse a city in the case that they don't like it, since the poem would cease to function in such a case. It diminishes the excess of intentionality. It's a game with its rules to which they must submit. It's clearly not about adapting words to things or names to cities; it's about creating a mode of confrontation with the chaos of the world without submerging, establishing an initial direction, and at the same time opening the film to the chance, unpredictability and imponderables of the real.

The documentaries that are a result of these devices differ profoundly from one another. *Accident* bears similar traces to the films composed of long shots, although it doesn't have any proper characters or themes. The film is made of blocks of time-space that capture the duration, in many layers, of the cities from the interior of Minas Gerais. This approach to these regions allows the spectator to see and feel "a portion of time in its pure state", as in *Ozu*. Where *Accident* seems closest to the static photographic image is precisely where it is the farthest, in view of the duration. In the city "Amid Leaves", for example, we see the sunset from the balcony of a bar where practically nothing happens apart from the infra-ordinary movements of its owner, or the rare circulation of cars and people outside. In the city of "Palm", the film focuses on a hill in which dead time alternates with micro-happenings. A form of inaction that contaminates both characters and filmmakers captures the entire film. The spectator is



also involved in that circuit in which the connection between words and things, names and cities, happening and characters are tenuous, fragile and, ultimately, of little significance. *Accident* is a film in which the propositional dimension gets mixed with a more sculptural, contemplative and formal dimension, where two movements identified by Cao Guimarães in his trajectory and in different works get blurred into one.

Concerning *Two Way Street*, the film's great invention responsible for the proposal's soundness is the director's request that the "others" in question, the film's participants, be interested in others and not in their own selves; an attitude that redirects the desire of the "confession's beast", in which we are transformed at the point in which a camera is placed in front of us. Cao Guimarães does not want them to look inward and talk about their lives, revealing themselves to the camera; instead, he asks them beforehand to speak about people they do not know and film unfamiliar houses. The shift from the "self" to the "other" helps the characters to become less aware of self-control, censure and filters which we usually put into action in order to offer the image that we wish to see of ourselves. Yet, the manner in which they relate with the unknown space, what they choose to film, what they say, how they speak, words, syntax, the tone they add to each scene, all that reveals much more about their own selves than what we would expect. The results are images of the other that were intensely imbued with the world view and affection of the one filming.

Ultimately, the film portrays with crystal clarity how our view of the world is permeated with physical memory and affectations, how we are tied to specific ways of seeing and feeling, how much we ignore our prejudices, how difficult it is to put ourselves in the other's place, to accept him/her in his/her singularity and difference. The film shows us that "we are" where we least expect it, not necessarily in terms of the content of what we say and think consciously; nor in a prior, given "interiority", but in the "tons of subjectivities" that are constituted and expressed in our relation with the world and the other. By means of what at first sight seems like a small gesture – to alter the direction of what is requested of the characters in a large portion of the documentaries based on conversations – the filmmaker marks a dramatic displacement in relation to all the concerns regarding the "voice of the other" that feature in the history of documentary film.

In the last years Cao Guimarães's works have been selected and awarded prizes in the main international documentary and experimental video festivals, as well as exhibited in numerous artistic manifestations throughout the world. The director has no film background or schooling and never actually worked in the film industry. "Officially", he studied philosophy and photography; whilst in terms of film, he began at home, when he lived in London, using a super 8 camera and making a type of filmed diary, "a small solitary observation of the world exercise", in a "natural enlargement of the possibilities of expression," he says.

His love of film is "digital and rhizomatic", suitable to a contemporary way of relating to cinema which doesn't have to go through affiliations but which is nonetheless filled with a passion for reencountering a certain spirit of the cinema, that of experimentation. It's an attitude that challenges both the conservative stance which sees the cinema as "heritage", the object of knowledge and reverence, and that of cinema as market. An approach that makes liberating films that invent narratives, devices and new perceptions of the real, thereby suggesting that film has a lot to gain associating itself with what is "exterior" to it. Otherwise, following its current dominant modes of production [market, marketing, laws, lobbies, endless projects, distribution, exhibition], the cinema has little chances of renewing itself; that system stiffens and fossilizes film, corroding from the inside its creative possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Cao Guimarães, in text published on back cover of the video *Two Way Street*.

<sup>2</sup> "Sob o risco do real" [Under the risk of the real] in *Catálogo do 5o Festival do filme documental e etnográfico* [Catalogue of the 5th Documentary and Ethnographic Film Festival], Belo Horizonte: November 2001, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, referring to the Japanese filmmaker in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. London: Continuum, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Expression coined by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Expression by Peter Pál Pelbart, in *Vida Capital, Ensaios de Biopolítica* [Capital Life, Essays in Biopolitics]. São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2003, p.20.

<sup>6</sup> Thierry Jousse, in *Pendant les travaux. le cinema continue*. Paris: Les Cahiers du Cinema, 2003.