

CANCER



A FILM BY GLAUBER ROCHA



La Ville Souvenir

Gean Moreno & Ernesto Oroza

What happens if all the souvenir shops and stands are invaded by an abstract souvenir, something that everyone, even children, recognize as a malefic mass? And what if this mass all of a sudden is acknowledged by a baffled population as a proper sign to identify the city by? What if, magically eliciting little hostility, it is simply accepted and reproduced, despite the diffuse disgust and fear that it generates in everyone? Imagine hundreds of thousands of malefic and possibly animated masses—with a range of physiognomic variations of course, as souvenir economies demand—cast in plastic and in polychromed clay, produced in blown glass and in treated and pressed metal, all taking over the shelves and pushing past the doors of the establishments where they are housed and sold, leaving mucus trails behind, climbing over Mexican sombreros and sliming rows of postcards, sullying flamingo towels and defiling squeaky rubber sharks, altering the temperature registered by the map-thermometers and rendering inconclusive the “deadness” of the alligator paw-bottle openers. What condition in the city, in its geography, in the behavior of its inhabitants, is suppurating these terrifying souvenirs? What dark underbelly of collective identity demands such an object? Is it rightful compensation for the wretchedness of the locals?

The questions can come from a different place: Is this souvenir even bound to the city which it purportedly represents? What if it was intended for some other place and the containers it was shipped in were accidentally sent to the wrong port? What if Somali pirates, a risk-averse subset among them, took cargo in lieu of hostages and abandoned it at sea when they realized what they had in their hands, and the materials simply drifted onto shore and began to radiate out as they were absorbed by

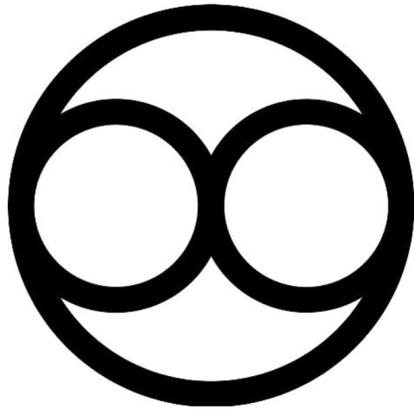
the local economies? What if this shapeless souvenir arrived like an invasive plant species, through clandestine channels, outfoxing border control agents, and settled in, put down roots and spread seed, overwhelmed the local ecosystem of representational characters, eliminating alligators, flamingos, dolphins, mermaids, and manatees, and now nothing can ward off its steady advance?

Imagine that these malefic masses, chromatically muddy and screen-printed with putrid and matte inks on rows of towels and t-shirts, begin to absorb all the light in the storefronts in which they are sold. They even ingest the sunlight that pours in through the windows and photosynthesize it into waste product. They slurp the neon gas as if the glass tubes were straws. They recast the souvenir shop as a zone of swelling opacity, of encroaching dark forces, of fading details, of extravagant expenditures of energy without positive outcome: things are only eaten away and blinked out in there. Are these souvenirs evoking a buried past, ancestral sins and distant atrocities that are clawing their way out of the deep caves of repression? Or, are they pointing to something that is slowly materializing on the horizon, coming catastrophes? Are they inventing a dreaded condition, prefiguring or courting dark disaster, and forcing the city to assume it? Maybe they are pointing to the very end of the city, to that moment in which urban texture is so generic that to attempt to produce any kind of coherent sign system to represent it is a ludicrous task.

Hundreds of thousands of shot glasses and refrigerator magnets begin to arrive from China. (We always know where they come from, that’s the one certainty we have these days, but we are unsure of the intended destination.) All of them are stamped with an image of the malefic mass. Leaving the port,

trucks carrying container after container filled with screen-printed t-shirts and bathing suits drag this malefic mass across the city and into all the shops and bars by the beach. Lincoln Road mall becomes the largest deposit of layers of malefic masses, a kind of sedimentary diagram of this unstoppable abstraction. An image of it is printed on a massive vinyl mesh sleeve and draped over the Herzog and de Meuron parking garage, replacing one icon with another. Masses are also painted by famous street artists on foreclosed and abandoned buildings throughout the city as part of beautification campaigns sponsored by the major’s office and desperate developers. They are cast in concrete so that they can be used as lawn ornaments and as camouflaged obstacles in pedestrian malls. The unstoppable invasion of malefic mass happens slowly, as slowly as the invasion of Mexican sombreros in Barcelona and Sevillian castanets in the Bahamas and Sphinxes in Las Vegas.

In time, the malefic mass will go global, like certain celebrities. Eventually, the Swedes and the Japanese and the Egyptians will take the malefic mass back home with them, across the ocean, through customs checkpoints in which bored agents will confuse it for a benign blob without the dark intention of swallowing differentiated urban texture. Perhaps, the true depth of mass’s terrifying quality will only be obvious to us, who blew life into it, who can



perceive it in its totality, who understand the invasive drive that animates its ability to generate reality. It’s a supermass that overtakes everything, but slowly enough to curtail the possibility that any desperate call to action be put to the city’s inhabitants or for product recalls to be issued. It alters the weather at a measured pace. It absorbs massive amounts of sunlight and heat but never in a single swoop. And it becomes increasingly and slowly less visible, less image, and, in time, it is only a terrifying entity, a blank space without identity, and it makes the city like this as well. It incorporates the object it stood for into its fundamental formlessness.

And what if the hordes of flamingos that have slowly taken over our shot glasses and towels and lottery tickets, invaded our landscape and imagination, are a temporary stage in the slow emergence of a malefic pink mass that will eventually overtake the city? What if it is waiting at the moment for someone to blow life into its melted-together body? Isn’t this already happening? PortMiami just announced that the four Super Panamax cranes that it’s having built in Shanghai—they arrive next summer—will be painted flamingo pink (along with the two that are already there) so that we can

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Symbol system - Tomás Maldonado, 1962

have a flock of gigantic souvenirs permanently tattooed against the horizon. A towering image to represent the city: crane-flamingos against a beatific sunrise. In no time, this image will begin to grace postcards and flickr feeds, and it will migrate to t-shirts and keychains and towels. Tropical typographies will dance around it. Eventually, it will mutate into the city’s official logos and campaign signage. It will seep into our neural lines and be distorted in our night terrors. Its numbers—of the images, but also of other flamingo-structures and souvenir-buildings—will swell to such a degree that it will make little sense to speak of differentiated specimens, of individual manifestations. It will just be one massive pink mass invading the city, assuming the shape of birds and buildings only as a way to disguise its di-

mension and extravagant force.

Crane-flamingos. A souvenir that is both a sign of the city and an element inscribed in the urban texture itself. The souvenir as no longer only a reflection of the city, but as the city itself. Which is to say as the end of the city. When the souvenir seeps into the chromosome sequences of contemporary architecture we’ve left behind the fable of the Generic City and the detrimental effects of speed building; we’re beyond starchitects and urban planning. We’ve entered much stranger territory. We’ve butted up against the possibility of living inside souvenir-world—on palm tree-islands and tropical Alpine villages. The duck shed has exploded into the flamingo skyline, oddity has become norm. New buildings will be erected to resemble the souvenirs of buildings that no

Cancer, File-Sharing, and the Anti-anti-Colonial Reason

Ariana Hernandez-Reguant

To Peter Sunde

The only way to watch Glauber Rocha’s 1972 film *Cancer* is by torrent-downloading it first. That is to say, the only way to access *Cancer* is through an unlawful act, one in which a public museum —any institution with stakes in the public sphere, for that matter— will not engage, not even as an artistic statement. Screening is necessarily “insourced” to the intimacy of a laptop: Piracy is an act of privacy. Watching *Cancer* becomes, then, a sort of hidden transcript, a weapon of the weak; a challenge to the intellectual property regime of capitalism. But that is socially inconsequential just because collective action is not constituted by the sum of individual acts. And thus the 2014 pirate spectator approximates the 1968-72 film director with a rebellious act that is not revolutionary because, like Glauber Rocha himself said about the time of his film, revolution is not so much about seizing power as about generating entirely new relations that are not of power, new practices that do not follow from the logic of modern rationality.

Cancer marked a departure on Rocha’s filmmaking. Shot in Rio de Janeiro in 1968, during an impasse before the making of his *Antonio das Mortes*, it was edited in Cuba, at the National Film Institute or ICAIC, in 1972. Rocha spent about a year in Havana during the worse of Brazil’s military dictatorship, at the behest of his friend Alfredo Guevara, then director of the institute. But what was to be another instance of “third cinema,” or “imperfect cinema,” or “cinema novo,” which is to say a political film in line with a materialist view of social inequality, became instead a critique of it. Just when one of Cuba’s foremost intellectuals at the time, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, published his rendition of the Shakespearean Caliban, the slave that learns the colonizer’s language in order to eventually seize power, as symbolic of the Cuban revolution itself as the peak of anti-colonial praxis, Rocha was turning against it. The language of the colonizer is a colonizing language, no matter who uses it, he implied in his 1971 manifesto, “Aesthetics of Dream.” Influenced by Buñuel and embracing Jorge Luis Borges, he rejected his earlier, and well-known, “Aesthetics of Hunger,” and called for alternative rationalities, including mysticism, as the only possible way to transcend the modern rationality of oppression. A truly revolutionary art would not serve as an instrument for political action, but promote philosophical speculation and generate awakening to new modes of knowledge. In other words, Rocha understood that socialism was a product of modernity, just like capitalism, and that anti-colonial thinking was still perpetuating both their lines of structuration. Rocha’s call for an alternative reason, for a “pensée sauvage,” anticipated the post-colonial theory that would boom decades later. It also anticipated the need for a renovated Left, which the pro-Soviet Communist Parties in Latin America would not be able to deliver.

In *Cancer*, actors improvise over loose themes related to social inequality and their expression in individual forms of violence. Along several scenes, stitched together in no particular order, the actors argue with each other as husband and wife, acquaintances, friends, or would-be lovers, bringing social, ideological, religious, and national conflicts to bear in their relation so as to generate interpersonal violence that, in the end, culminates in senseless death. The actions take place in Rio de Janeiro: not on Ipanema beach or under the Cristo Redentor, but in nondescript thoroughfares, homes, backyards, and local sidewalks lined with stores. Making true Rocha’s prescription in “Aesthetics of Dream,” experimentation takes place at the level of form: on the actors’ improvisation, the camera work, and the editing, particularly the audio, which is some times not synchronized, spills over the next scene, or includes several tracks at once: the actual dialogue happening on screen, ambient sounds, and perhaps a random recording from Cuban radio. The film blurs the boundaries of fiction and documentary: Actoral dialogues may include interactions with people on the street, and the hand-held

longer exist. Not Mies, but the Mies plastic key-chain skyscraper as source and inspiration. A malefic mass of souvenir-architecture spreads and layers the globe with a new crust. We will be able inhabit this souvenir-world the same way we once thought we could live inside the Ville Spatiale. But, of course, with this difference: La Ville Souvenir has arrived through stealth and not through theoretical proposal and museum installations, or stowed away in styles friendly to it, like postmodern architecture or Memphis design. It never got stuck in the swamp of the manifesto or in reams of drawings. La Ville Souvenir, like a malefic mass that no one noticed until it was too late and it had overtaken everything, simply spread itself cunningly across the hard surface of reality. ■

camera moves in their midst like another participant, often at odd angles, or focusing on parts of the body that may not be central to the action —like a couple’s laps while they sit next to each other and kiss, or a woman’s forehead while she speaks. This technique offers a liberating viewing experience, closer to reality, by allowing the eyes to wander along. *Cancer* is, for sure, a film for filmmakers, and there resides its failure.

By the end of 1972, Rocha broke with the Cuban revolutionary regime and moved to Paris, but the footage he turned into *Cancer* was never shown commercially. Film critics considered that it marked the beginning of his second, less successful phase, and no film of his would again achieve the success of his former ones. Today only his very last, *The Age of the Earth*, in addition to his pre-Cuba ones, exists on DVD. *Cancer’s* experimental character may have attempted a revolution of form but failed at a social rebellion. The film’s intertextuality —with Buñuel, for instance— and self-referential character, condemned it to small elite circles of artists and connoisseurs. And although it was said to be intellectually transformative for a few contemporary artists directly or indirectly involved in its production, like Helio Oiticica, it was ultimately inconsequential in generating a broader social impact. And that leads me back to piracy.

In this age of extended digital access and reproduction, when the barriers between producers and viewers are coming down and traditional media outlets and distribution companies are in the defensive to protect their investments, the revolutionary act does not sit with producers, or not only. The power lies with the digitally-empowered public, capable of putting corporate interests against the fence, despite a legal regime tailored for them. It is us too, re-creators and viewers of cultural materials, who can reclaim films of non-commercial interest and bring them to life through our creative hacktivist practices. And thus *Cancer’s* experimentation only generates viewers’ awareness in so far it already exists. The anarchist imagining of new possibilities envisioned by Rocha is a reality in the digital age. The challenge is not only to break the prison of copyright, but to rally around those who are physically imprisoned for it. The challenge, in sum, is to transcend individual practices taking place in the intimacy of the individual-computer interaction, and generate a collective movement for the democratization of culture. ■

