

SOCIAL AND CINEMATIC LANDSCAPE IN NEIGHBOURING SOUNDS

paisagens sociais e cinemáticas em o som ao redor

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Resumo

Esse trabalho discute sobre a particular potencialidade cinematográfica na construção de imagens do espaço urbano como um sistema signifiante no contexto relacionado às noções de espaço urbano (espaço) e modernidade (tempo). Aqui é dada atenção à discussão sobre como um espaço urbano em particular, a cidade brasileira e nordestina Recife, é construído e tematizado como uma estrutura de significado que produz um espaço de onde surgem as paisagens social e cinemática. Assim, esse artigo discute, com base em conceitos desenvolvidos por diversos autores, a relação entre filme e cidade a partir da análise de como a cidade de Recife é representada no filme *O Som ao Redor* (Neighbouring Sounds, Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2012).

Palavras-Chave: Espaço Urbano; Paisagem; Cinema; Recife-PE; Som ao Redor.

Abstract

This paper comments on the particular way film makes use of an urban imagery as a signifying system of meaning to represent specific features related to the notion of urban space (space) and modernity (time). Attention is given here to how a particular urban landscape, the Northeast Brazilian city, Recife-PE, is constructed and thematised as a living structure of meaning and aesthetic effect acting as the space from which social and cinematic landscape emerge. Thus, this article comments on a diversity of concepts drawn from different authors to set a discussion around the matter of city and film or, rather, the way in which the city of Recife, is represented in the film *Neighbouring Sounds* (*O Som ao Redor*, Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2012).

Key words: Urban Space; Landscape; Cinema; Recife-PE; Neighbouring Sounds.

Résumé

Ce travail examine le potentiel cinématographique pour la construction d'images de l'espace urbain comme un système important dans le contexte lié à des notions urbaines de l'espace et modernité (le temps). Notre priorité est de démontrer comment l'espace urbain de la ville de Recife, situé dans le nord du Brésil, est représentée par la diversité des paysages sociaux et cinématographiques. Cet article utilise des concepts de différents auteurs pour penser la manière de la relation entre l'image filmique et l'espace, en particulier dans le film *Neighbouring Sounds* (*O Som ao Redor*, de Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2012).

Mots-clé: Espace Urbain; Paysage; Films; Recife-PE; Neighbouring Sounds.

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INTRODUCTION

The cinematic landscape is not ... a neutral place of entertainment or an objective documentation or mirror of the “real”, but an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings of place and society are made, legitimized, contested and obscured. Intervening in the production and consumption of the cinematic landscape will enable us to [...] contribute to the more expansive task of mapping the social, spatial, and political geography of film (HOPKINS, 1994, p.47).

Referring to the particular way that films make use of an urban imagery as a signifying system of meaning to represent specific features related to urban spaces (space) and modernity (time), attention is given to how a particular city is constructed and thematised as a living structure of meaning and aesthetic effect within a specific film. Therefore, the intention here is to comment on a diversity of concepts drawn from different authors to set a discussion around the matter of city and film or, rather, the way in which the Northeast Brazilian city, namely Recife – capital city of the State of Pernambuco, one of the largest cities in Brazil, situated in one of the earliest regions settled by the Portuguese, and thus intimately tied to Brazil’s history –, is represented in the film *Neighbouring Sounds* (*O Som ao Redor*, Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2012).



Figure 1 - Posters of Neighbouring Sounds

Neighbouring Sounds presents to us characters that live in an upscale street in the upper and middle-class neighbourhood called Boa Viagem, and offers new insights into the unlimited urban growth highlighting the social and human problems associated with it. One can consider this film as an urban chronicle that focuses on a kind of urban metamorphosis that is supposedly occurring in contemporary urban spaces exploring the problems of Brazilian society’s class structures. Moreover, the unique history of Recife, put together by native Brazilians, black enslaved people, Dutch and Portuguese settlers, who left visible traces in the culture of the region, come into sight in the film as a subtle reminder of the city’s past shaping the everyday life of its inhabitants. Exploring new aesthetic and representational archetypes for representing space (the city) and time, that is, to represent realistically an existing place (Recife) and its social reality, this article looks at Recife’s cinematic landscape and its urban architectural space as an attempt to articulate a broader understanding of the contemporary urban and aesthetic film experience.

INTRODUCING CINEMATIC SPACE, TIME AND THE CITY

Considering the concept of space, our main concern here, the cinema does not necessarily depict it as a succession of fragmented pieces, which are reassembled by the narrative to make sense (or not). This happens, for instance, in the opening sequence of *Neighbouring Sounds* when still photographs depicting the rural landscape that relates to Recife's past are shown. This sequence situates Recife geographically and historically in space and time, bringing into light the city's surroundings, its rural metropolitan area, and the city's past history.



Figure 2

More about this opening sequence will be commented subsequently. For now, it is only necessary to say that it is an example of the way filmic space and time, once they are set, are means to identify geographies, people, processes, events, cultures, etc. As English geographer David Harvey states:

Location and bounding are important if not vital attributes for the definition of the objects, events, and relationships existing in the world around us. To choose one ordering principle rather than another is to choose a particular spatio-temporal framework for describing the world (HARVEY, 1996 p.264) (His emphases).

Harvey's words can help, for instance, in the process of conceptualising the motion condition associated to the formation of cinematic landscape. This particularity of the cinema is responsible for the many potential formats of movement and artistic images of landscape in general and the ci-



tyscape in particular. From this perspective, the cinematic apparatus permits new ways of visualizing and experiencing geographic space. Finding in the stress of 'time-space compression' the central motivation for a cultural force in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century modernism, Harvey refers to instances from different cultural milieus such as architecture, urban design, painting, literature, and cinema and conceptualises them within the paradigms of social life and power.

Because of the state of development of modern mass communication, which eases and speeds up the ability of information (and people) to travel around the globe, time and space are becoming less stable and less comprehensible as well as confused, incoherent, disunited and, to use Harvey's term, 'compressed'. It follows that culture is expected to encapsulate, accentuate and reflect these 'confusions' and 'compressions' of time and space. Furthermore, increasing interest in new special effect technologies has fostered new possibilities in the operation of cinema apparatuses. Digital as well as other technologies, which have been used to construct illusions, fantasies or 'realisms', have been a feature of contemporary cinema production.

Taking the above statement into account, one can raise the following question: how can a specific city be represented in motion (film) and what are the qualities and specificity of its cinematic landscape? Or, to rephrase it, what kind of cinematic techniques – the use of camera angles, depth of focus, framing, camera mobility, altered motion, special lenses and special effects and lighting – are engaged in representing the cityscape, and what are the implications of the process of 'transferring' the physical city's imagery to the screen?

According to the concept of narrative space developed by Heath (1993), filmic space is a construction, a spatial discourse projected by the medium, which not only acquires meaning but can also be full of symbolism – it is an imagined space. If the experience (of space as an instance of material practice) is perceived also through a cultural form such as film, the final result is that this particular visual construction of space, the cinematic space, will also constitute a spatial experience not at all detached from reality or from the living and the practices of everyday life.

In this context, in reference to Lefebvre's (1991) widely known scheme, the cinematic cityscape can be considered as a 'three-tiered' space: 'real space', the city that is part of physical reality (the 'experienced' related to the 'practices' involved, the practice of movie-making and viewing, and so on), the urban space actually represented, 'constructed', in the film (the 'perceived', the spot of the city given in space and time); and the filmic space (the imagined).

But, as assumed so far, if space in film is a film construction, what links does it have with the physical space that it 'creates'? This has to do with the 'reality effect' or the 'impression of reality' inherent in the cinema and theorized in the work of many authors (ALLEN, 1993; BAUDRY, 1974-75; BAZIN, 1967; BORDWELL, STAIGER, THOMPSON, 1985; COMOLLI, 1990; HEATH, LAURETIS, 1985). The point is that: cinema is photography, but while photography projects and fixes 'solids on a plane surface', the cinema uses photographic images to reproduce (by optic illusion) movement, motion. It is through motion that the cinematic images correspond to reality. It is through cinema's motion condition that images gain life and can become 'real' statements about what is going on in the world out there. Thus, a narrative that tends to be realistic aspires to capture through motion the spirit of the real.

So, bearing in mind the question of what kind of relationship exists between the physical city and the cinematic city, one could understand this relationship, as Benjamin (1992) states in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [1935], as a simple record of images of nineteenth century life in the streets, united by montage or linear editing and put in motion by the movie camera. Benjamin's focus at the time was modernity and its representation. He argues for the character of the film as the modern critical aesthetic and, in so doing, his views were instrumental in securing the link between film text and city text. The movement of modern life in the city seemed to be always, and almost insistently, represented by movement in the streets. However, to be a manifestation of modernity, the cinematic image of the city could not be just a 'record of reality' because representation, in its wider sense, is not a matter of carrying a camera, framing and shooting



the motion of modern life in the streets of the metropolis that have materialized themselves during the first half of the 20th Century.

Representation is not just a matter of composition either. For meaning to be achieved, a ‘new reality’ must be created which expresses the lifelike quality of reality becoming its manifestation, that is, giving meaning to the city imagery. Hence, if the city and its spatial form are the material essence through which to represent modernity, post-modernity or any contemporary reality at different times, they also bestow distinct symbolic meanings, opening a plethora of iconographic types and genres in the process of imagining and imaging space.

It must be taken into consideration that, in contemplating filmic images of a city, the audience takes the viewpoint of the camera. In doing so, those images become not just recordings, but, in some magical way, they are imaginary cities constructed within the framework of the filmic space. Although every so often primarily a product from the recording of physical reality, imaginary cities acquire their own quality and identity through editing, montage, the filmmakers’ individual experience and priority of choice, and, of course, the point of view of the camera and of the viewer.

Benjamin’s reference to the cinematic manipulation of time and space is interesting precisely because he gives it credit for the cinema’s ability to show things that otherwise would be impossible to see. Interestingly, he also calls attention to the fact that film is able to show at the same time different dimensions and angles of the same object, that is, film allows us to contemplate an object in a manner that otherwise would not be possible. Moreover, and, to some extent contradictorily, it is exactly this ‘ability to show things’ which also creates the imaginary city or magical world. It is thus, and most importantly, through the creative mediation of space and time that the connection between film and palpable reality is established.

In view of the above, it is worth arguing that a specific cinematic city, Recife, in the case discussed here, is constituted by the materiality of the real city, the replicated imagery of urban objects and elements through the cinematic medium, and the imagination which influences its cinematic construction by setting its images in motion in filmic space – the latter of which emphasise unique images of Recife’s cityscape and architecture and place the characters within particular geographical locations within the city’s *mise-en-scène*.

One can argue for the existence of a nostalgic conflict posed by the still photographs in the opening sequence and the subsequent film images (in motion). These contrasting sequences serve to the purpose of narratively working with two opposing positioning. Cutting to the future, with the help of a flash-forward, the film builds narratively a symbolic space and time. *Neighbouring Sounds* builds a tension through a space-limit (contrasting past and future) within which the characters transit and belong.

Thus, Recife’s cinematic city is a meaningful city, a city created by and upon a diversity of previously chosen images that, joined together, not only become another city, but still say a lot about the ‘original’ city – the object – and its subjects. As the cinematic city is, to some extent, a product of our imagination, and the experience of the filmmaker in space, in the city, it provides a bridge for understanding the development and formulation of our sense of the place we know and sometimes live in. Film constructions help either to criticise or to reorder the ‘geographical imaginations’ we have of the world. As Crang (1998) points out: ‘...most people’s knowledge of most places comes through media of various sorts, so that for most people the representation comes before the “reality”’ (p.44). This is to say that the cinema plays a central role in shaping people’s ‘geographical imaginations’ therefore helping to ‘invent’ these places.

EXPERIENCING RECIFE’S CINEMATIC LANDSCAPE

Neighbouring Sounds is a film that is part of the so called cinema pernambucano, the cinematographic production of a specific group of filmmakers who start producing short films and videos



in the 1980s and 1990s in the city of Recife, the capital of Pernambuco state in the Northeast area of Brazil. This group of filmmakers legitimates their work from the production of films that were an outcome of a collective and collaborative work that, in many cases, mixed fiction with documentary, composing hybrid narratives (NOGUEIRA, 2014; 2009).

Written and directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho, *Neighbouring Sounds* is divided into three parts: 1. 'Guard Dogs' (Cães de Guarda); 2. 'Night Guards' (Guardas Noturnos); 3. 'Bodyguards' (Guarda-Costas). These parts' title have in common the word 'guards' which, as will be established all through the film, is symptomatic of an appealing representation of the urban paranoia with security of those who live in large capitalist cities all over the world and are in constant fear that the miserable will finally rebel against economic oppression and burst the barrier that keeps them a part.

The above congregate sequences that interweave the characters that live on the same street in Recife and the corrosive tensions that define life on the block: whether it's middle-class tenants considering the dismissal of an aging doorman who works in their building, a resident who upsets the head of the street security because does not want to hire his services, the hostility between a servant and her boss over a trivial offense, or a dog that won't stop disturbing the peace. The characters get into petty conflicts throughout the film, finding expression for accusations and blames, while trying to extract as much happiness as they can from an environment that offers minimal inspiration. In this sense, *Neighbouring Sounds* presents itself as a faithful socio-economic class reading.

Neighbouring Sounds constitutes furthermore a significant material for understanding the symbolic representation of Recife's (and also Pernambuco's) culture within the paradigm of space and time representation. The film allows establishing wider connections that extend themselves to the grounds of urbanism, real estate speculation, colonialism and individualism to the fragility of the inter-subjective relationships that exist within a society characterized by tradition and consumption. Nevertheless, the main discussion here evolves around the articulation made in the film between the contemporary urban experiences of living in the city of Recife vis-à-vis its cultural and social history.

Neighbouring Sounds intentionally associates the idea of a local/cultural identity to an urban life that goes without clear borders from a cosmopolitan Recife to a peripheral, kitsch, in some aspects, shameful city. This turns the film into a perfect case for analyses of the narrative and the aesthetics construction of filmic space and the urban experience of living in contemporary Recife associated to the filmic articulation of visual composition and the sound elements to construct the cinematic Recife.

As mentioned before, *Neighbouring Sounds* opens with a sequence that places the spectator in front of two diverse historic and geographic moments: a past shown on the still photographs on the screen (Figure 2), through which the social and economic differences between the coronels, large estate owners, and the rural working class can be identified, and the current contemporary urban scene, filled of specific social and economic aspects, noises e rhythms (Figure 3).



Figure 3

If the cuts between past photographs and present moving images, in the opening scene, suggest a contrast of different ways of living, the film also postulates on the relations of continuity and resonance between the past and the present, as if something from the past was, too, resonating on

the present. The still photographs sequence reminds the spectator of the violence that was present, and constant in the historic formation of the Brazilian Northeast Region; more specifically that one related to Pernambuco's 'zona da mata' that was centred in social-economic factors related to patriarchal behaviour and the sugar cane plantations. The aseptic photography of the public area of the building where the children are playing, serves as a contrasting social space to the previously photograph sequence.

The soundtrack composed only by the sounds and the noises intra-diegetic also creates an atmosphere. Throughout the film a naturalistic acting implicates in the dramatization of the scenes putting in motion a realist strategy: the fictional space is empirically indicial (of the city) as the film locations take us to one place and one time that maintain simultaneity with real space-time that is immediately recognised by the spectator.

It seems that the point in this case is to enunciate that the urban contemporary society is, in current times, additionally giving continuity to old relations set up by colonial exploitation. That is, opening the narrative with a series of black-and-white photographs that depict aspects of the hard life of rural workers in the past, *Neighbouring Sounds* well demonstrates that, in a way, the old economic logic is still in place (VILLAÇA, 2013). The street (Figure 4) on which the story is set ends up being seen as an urban update of a much larger reality.



Figure 4

It is obvious that the photographs that open the film (Figure 2) is a composition that takes us to think about the specificities of the social and the cultural contexts relating the countryside to the city in this specific place. The large tracts of land and the exploitation of sugar cane mill society that has its roots in a slavery system characterized by conflicts is then opposed to the conservative modernization of a city that, in contemporary time, seems continuously to remind us that Recife's genesis is placed in rural economic practices.

The centrality of the big *engenhos* (sugar cane large property) and its agrarian situation is reminiscent of the sugar cane plantations that have always been part of Pernambuco's scenario and representative of its socioeconomic background and particular history. Though the relationships between the characters in the film have the urban space as a central element, it is noticeable that they are situated within the less productive sector related to the rural (in the past), and the contemporary more productive Real Estate sector (in the present). Thus, *Neighbouring Sounds* evokes a debate around the theme of the extremely conservative society trapped in the middle of its process of modernization, within which archaic and modern relations 'get along', not without conflict, side by side.



In a very interesting way, *Neighbouring Sounds* constructs also a sense of ‘paranoia’ that often settles on the life in the big cities, such as Recife, that relates to violence and the lack of security. This ‘feeling’ relates to the fact that Brazil has been appointed by the Centro de Estudos Latino-Americanos (Cebela), as the 7th country in the world in the ranking of urban violence (homicides). In 2001, Pernambuco was the first in the ranking as the most violent state in Brazil in relative numbers (with 58,7 homicides for each 100 thousand inhabitants) and in 2011 it occupied the 5th position (39,1) among the most violent states in Brazil. Even if according with the Mapa da Violência 2013, in Pernambuco state, there was a decrease to 26,3% in the index of CVLIs (Crimes Violentos Letais Intencionais) in absolute number; and Recife has also presented a reduction on violence rates with a decrease of 36,8%, an equivalent to less than 41,3% for 100 thousand inhabitants, making the city drop from the second to the fourth position in the ranking of the most violent city in the country; these numbers are well above the levels considered tolerable by ONU, that are 10 homicides for 100 thousand inhabitants.

Accordingly, in *Neighbouring Sounds* the movements of everyday life gain expression from forthcoming dangers – apparently about to happen –, though these almost never do. This reminds us of the discussion about Real Estate speculation, and the formal and informal groups of security guards, which are wide spreading in the urban territory.

What is curious and interesting is that the film is shot in such a way that depicts an environment of physical security that paradoxically is full of psychological unrest. Physical barriers are constant within and throughout the film scenes composition: gates, fences, doors, windows, etc. The city’s apartment buildings and houses – as well as the extensive instruments of security – generate a feeling that characters can’t quite escape fully from both their surroundings and that despite all the ‘security’; there is no real privacy or peace. There’s still an intense fear on the edge of breaking. On top of that, the presence of night security watchmen doesn’t facilitate in suppressing the deeper psychological angst and paranoia that lingers about through households and streets. In the end one can question: what are characters that lives in the neighbourhood truly trying to escape from?

Neighbourhood Sounds builds up the psychological tension by showing that social fears come from within as much as from without; that is it comes from a projection as much as from reality. In spite of the craving for more security, the feeling is even more and more unsafe. The fears of the apartment block tenants result also from their lack of privacy – for instance, a young couple is caught in flagrante naked, as a cleaning lady shows up for work; a maid sneaks out for impromptu sex with one of the guards in an apartment he’s supposed to guard, without realizing that there’s someone at home. The sense of forced intimacy is indeed oppressive. (VILLAÇA, 2013)

The plurality of voices in *Neighboring Sounds* gives importance to the triviality of life, as if everything were being captured on a surveillance camera that becomes voyeuristic. Good examples are the scenes where two teenagers make out in a courtyard or a stoned housewife (Beatriz) masturbates in a laundry room. In view of the above, it seems clear to the spectator that the filmmaker never loses sight of the fact that the paranoid state that plagues this microcosm of the Brazilian middle class is a result of the huge disparity between the rich and the poor.

To reinforce this theme, Mendonça takes us out of Recife to Francisco’s plantation villa, with its gardens and stone statues – a vision of a decadent place well known as been built on the backs of slaves. The images are sentimental, as Mendonça negotiates: on one hand, reverencing the Brazilians’ attachment to the grander, less ‘compressed’ past, against relentless urban intrusions, and on the other, condemning the unjust system of privilege it has created. The social and historical complexities feel at times like artificial attachments to his story.

Echoing the psychological and melancholic tone of the characters’ interactions, *Neighbouring Sounds* benefits from an extremely detailed sound design which, instead of simply reflecting reality, is in use to suggest ideas, feelings, and memories and to express psychological oppression. Sound is interestingly employed by Mendonça: the incessant barking of a neighbor’s dog, the stereos of



street vendors, the noisy vacuum cleaners, the vibrations of washing machines, the TV noise, the atmospheric noise of thunder and electricity, enfolded into a unenergetic Afro-beat, the rhythmic beat that follows Francisco's nocturnal walk, or the growingly louder and tense noise in the elevator in the last scenes of the film are fine examples. Thus, sound, throughout the film, serves to build the narrative climax as well as refrain and punctuation, especially when dialogue becomes somewhat static.

As stated earlier, *Neighbouring Sounds* takes place in Mendonça's home city of Recife, more precisely on a middle-class street by the beach – in the neighborhood of Boa Viagem, where modern high-rise buildings are replacing the last remaining small houses. Mendonça's intention, in particular, was referring to the strong real estate speculation that is happening in Recife at the moment (as in many other cities all over the world) and that has been changing the city's shape and landscape for the last decades. Apparently, for him to make films represents to think politically and socially about reality and this is instantly connected to a specific model of city. On both the real and fictional landscape of Recife, high-rise buildings are replacing the homes that used to dominate the area, one by one. "Actually, the problem is less of the city than what people are doing to it" (Mendonça in DELMANTO, 2013).

In Recife, centuries ago, the edifications (houses and buildings) opened directly to the street. So, when someone was in the sidewalk the inhabitant of the house could see him. There was at the time what the urban planners called as 'social vigilance'. That one produced by the vigilance in both ways: who walked on the street was able to see the interior of the houses and vice-versa. However, this urban logic changed and increasing the absence of this social vigilance.

The act of walking on the sidewalks of Boa Viagem, signifies walking in a path limited by high walls, no visual or physical contact with the inhabitants of the edifices. These buildings and its big walls are like barricades. So, at the same time that someone who walks on the streets does not have any visual relation with the edifices' inhabitants, whoever inhabit the buildings, does not also have any visual of the streets.

The theme of social vigilance reminds of Jane Jacob's (1993) writings on the vital importance of the possibilities of visual permeability between public and private spaces on the big cities; that is, the importance of seeing and being seen in urban space. Looking at the city, Jacobs stated that for someone to feel safe in the streets of any city, the street has to have 3 characteristics: (1) a clear separation between public and private spaces; (2) must be there 'eyes' to the streets; the inhabitants of houses and edifices should see what is going on in the streets; (3) the sidewalks should have people walking at all times uninterruptedly.

It is easy to conclude that in Jacobs's opinion, the increasing observation of external space helps implementing social vigilance; that is necessary for the urban function to work; this helps to increase the feeling of being secure. However, in spite of the necessity for integrating private and public spaces through this social vigilance, contemporary urbanism does not seem to have worries about it.

That what Jacobs had preconized in the 1960s is exposed in the film, demonstrating that the crescent phenomenon of undervaluing urban public spaces is a consequence, mostly, of the spatial segregation caused by the web complex of electronic vigilance and by the high walls that separate private from public spaces. These elements blinds the street leaving both isolated; the interior and the exterior of the edifications isolate one from another. Recife – in real-life and in *Neighbouring Sounds* – seems to be a result from the understanding that a web of vigilance or even a human one, along with high walls and electric fences generate more security and a well being for the city's inhabitants. 'Guard Dogs' is the part that well illustrates the importance of the vigilance defended and put together by the character of Clodoaldo, for instance.

Along with spatial segregation in the city space, there is the human segregation within their different social levels. So, we have in the film both the spatial and social differences occurring simultaneously. The integration between the edifices and the streets ends up promoting a decrease of the



public space. For instance, children play in the building playground and car parking and not in the park or on the beach near by. People walk their dogs in the building's garden and not on the street.

'First, we mould the cities, then they mould us', says the Danish urban planner Jan Gehl (2013). The film works with this premise; that is, the urban structures (as well as its planning) influence human behaviour and the way cities functions. The way people make use of public spaces transforms their arrangement; and the space transformed ends up transforming the people themselves. However, though the city should be for all, the social and spatial tensions transform the collective space. The segregation exposed in *Neighbouring Sounds*, its tensions and narratives expose the fragility of the city inhabitants and users of the urban space that has being built with an architecture that segregates, feeds social differences, and also turns the similitudes fragile.

Neighbouring Sounds focuses on urban questions that afflict the city's everyday life. Mendonça knows that there is a lot of construction in Recife, and particularly in Boa Viagem, with not much urban planning or organization. The required urbanism and architectural study, is sometimes completely disregarded (or absent) in spite of the city's directive plan. This fragment of Recife's urban mess seems to be the one that Mendonça wants to be part of his cinematic city's creation. In his own words:

The neighborhood really is photogenic in the way that I think bad architecture is very photogenic [...] it generates a strange kind of tension when you photograph people against buildings and walls and hallways – especially in this neighbourhood where there is a huge concern with security, so you have high walls and steel grates. Everybody sometimes looks like a little mouse trying to make its way through, and that was one of the ideas, to shoot widescreen and show the relationships of people against this kind of aggressive presence of straight lines. (WILLMAN, 2013).

Mendonça offers the spectator a particular view of 21st century Recife, in which a glossy new world appears to be rising as age-old and often-oppressive values live on within it. The street is still a privileged enclave owned by a landed patriarchy. The whites still have poor black servants, who are treated like family members – except when they aren't. And the poor still get hired to protect those with money and property from the other poor criminals who must surely be lurking out there somewhere. Part of what makes *Neighbouring Sounds* so revealing is that this sharply observed portrait of today's Recife, or Brazil in a larger scope, is not only about Recife/Brazil.

If the local identity is, in this case, built through reference to the Pernambuco's cultural universe, Recife's cityscape works and is built within this paradigm. The city's cityscape images are explored by travelling and birds-eye-views shots that flow over the urban space, registering the city everyday life. The spirit of Recife that is called here is the one of a multifaceted city, hybrid, and multicultural. Moreover, the important thing is to 'present the city' – to give us an idea about its urban structural design, buildings, streets, bridges, sea and rivers.



Figure 5

Neighbouring Sounds gives a detailed and outstanding narrative about what happens when a cosmetic modernization is put together on a decadent sugar cane large economic structure. Recife was a port whereto slaves were imported from Africa and sugar was exported from. With the decline of sugar trade, the city also decayed before it appeared as a modern place of tourist interests. The

old Recife has not yet disappeared, but, seen from the top of the high-rise buildings in the film, this is actually turned into a bunch of rooftops.

Examples of the above can be found throughout the film: the relationship between João (Gustavo Jahn), Mr. Francisco's grandson, the owner of a decaying sugar cane estate and of the apartments on the street, and the maid, is portrayed as being a respectful and affective relationship, but at the same time reminds us of the mystical relationship between the slaves and their owner who were also the owners of the sugar cane large properties. Or the rapid change of the urban ambience that is represented by Sofia (Irma Brown), João's girlfriend, who has lived in the neighborhood for less than 10 years and is not used to the high-rise buildings that is transforming the landscape of the city.

And subsequently, when Sofia visits the place where she spent part of her youth, we feel the imminent loss of a place that assumes the shapes of a personal memory. So, when João says to Sofia 'The house in which you lived will be demolished' (Figure 6), the understanding is that this literal piece of information also works as a metaphor for the loss of our roots and the sad destruction of our history. And if nothing else, the sequence in which João and Sofia visit his grandfather rural state comes as a tribute to cinema itself: the transformation of an old cinema theater, now taken over by weeds and mold, appears on the screen as a living memory of the past (Figure 7).



Figure 6



Figure 7

Being interviewed, Kleber Mendonça affirmed his great interest in reflecting about the persistence of the old relationships between different classes and races. So, this explains why class and race and their situation within Recife's urban space is an important concern for the film narrative, the construction of its filmic space and the aesthetic of the cinematic city that is put together. The physical barriers and what happens within and around them serve to comment on the levels of apparent social stratification all over the neighbourhood.



Likewise, the same importance is given to the question of urban security as mentioned before: the barking dog, the many lockers on doors and gates, the electric fences, the buildings security porters, the anti-robber car alarm system, the street security guards that acts under Clodoaldo's (Iran-dhir Santos) leadership. All that highlights the obsession with security, which ends up transforming the lives of the city's inhabitants, and also the city's imagery trapping them in their own houses. This representation is suggestive of Mendonça's choice for several shots of few houses suffocated in the midst of countless tall and luxurious buildings, and also of the extraordinary editing that unexpectedly cuts from a shot of the city's skyline to one that shows the characters trapped behind walls and bars, for instance.



Figure 8

As Villaça (2013) points out:

Contained in their apartments by ever-present iron bars installed to provide security but evoking a prison-like atmosphere, the characters express their humanity and their desire for freedom as circumstances allow: a boy tries to play ball in the street but is continually frustrated, a pair of embracing teenagers kiss in a concrete corner, and anonymous individuals paint messages of love on the asphalt in futile defiance of the oppressive gray concrete.

Boa Viagem constituted itself, during Recife's initial urbanization expansion process, into a region configured by streets with houses and less than a few new buildings constructions. This neighbourhood, during the 1970s transformed itself into an area that congregates many high buildings that are multi-familiar and have between 20 to 40 pavements. That is, this neighbourhood became vertical and changed into a very dense area in constructions and population.

There is an interesting scene in the film when João (a real-estate broker) shows an empty flat to a potential buyer. He explains that, even though the flat is on the market because it's owner had committed suicide; the incident does not have an impact on the quality of the place. That is, he points out that human lives are less valuable than the house estate. Clearly disappointed, the lady visiting

the flat – who seems to express horror upon hearing of a suicide in the building only to ask for a discount on rent – goes to the balcony from where she sees the oppressive view of the many new high-rise buildings. In this sequence, the film capably places the spectators into a state of distress by presenting the present-day dark modernity nightmare in which the statistics of suicides committed by people jumping over the walls of the neighborhood are crescent.



Figure 9

Further on in the film, these buildings are shown jointly with old houses facing the ocean; what makes almost incomprehensible that Recife is a city by the seaside, famous for its reefs. The sea is shown just once in the film, when Francisco (W. J. SOLHA) goes for a swim at night, almost as if knowing that he owns the ocean. Scenes like this give us the impression that a unique city is revealed on the screen. That is, Mendonça's choice is to draw more on the city of high-rise buildings, than on the sunny, by-the-sea tourist destination city or on the low-rise historic town.

The city and its architecture are in a movement against people. I think there are many moments in the film when the characters are depicted almost as if they were little mice in a cage, in a laboratory, and they must walk in a strange manner, and to overcome obstacles, and turn left just because the thing was designed for them to do so. They are totally conditioned to that geography in an unnatural manner. A not human one I think. (Kleber Mendonça interviewed by Paulo Camargo, 2013b).

It is not difficult connecting this quotation with the panoramic view given from the top of the 'Castelo de Windsor' building in *Neighbouring Sounds*.

Here, there is basically a play with image motion and scale. This sequence seems to be questioning the relationship between the city and the historic process from which Recife was born: one can see that, in the middle of the image of the many high-rise buildings, there is a shantytown (favela). With a zoom the camera slowly gets close to the favela and with the next cut we see the city's horizon and the sea. We can also see a petite forest before a low travelling takes us to a view in close-up of a screw thread on the top of the building.

From the building's rooftop, João faces the city. With a zoom, the camera shows some houses compressed between the many high-rise buildings that vertically grow around them. At the same time that the camera's movement allows us to see the details of the buildings that compose the cityscape, it shows the social and economic tension that such a space configuration implies. The social exclusion dimension of poorer communities and the many processes of making it impracticable to live in better conditions are materialized in this becoming near camera movement. It happens on the screen to make the same high walls, fences and grids that some tried to avoid visible; it makes poor people on whom fall stigmas of the marginal that represents a risk to society and from whom





Figure 10

Simultaneously, in this same sequence, we hear a conversation between Francisco and João. They are talking on the mobile phone about a visit to Francisco's old home, in the rural area of the state, in a municipality called Bonito. The image of a favela opposed to the one of a screw thread, seems to metaphorically portray the contemporary problems that affect Recife's society, that is, social and economic differences that were built through many centuries of exploitation, exclusion and repression. The film builds the city as a space of sharing and dissension – allowing the spectators to experiment the city and its community in its problematic and conflictive character – but also allowing us to see the moments of resistance.

This social and historical context is evidenced when we are taken to see scenes in which the horizon of buildings avoid our view of the sea or of sunset; or when we see the different flats shown by João to his clients; or when we follow the walking of the security men on the streets and we are obliged to stop just before big walls or electrified fences that separate public from private spaces, the street from the private properties; or the many scenes where the inhabitants of Boa Viagem are seen behind bars that protect doors and windows.

In the film, the high-rise buildings appear in many sequences on the borders of the frame pressing the human figures that are placed at the centre of the frame. This composition suggests the dimension of the oppression put by the big reinforced concrete constructions, infinitely bigger and numerous in contrast, onto the fragility of the small bodies made of flesh, blood and bones of the city's inhabitants.

The film shows, not without pains, that in spite the city's modern appearance, its contemporary society is still a rigid and traditional one, which clearly has bases on the Portuguese colony. The characters seem to have a social hierarchic consciousness: Francisco, João, Anco (Lula Terra), Dinho (Yuri Holanda) are part of the same class and they explicitly state the fact of being the owners of the land. The authority of these characters seems to transcend the one of the State, the one of the public power responsible for that territory. Moreover, the public power is absent in the film. Even a service such as the State public urban security, which should be efficiently enough, is here considered necessary to be placed into the hands of the private sector.

Lima e Migliano (2013) consider that *Neighbouring Sounds* aligns the use of audiovisual operational modes with the police's order, in order to generate and maintain collective urban fear, throwing some light onto the problems and tensions of trivial contemporary urban life and experience.

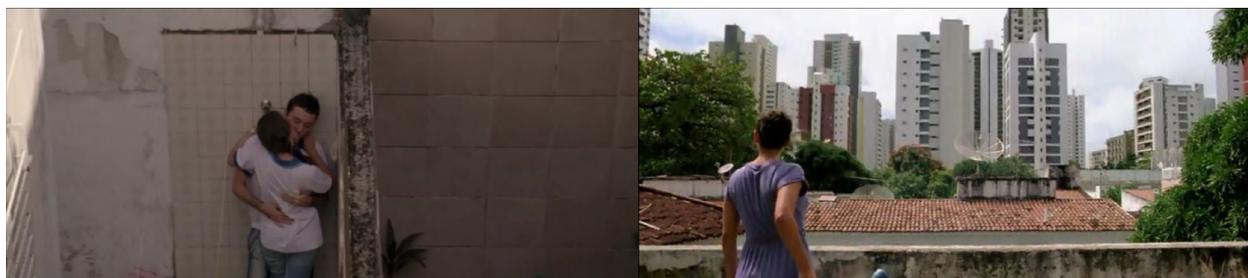


Figure 11

Escaping from the realism into a realm that borders on fantasy the filmmaker presents a scene in which Anco goes out into the street and the camera shows us that he still lives in the only house that still keeps low fences. He looks to the right and the image that we see on the screen is a nostalgic vision of a man who suddenly sees the street from the perspective of his childhood; that is the one that comes out direct from the character's memory: a photograph of that same street thirty years ago, when the houses had low fences and walls and colorful cars parked in front, under the shade of the trees. The image of another time appears on the screen very briefly, but it still allows the spectator to foresee another possibility for the world we live in, even if this world is based on a kind of nostalgic city image. This image contrasts with the sequence that follows showing Beatriz and her children in a car with the windows closed unaware to the very loud sound of a football blowup when the car she is driving tumbles over it.



Figure 12

At the end of the film, the sound of festive bombs bought by Beatriz (Maevé Jinkings), to scare the dog is confused with the sound of gunshots fired against the old landowner (Francisco) by the security men who were there supposedly to defend him. It is then possible to understand that the conflict over land and against landlords, which has been common in Brazilian history, is reconfiguring itself. Having been associated with the countryside, this is now present in new formats: the fences that once set the boundaries of the sugarcane estates now are the walls that protect the middle class and that have direct effects on people's everyday lives, especially in individual liberty. For example, there are many scenes where we see Beatriz and her family behind iron bars,



as if they were convicts; not coincidentally, we see the drawings by Fernanda (Beatriz's daughter) portraying a house without walls.

CONCLUSIONS

In *Neighbouring Sounds*, the city of Recife and its urban and architectural subject are intimately related to historic, social, and even racial problems. Behind the character's smiles, there is a tension which echoes the one that existed between slaves and their owners and that has the proliferation of security mechanisms, its vigilant cameras and sensors, that are spreading all over Recife and other cities, as its more concrete effect.

In the end, *Neighbouring Sounds* allows the spectators to experience the urban flow of life, and whatever feelings are associated with them, giving them an opportunity to through another look over the city, Recife, to have a renewed and critical glance over the urban and public space and their conflicts and problems that every so often are silenced. Ultimately, *Neighbouring Sounds* talks about questions associated with the contemporary city and its nonsense, conflicts and tensions.

Recife, being a cinematic city, and also a narrative city, can explain or can, in itself impersonate (represent) and also symbolise the different types of space motion working together within the filmic space. Space, here, acquires meaning through the diversity of motions. The cinematic city, instead of being mere background, is recorded and constructed, acquires meaning, and as a cultural creation, helps to shape our perception of that 'reality'.

Recife's cinematic city has connections with reality in which it finds a referential system of meanings. Through its text and language it helps to interpret reality, connecting us to it. It thus transforms, recreates and establishes the real. It is then plausible to say that Recife's cinematic city is image and symbol and thus also 'moulds' our views of the world, in particular, of this city. That is why, to make sense of any city, it is not only necessary to examine its physical, sociological, political and economic elements but also it is of paramount importance to look at representations of the imaginary city of films, because this helps the understanding of the meaning of the actual city.

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