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VOYAGE TO ANOTHER CITY

by

Michael Robert Alves De Lima

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

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PERMISSION STATEMENT

Title of Thesis: VOYAGE TO ANOTHER CITY

I, Michael Robert Alves De Lima, prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction is made. I can be reached at the following address:

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Finally I would like to thank the CAPES Institution which gave me the grant that made my participation in this program possible.

INTRODUCTION

This Thesis Report describes some of the motivations and problems involved in putting together the audio visual slide presentation "Voyage to Another City". The overall description will follow the events in their chronological order:

- The original ideas
- The narrative/ photographing
- Sequencing
- The audio visual
- Copying
- The sound track
- Synchronization
- Conclusions

THE ORIGINAL IDEAS

It soon became clear to me that in the past two years most of my concerns were with being in a country other than my own. This permanent state of estrangement would have a definite presence in my work.

The initial problem consisted of representing this

condition. Several ideas came together to form the final narrative. Although they are presented here in order they should be understood as occurring simultaneously and in constant interaction with one another.

1- First there were a series of photographs I had made of a political rally in Brazil. The role I wanted to assign to them was to create a feeling of estrangement in the audience that could be equivalent to mine. These photographs were supposed to create a sharp cultural contrast, break the sense of place, language and people of whatever photographs I would come to make in the United States.

Beyond this immediate effect there was the significance of the Brazilian photographs to me. In mid-June 1984 when this rally occurred the cause the people were fighting for had already been aborted. The struggle for direct elections for the presidency had been betrayed by the token opposition to the military government. Defeat was in the air, although it was not yet a public fact. Within days of the rally the representatives were to vote in congress to determine whether there should be free elections or if the presidential succession would be decided by an electoral college.

The immediate implications of having an electoral college elect the president were that it could be easily corrupted or intimidated as it had been in the past twenty years of military rule. The more profound implications were with the legitimacy of a president elected by a selected

minority. In whose name would this person make his decisions? Whose interests would he represent?

To make a long story short, the conciliation of the elites, as it was known, was victorious. A transition candidate was created as a smokescreen, and the people were once again excluded from the process. The electoral college remained.

I originally wanted my photographs to reveal the tension of a last struggle for a lost cause. But here in another context this would be impossible, as the audience would have no reference to the original event. The meaning of the photographs would therefore have to change from representing a specific event to providing a more generic characterization of a rally. Perhaps this change would be the ultimate treason to those in the rally; beyond having their political rights stolen they were now to have their representation manipulated.

2- The second body of ideas I wanted to utilise derived from the literary notion of the voyage genre, in which a narrator presents a series of episodes along a particular path in order to make some statement about his time.

Two films and one book of this genre played an important role in structuring my narrative. "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" by Werner Herzog (1) is about a Spanish conquistador who goes mad while searching for the Mythical city of Eldorado, in the midst of the Amazon jungle. As Aguirre goes deeper

into the forest, his European standards and customs seem more and more useless to solve the problems he encounters. Even Aguirre's ambition of creating an independent empire is totally misplaced and transforms the whole enterprise into a massive disaster.

The second film is "Apocalypse Now" by Francis Ford Coppola. (2) Although apparently different from "Aguirre...", it has the same basic structure of Aguirre's voyage on the river with episodes in which the conflicts of Coppola's protagonist reveal a broader cultural rupture.

Finally there is "Gulliver's Travels" by Jonathan Swift. (3) Its narrative technique has the form of an inventory of other cultures and at the same time a constant conflict with them.

What I wanted from these stories was their narrative structure: an itinerary, a series of episodes, and the cultural conflict as a source of political reflection. In essence, I saw my condition to be equivalent to that of the central characters of these narratives. I wanted to explore the genre on my own terms.

3- The third source of ideas was the urban environment. I wanted in some way to compare my city, Sao Paulo, to Rochester. I had no pictures of Sao Paulo, however, except for the ones of the rally. Since the specific nature of the rally had been sacrificed, I decided to do the same with the city. Instead of using Rochester for its specific

characteristics I used it as a representation of the city in general.

I also knew that a study of the city in all its multiplicity was outside the scope of my project. I therefore decided to concentrate on the urban spaces of public use. This would relate to the rally, which is ultimately the political appropriation of public space.

THE NARRATIVE / PHOTOGRAPHING

With the three elements mentioned above - the rally, the voyage and the city - I decided to work simultaneously on the narrative and the transformation of my ideas into pictures. With the narrative I tried to establish a sequence of events. I chose the Genessee river to be the backbone of the narrative. The reasons for this choice were based on the films mentioned earlier. This would be the line upon which I would situate my events.

At the same time I began photographing. I would have liked to have scripted the work. I did not though, for fear that this literary form would absorb too much time and force me to sacrifice an inherently intuitive and visual development.

I began photographing an old railway bridge and the environment surrounding the river, hoping that this would

suggest the sense of arrival at another culture. Since I was to encounter civilization, I decided that I had to arrive from some primitive environment; my intention being to put myself and consequently my audience into the position of an explorer or discoverer. The representation of the primitive environment would be made with photographs of whatever had the appearance of untouched nature. These pictures were made in parks around Rochester.

During my drives in the country, the untended corn fields and deteriorating old barns came to fascinate me. These were evidence of a wider problem facing the small farmers; gradually I discovered that with the growth of industrialized agriculture the smaller farmers were being driven out of business. I decided to address these issues by juxtaposing photographs of the corn fields and barns with harvesting instruments in an attempt to create an ironic relationship between abundance and waste.

The narrative was beginning to take shape - at least its initial portion. The audience would come through the jungle to a river and would follow its path, later encountering the cultivated land. They would then arrive at the city.

SEQUENCING

I made 5x7 inch work prints from all my negatives and

arranged them in categories such as jungle, train, river, corn, city and rally. Each of these categories were then subdivided according to their intended role in the narrative.

I decided to sequence the images in a way that would break down these rigid categories. Several possibilities were discussed with my board members and friends. Two basic strategies became apparent: one which could be called 'harmonious' and the other, 'dissonant'. The first stressed the linearity of the narrative and preserved to a great extent the original categorization of the pictures. The second tended to disrupt these categories and created a greater sense of simultaneity.

The risk in adopting the first possibility was the eventual predictability of the narrative. The second, although strengthened by the possibility of fortuitous relationships, ran the risk of being sufficiently confusing that the narrative structure and sense of emotional build-up would be lost.

The solution that I finally adopted was to preserve the basic voyage/narrative structure, but to break the linearity as much as possible within each of the major portions. In the overall sequencing, the first half presented no major problems. I had, however, decided to place the Brazillian rally photographs at the end of the narrative and it was in the portion between the city (Rochester) and the rally that the sequencing became difficult. The reason for this was

that I wanted the narrative to make a logical statement in the following sense: if it was the nature of society that had been presented up to the introduction of the rally, then the rally (or what it stood for, the politicization of the people) had to appear as a plausible outcome of events.

I had tried to present the image of society divided in classes through a metaphor - the physical image of the city. The contrast between the contemporary architecture and the older, abandoned parts of the city appears to me as a metaphor for the fact that our social system reduces to a wasteland everything it touches. The beautiful edifice exists as a facade hiding a society based on the exploitation of man by man. The way in which our system uses up the strength and intelligence of its people during the best years of their lives and then abandons them is equivalent for me to the wasteland which surrounds modern architecture. It is the physical manifestation of oppression. I deliberately chose the metaphorical approach because I did not want to present a factual report of the situation. This would have involved a form and type of research which would be far removed from my original intentions.

I tried originally to sequence the work without including people but the sequence of buildings and artifacts looked too formal. As the images acted one upon another, what prevailed was a feeling of architectural beauty and the nostalgic qualities of the more run-down buildings.

The solution, after several variations and discussions, was to include an occasional image of the people of down-town Rochester. Luckily it was possible to photograph them in a way that retained the symbolic character of the imagery. I tried to avoid photographing the people as individuals, but rather concentrated on their social role or activity. This was done by relating them to their space and to artifacts such as bicycles, canes, crutches, etc. These photographs created the link between the metaphor of the city and that of the rally.

I should point out at this stage that this is a rationalization. and that the exact significance of this visual passage is still ambiguous to me. A good deal of the audience response after the RIT Gallery screening indicated that the contrast between my culture and that of the USA had been communicated. The notion of politicization as a response to oppression was apparently perceived less clearly.

THE AUDIO VISUAL

The reason I chose the format of an audio visual presentation has several origins, three of which are discussed here.

1- First of all there is my dissatisfaction with the

traditional gallery exhibition. It is almost impossible to direct the viewers' attention to a specific point of view in this environment. The complexity and articulation of the photographic narrative is always subordinate to the limits of the gallery. The potential of a visual narrative in this context is always very limited.

The one circumstance in which this judgement may not hold is when an installation modifies the gallery space. But even here there are two possible dangers: the installation apparatus overwhelms the photographs, and photographic quality is diminished due to the degree of enlargement.

2- The second reason for the choice of the audio visual were two presentations I had seen in Brazil; one by Miguel Rio Branco and the other by Antonio Saggese.

Miguel's was an outstanding show about a prostitution district in Salvador, Bahia. Saggese's show was on a coal mining town in the state of Santa Catarina. In both these works an even balance between the individual image, the sequence and the sound track was achieved, creating strong critical statements.

What most attracted me to these works were the total absence of the standard audio visual gimmicks - such as multiple screen, animation, etc., which attempt to turn the audio visual into film, and into an alternative presentation of the photographers work.

3- The third issue was that of cost. The possibilities

of the moving image are evidently richer than those of the audio visual sequence. Film or video tape require production considerations and a crew - which was not available.

COPYING

The decision on the format of the show was a consequence of aesthetical as well as practical considerations. First came the choice between black and white or color. The rally photographs were in black and white, and that in itself was a strong factor for consistency. I had earlier considered color but I have always had a certain difficulty in relating color to a more dramatic effect. Photography always beautifies its object, and with color this effect is greatly enhanced. Furthermore, when photographing colors the first consideration is to place them in a significant relationship. If one is photographing on the street in an uncontrolled environment, there is a strong possibility of unfortunate color relationships that overpower other elements in the picture. What made me finally decide in favor of black and white was not totally intellectual, however. I just felt that my idea demanded black and white.

The rally photographs were shot on Tri-X with an exposure index of 1600. This choice was made because the rally began late in the afternoon and continued well into the

night, and I wanted to shoot hand held at a reasonable speed. The film was developed in D-76 diluted 1:1 for twice the nominal time.

The Rochester photographs were shot on Ilford FP4 (125 ISO) and developed in D-76 diluted 1:3 according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The reasons for this choice of film were purely subjective; I had used the film many times before, knew what to expect from it and liked the results.

The projection film was chosen to be Kodak Fine Grain Release Positive. (4) In simple terms this film works like printing paper, with one significant advantage. It is capable of reproducing a far greater density range than paper. While paper is capable of (at the most) a maximum density of 1.9 on an unferrotyped glossy paper, the maximum density of release positive film can be above 2.7 . This makes possible an image of a subject with much higher luminance ratios.

Besides these qualities the shape of the characteristic curve of release positive film makes it possible to achieve much greater separation in both the highlights and the shadows. Ideally, the positive image should be viewed on a backlit illuminator.

In the projected form as I finally used it, some of the quality is lost. The poor resolution of the projector lens, its chromatic aberration and the flare produced by scattered

light reflected from the projection screen all contributed to a considerable loss in image quality. Even in these circumstances, the image remained amazingly brilliant when projected to a size of 1.4x2.1 metres in the RIT Photo Gallery. The overall impression of the audience was very positive and the substantial loss of detail did not detract too significantly from the overall result.

The ideal way to reproduce the negative would have been by contact exposure with the release positive film. Unfortunately, the high static electricity in winter made keeping the contact printer sufficiently clean virtually impossible.

Instead, the positives were made on a hand-made duplicating device lent to me by Prof. Andrew Davidhazy. The standard exposure was set to one flash burst at f8, with the nominal intensity of the flash reduced by neutral density filters. To ensure a correctly exposed positive, I devised a way of bracketing the shots with the use of .10 ND filters. I used successive exposures of:

- two flash bursts
- two flash bursts minus .10 ND
- two flash bursts minus .20 ND
- one flash burst
- one flash burst minus .10 ND
- one flash burst minus .20 ND

The neutral density filters were always placed outside the path of the image forming light rays, that is, between the light source and the negative being copied. As I gained familiarity with the method, the bracketing was reduced to at most three exposures. In most cases, the final choice had been given one flash burst at f8; in a few other cases, a positive that had received two flash bursts minus .20 ND was chosen.

The development of the Release Positive Film was done according to the manufacturer's specifications. Unlike photographic paper, contrast can be affected by development, making this film ideal for reproducing the negative. My development times seldom varied after the compensating exposures described above. Each roll of film processed was projected and compared to the previous ones, adjusting the slides to a compatible standard. The process was tedious but the results were gratifying.

THE SOUND TRACK

Right from the start I knew I wanted to use Brazilian music. It would enhance the estrangement effect previously mentioned. I wanted to avoid lyrics, since I thought they might be too distracting. I wanted something that would flow and at the same time be slightly strange. Unfortunately my

choice was limited, as I could not find much Brazilian music in the United States. Luckily I met another Brazilian who had been living in the United States for several years, and who had had time to collect several tapes. I tested numerous combinations of images and sound with the aid of his tape library, and finally made a choice of two composers and one musician.

The music of Egberto Gismonti is a blend of classical, folklore and jazz. The first and last musical excerpts in the audio visual are his compositions, and all four musical scores are performed by him. The second and third pieces are by Heitor Villa Lobos.

Heitor Villa Lobos was a participant of the modernist group which took part in the 'Week of Modern Art of 1922". This movement was a rupture with the institutionalized forms of art of the period. In many ways this movement corresponds ideologically to the urge for industrialization and the rupture with the bindings of society dominated by the land owners.

The influence of this movement was so extensive that from it stemmed the Brazilian fascist party, the 'Integralistas', and the overall concepts that direct the Ministry of Culture, especially in the fields concerned with preservation of historical patrimony. On the other hand, the 'week of 22' has also been a source of inspiration for many avant garde movements such as the 'Tropicalist Movement' of

the late sixties.

Villa Lobos' role should probably be considered less radical than the above-mentioned movements. Much of his work was based on the re-orchestration of popular themes, and although his music is modern and influential it can hardly be called avant garde. Some of his pieces are popular; for example, the Prelude to the Fifth Bachiana was even recorded by Joan Baez in the late sixties. Gismonti is an heir of Villa Lobos. Their compositional strategy is similar, employing popular themes, classical training, and embracing a mild flirtation with the avant garde.

The first piece of music that appears on the sound track was Gismonti's composition "Don Quixote", performed by himself and Nana Vasconcellos. (5) The guttural sounds and the subsequent piano melody seemed to match the jungle, the water, and the voyage itself.

The second piece, by Villa Lobos, "Prelude to the Fourth Bachiana", (6) is introduced as we arrive at the city. The whistle-like sound is there to induce the sense of one who wanders through it. I also thought the music might invoke a feeling of the discrepancy between the scale of the city and that of the individual.

In the third piece, "Pobre Cega", also by Villa Lobos, (7) the repetitive cadence alludes to oppression; to, for instance, the repetitive tasks of labor. In a broader sense I believed the music was related to a sense of repeated

frustration - like looking in a store window and seeing a model one can never hope to emulate.

The fourth piece, "Em Familia", by Gismonti (8) relates to the intense feeling of one who is in the midst of the rally. The desire to destroy the source of oppression is in conflict with whatever one has to lose; the fear of the unknown, or the partnership with chaos. I also wanted a sense of tragedy, the struggle for a lost cause.

SYNCHRONIZATION

The music and the images came together simultaneously. After I had a substantial number of slides I began projecting them to the music I had. This went on until I became familiar with the relationship between the sound and the image. The kind of relationship I established in the beginning was one of the general mood. As the process developed and the slides were shifted towards their final positions, certain images became associated with particular portions of the soundtrack. When it became clear how the slides and the music would fit, I had the sound track recorded. The slides were then cued to the tape with the aid of a Wollensack recorder and a Micro-Diamond dissolve unit.

During the above process, I began to debate whether I should instead have planned the overall slide presentation

first and then found a sound track to match. The problem here was equivalent to the one of scripting. I was used to the sound track by this stage, and was afraid there would not be enough time to change to any other. Prof. Charles Werberig, who had raised the above issue, also lent me a tape of music by Luciano Berio. This music was a lot less melodic or harmonious, and presented a real temptation to change the entire sound track and possibly much of the audio visual. Time was by this stage a serious limitation, as all changes would have to be completed within two weeks, and so this possibility was abandoned.

At this stage the limitations of a personal project like this became very clear. Had it been possible to work full time with someone responsible for musical research or with someone strictly responsible for the editing, many of the flaws or shortcomings that now haunt me would have been overcome.

CONCLUSIONS

When I set out to do the audio visual "Voyage to another city" I wanted to make a statement strictly on visual terms. In this sense no written statement was issued at the public screening. I chose to do this also because I had attended many thesis sharings dominated by discussion of the statement

and where the work itself had been totally ignored.

This written report is not a justification or an explanation of my work. It is intended to have a didactic function, to be useful to anyone attempting something along the same lines. Going from my initial ideas and motivations through some of the technical problems and the development of my narrative I have tried to reveal what went into the making of the final product. The audio visual differs substantially from my initial ideas - which is a normal occurrence in the development of a narrative. Photographs made with less certainty of intent replaced others originally made much more deliberately. Juxtapositions created new and multiple meanings and images.

Finally I would like to make clear that the audio visual is a limited medium. It does not have the capabilities of film or video tape, and its use served a specific purpose as a dramatic sequencing device. It thereby overcame the dissipating effect of the gallery environment by concentrating the audience's attention and was a lot more economical than any other medium designed for a similar purpose.

NOTES

- 1- Herzog, Werner. Aguirre, The Wrath of God,
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- 2- Coppola, Francis Ford. Apocalypse Now,
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- 3- Swift, Jonathan. Gulliver's Travels,
Bantam Books Inc., NY, USA, c.1971.
- 4- Stroebel, Leslie; Compton, John; Current, Ira;
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- 5- Gismonti, Egberto; Vasconcelos, Nana. Don Quixote
in Duas Vozes, ECM Records GMBH, USA, 1984,
side 2, track 3.
- 6- Villa Lobos, Heitor. Preludio: Bachiana No 4
in Gismonti, Egberto: Trem Fantasma, EMI-ODEON,
Brazil, 1985, side 2, track 4.
- 7- Villa Lobos, Heitor; Moreira, Alvaro. Pobre Cega
in Gismonti, Egberto: Trem Fantasma, EMI-ODEON,
Brazil, 1985, side 2, track 5.
- 8- Gismonti, Egberto. Em Familia in Em Familia,
EMI-ODEON, Brazil 1981, side 1, track 3.

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in Camera, 59th year, September 1980, no 9.
(Copyright 1980 by C. J. Bucher Ltd.).

APPENDIX A

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this work is to put out photographs in sequence. The intent is to produce a narrative voyage. This narrative will be based on my condition as a stranger in the United States. Without necessarily being an account of my circumstance, the work will therefore lie between fact and fiction.

Background

For reasons I do not fully understand I have always been fascinated by storytelling. Grandparents' adventures, and tales, and sitting around a radio before television, long conversations during adolescence about the meaning of life, all set up a universe of narrative that lies between fact and fiction. This twilight zone is not the world of logic, but a world of expectation. The only response being another tale.

My bachelor degree is in architecture. Having lived in a major capital of the world with a population of over ten million people, poses some essential, elementary questions:

Why do these people come here?

Why do they build, destroy, and rebuild this
living artifact?

What is the nature of this human magnet?

What is this obscure object of desire?

I do not intend to answer any of these questions, but ask them again, point the camera at things asking how, when, where, who, what or why?

I have also worked in the last eight years with the photographic collections of the Department of Historical Heritage of the city of Sao Paulo. This experience has led me to believe that photographers, knowingly or not, make statements about their subject matter. Whenever photographers organize their work by sequencing or editing these collections, they direct the viewers' attention and present organized views of the world.

The struggle for autonomous statement in photography is not new. The Comparative Album of the City of Sao Paulo, by Militado De Azevedo, made between 1860 and 1880, was an attempt to understand the city photographically. By sequencing his photographs according to the urban pattern, and intersecting images of the 1860's and 1880's, Militao was able to create a narrative which involved time and space simultaneously.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, William Gaensly released a series of approximately fifty collotypes which linked railroad, coffee, and the city into an unequivocal portrait of Sao Paulo in the period.

More well known internationally, Eugene Atget, Eugene Smith, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Christer Stromholm, amongst many others, contribute to this trend. Each one has in his own way attempted to articulate still photographs to convey meaning.

Presentation

The final presentation will be an audio visual presentation with two projectors controlled by a sound track that will be released in the spring of 1987.

APPENDIX B

see attached slide set.

APPENDIX C

see attached video cassette.

1



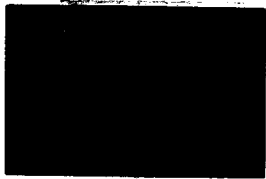
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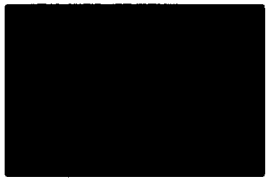
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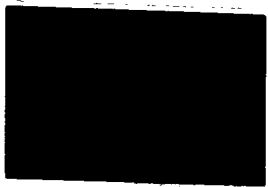
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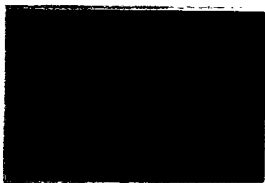
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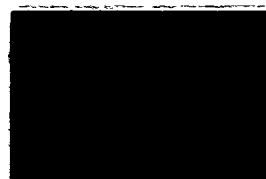
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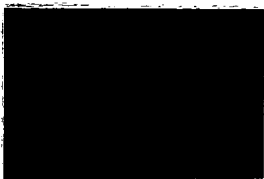
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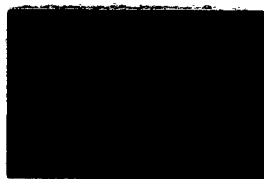
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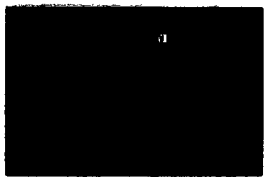
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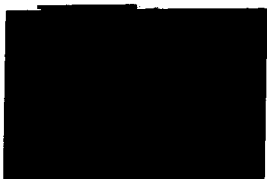
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