

## FILM REVIEW

# *Obscuro Barroco* (2018)

by Evangelia Kranioti

## *Obscuro Barroco's* Other Spaces

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In his famous essay 'Des Espace Autres', Michel Foucault makes the case for *other spaces* within culture, which, while being linked to all the others, however, contradict them, for they 'suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (1986 [1967]: 3). He identifies two types of such spaces: *utopias*, that is sites with no real place, presenting the society in a perfected form, and *heterotopias*, that is counter-sites, which represent, contest, and invert all the other real sites.

Shot through a kaleidoscope of colours, textures, bodies and sounds, Evangelia Kranioti's sophomore essay film brings both heterotopias and utopias into play to construct a visually stunning, meditative montage of gender and body politics, but most importantly an existential, yet celebratory, tableau of the unfixity, ephemerality and vulnerability of life.

Winner of the Teddy Jury Award at the 68th Berlin International Film Festival, *Obscuro Barroco* (France, Greece, 2018) focuses on the legendary icon of Rio de Janeiro's nightlife and transgender culture, Luana Muniz, who died shortly after filming. Probably the most famous transwoman in Brazil, actor, performer, sex-worker and activist Muniz appeared often in the media, using her celebrity status to call attention to sex-worker and LGBTQ rights. Muniz's contribution to the community is also reflected in the hostel-commune she established in her hometown for transgender sex workers; a place nothing less of a refuge for the marginalised community, offering them support, as well as access to medical and mental health services.

Muniz's turbulent, yet glamorous life and ardent activism have been the focus of two other documentaries: Rian Córdova and Leonardo Menezes's *Luana Muniz: Daughter of the Moon* (Brazil, 2017), and the more recent *Queen of Lapa* (Brazil, 2019) by Theodore Collatos and Carolina Monnerat. Nevertheless, Kranioti's work departs from both the more televisual, talking head mixed with archival footage, biographical style of Córdova and Menezes's film, and the more cinema-verité, observational approach of Collatos and Monnerat's social documentary, reinventing the genre's aesthetic and political aspirations, as one would expect from the Greek film essayist, after her mesmerizing *Exotica, Erotica, Etc.* (France, 2015).

Muniz's imposing, deep, but delicate voice guides *Obscuro Barroco's* loose, yet meticulously constructed narrative, which edits together contrasting images, volumes, and depth of field; her carefully scripted voice-over dominating the soundtrack, mixing intense personal reflection with lyrical excerpts from Clarice Lispector's novel *The Stream of Life* (1989). As Hélène Cixous (1989: xi) observes, Lispector's text indulges in 'moments of coming onto being, in the space of the not yet and the already'; moments that are, nonetheless, hard to be grasped through the limiting and normative codes of language. Set against the buzz of Rio's tumultuous cultural and political landscape, Kranioti's exploration of queer subjectivity and the transgender lived experience, similarly, refuses to conform to traditional filmic codes and genre conventions, rather delivering an all-encompassing experience that arrests the viewer's senses and emotions, teasing our intellect, provoking our thoughts.

'We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein', writes Foucault, only to conclude, '[o]ur epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites' (1986 [1967]: 1-2). Relentless juxtaposition becomes, indeed, Kranioti's primary mode of address: from wet frames of the lush, vegetal life that environs Rio, through night-time skyline shots of the city, to fly-on-the-wall sequences from Rio's vibrant queer spaces and then onto the streets outside, alternating between the hallucinating fervour of the carnival and heated anti-corruption protests. Kranioti's camera constantly roams over the multi-layered fabric of an ever-changing city, which, 'if it were human, it would be a transvestite', as Muniz robustly remarks.

Muniz introduces the viewer to Rio de Janeiro as the city which is simultaneously paradise, hell and purgatory. Our tour of the city would however be guided by the silent, impassive or melancholic gaze of a wandering clown, as he traverses through the carnival parade, a street performance and a dance floor, in extended dance sequences. Composition, editing and sound correspond to the clown's gaze, not so much through matching shots as in the way they enhance an

affective ambience of disorientation and unrest. Shifting between gigantic floats, enormous crowds, elaborate costumes and the glittered bodies of dancers, through shots that differ in scale, angle and movement, the handheld camera denies the viewer a clear geography to navigate on the ground; its only point of return being the ever-present clown, whose reluctant participation in the events unfolding around him impedes any other interpretation than the infinite expansion of a space beyond our reach, of a meaning beyond our understanding.

The dance sequences, much like the film in its entirety, emerge as what Foucault would name 'heterochronies', that is heterotopias linked to slices in time, but time 'in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect' (1986 [1967]: 7). However rebellious the persistent samba beats and the frenzied movement of the bodies dancing at the official parade may sound or appear, the real revolution would, nonetheless, happen away from the Sambadrome, the film highlights. Kranioti is clearly more interested in capturing the true spirit of the visceral tradition of the carnival, beyond the corporate appropriation of the official event. After all, as Bakhtin observes, the vibrant cultural space of the carnival offers the possibility of social unruliness and limited rebellion but always within the constraints set by some larger authority that permits it to take place (1984 [1965]: 11). The pandemonium of extravagant colours, sounds, and bodies at the parade soon gives way to toned down but more spontaneous celebrations that happen in the side streets. The samba sounds volume down and the clown appears drifting among tired bodies of revellers or young children, who keep dancing or look on passing vehicles in the backstreets, where another community rejoices in its own less flamboyant but equally fervent way.

The film keeps juxtaposing the city's obscure heterotopias, as the dancing purgatory moves to the underground, in hidden queer spaces, where ecstatic trans bodies indulge in unapologetic exposure of the pulsating flesh, reclaiming space, time, identity. 'The city of transformations; of my own transformation,' Muniz whispers. Glorifying, over-stylised portraits of Muniz would interrupt the narrative flow of the dance sequences if only to remind us of who masters our gaze. Muniz would self-indulge in the hard-fought, hard-won confidence of a fearless heroine, directing her gaze at the camera, controlling ours, arresting, indeed, our imaginary, recounting the fantasies of a transwoman, who can be anyone she wants, a factory of dreams, of fantasies. Faces of various other transwomen fill the screen, beautifully lit in effervescent colours, a saxophone takes over the soundtrack, an invitation to immerse in a colourful queer fantasy. 'I'm not human, I'm an object that shouts out, an urgent object'; Muniz commands the screen, our fantasies, her own self-objectification.

Kranioti's camera unveils the other spaces, the hidden ones behind the sparkling façade of Rio, in a way that forbids an interpretation of these sites as 'heterotopias of deviation', occupied, that is, by individuals of deviant behaviour in relation to society's norms. The film's insistence on a relentless juxtaposition might at times obstruct the viewer's wish for the delineation of space, yet never

obscures the boundaries between the distinct social spaces. As the carnival delirium indoors and outdoors fades into a vehement demonstration, the film becomes a repository of heterotopias, of both illusion and compensation. Throwing coloured smoke bombs and shouting anti-corruption slogans amidst loud music, the protesters argue for the recuperation of – above everything – their own bodies: ‘Occupy and resist with the trans!’

Yet another ‘stream of life’, the film never stops returning to the very vessel of life: the body. If Rio were human, it would be ‘a beautiful transvestite, preferably I’, Muniz resumes. Her voice prevails the soundtrack, as a connecting thread among otherwise disparate filmic elements, but it is her body that constitutes the axis around which unfolds the film’s hypnotic visual path; a centrifugal force, as it were, channelling an opulent affective cinematic experience, ever embarking, ever returning. Her ever transformed and transforming body; a heterotopia itself. Foucault claims the boat as the heterotopia par excellence: ‘a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea’ (1986 [1967]: 9). *Obscuro Barocco*’s absorbing journey ventures on an obscure cartography of the (trans) city and the (trans) body’s immanent baroque if only to reveal them, indeed, as floating pieces of space, fleeting and fluid, places without a place, unfixed and unhinged by norms and boundaries, existing by themselves, closed in on themselves and at the same time given over to an infinity of coordinates and identities.

In closing, I would like to borrow one last metaphor from Foucault, that of the mirror. According to Foucault, the mirror presents ourselves in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface, a presence in absence, a utopia. But if we reconsidered the mirror as an object that does exist in reality, we could look at ourselves being in a place distinct to our physical position, returning the gaze. ‘I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am’ (1986 [1967]: 4); the matter of heterotopia. Through its subversive style and narrative strategies, as well as through its genre-defying spatiotemporal construction, Evangelia Kraniotis’s film, similarly, reorganizes, challenges, and disrupts the traditional heteropatriarchal cinematic gaze, it reframes the canonical representation of difference on screen. Muniz’s piercing gaze haunts the viewer beyond the space of the auditorium, her body stimulating our fear, desire and identification, her voice seducing us as if it were some sort of primordial song sung by ancient Sirens, awoken again in post-modernity to recuperate their bodies, their stolen, abused, or forsaken bodies by millennia-old heteropatriarchal regimes of oppression.

But, just like Foucault’s mirror, *Obscuro Baroco* is also utopic, a queer aesthetic utopia, to borrow from another thinker, that is Jose-Esteban Munoz. A utopia in the sense of exuding a surplus of both affect and meaning, the ‘anticipatory illumination of art’; an exhilaration in which one glimpses the

potential of a restructured society, an opening, which though it might possibly engender disappointment, is 'indispensable to the act of imagining transformation' (2009: 9). Past the demonstrations, the parade, the dances in the dark corners of a street or a queer club, past the melancholic clown and the torrential rain over the greenery, Muniz's own real and imaginary transformations are finally summed-up in a laid-back lip-synching of the classic song *La Vie en Rose*. With perfect make-up, Muniz leans against an armchair, contemplating while the song is playing in the background. Right before the end, she turns to the camera and smiles cheekily; she wonders whether there could ever be a life in roses.

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