A RIP IN TIME:

Crime and Poetry in *Malunguinho*

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When poet Miró da Muribeca's voice-over opens the short film *Malunguinho* (directed by Felipe Peres Calheiros and screened at the Rio International Film Festival in 2013), declaring that, for once, the film title will not be a written one, and the screen will remain black, the spectator is met with a layered justification for this: the usual owners of letters and histories have reduced the trajectory of black people to criminal records. The narrator goes on to state, however, that orality has resisted, inflicted a rip in time ("rasgar o tempo"), and keeps confronting the official histories surrounding the death of Malunguinho. It is precisely this audiovisual device (sound against image, visuals contradicting the written truths) and its original, postmodern quality that Miró reveals in the first minutes of the film. Disputing the deep-seated and one-sided details behind the killing of a 19th-century black leader, the film proposes a different temporality for Malunguinho's story. Instead of a figure that was merely defiant to the Portuguese Crown and which fell in combat, he persists as a worshipped, symbolic figure. A presence in contemporary religious practices (namely the "Jurema Sagrada") in the Brazilian Northeast (where the film was conceived and shot), Malunguinho crosses two realms that constantly clash in Brazilian society: an institutional, militarised, written experience of history, rooted in colonisation and slavery; and a poetic, spiritual, musical, affective way of living that has stood the test of time in other ways. Here I will briefly explore how Peres Calheiros aesthetically invites us to travel to a paradoxical past-present time, where "slaughter and persecution" still haunt the lives of Malunguinho's descendants, but where poetry and rituals also provide a necessary outlet for a violent history.

Into the woods of present-day cities Camaragibe and Paudalho, in the state of Pernambuco, the film shows a black woman looking around, seemingly lost. She listens to the forest's sounds, as if searching for guidance. The choice for this particular setting evinces the film's fascination with a certain presence. According to historian Marcus Carvalho (1991), it was in similar sites in the suburbs of Recife that leaders from *quilombos* (resistance settlements founded by people of African descent) popularised the name Malunguinho. Probably combining identities of different men who fought against the destruction of quilombos by the Monarchy, this name gained recognition across the states of Brazil and inside communities. The official records, retrieved from Pernambuco's public archive and read out aloud by Miró da Muribeca, come in only after a striking fire scene. Illegal burning in cane fields is still prevalent in Brazil, and the film suggests a sensorial opening to understanding the role of nature within this universe. Quilombos were known to be self-sufficient communities: Jurema

is a plant-extracted beverage, and the wilderness represented refuge and ways to deceive the enemies in those times. *Estrepes* (a form of caltrops) would have been one of Malunguinho's strategies to protect the quilombolas. To this day, Jurema's practitioners sing the verses: "Malunguinho, tira as estrepes do caminho" ("Malunguinho, take the caltrops out of the way"). Dating from 1829, the first criminal files relate a shocking plea for annihilating the blacks that had fought back against the military, calling them cannibals. What we see, however, is a muted glimpse of a Jurema ritual (clapping and dancing in different, yellow-lit perspectives) in a gut-wrenching contrast – in regimes of visual truth, but in accordance with an informational tradition, what should we believe in? The director saves the music for a more impactful moment later on, but in setting the tension between State facts and popular practices through the juxtaposition of image and sound, he evokes the conflicted existence of the film's protagonist.

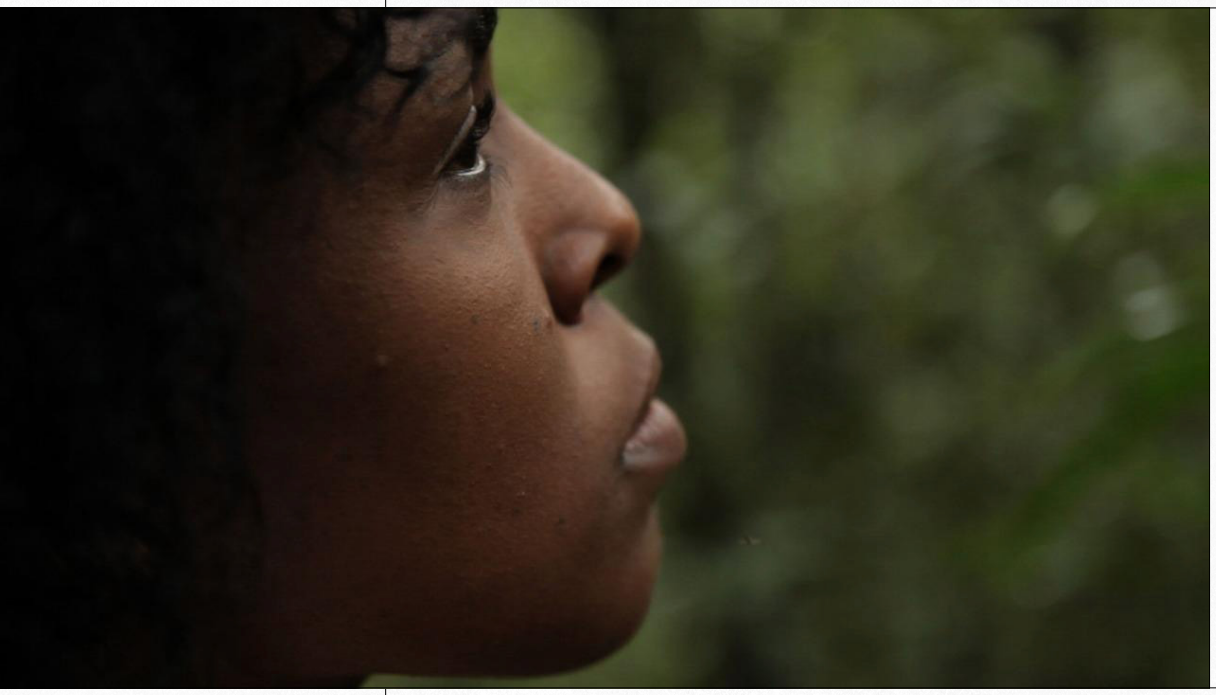

Fig. 1 - Still taken from *Malunguinho* by Peres Calheiros: the woman, into the woods, mystified by a certain presence. © Felipe Peres Calheiro.

At daylight, a black man chops a tree, in a reimagining of Malunguinho's historical period (as we glean from his and the previous woman's costumes). Distinctively, the camera's perspective shakes with each blow of the axe, and the echoing sounds in the background slowly fade into the forest's hum – a somehow delicate transition that touches on the temporal ruptures that Miró da Muribeca wrote about. This serves to introduce a non-verbal, minimalistic

portrayal of the woman we have seen earlier, running away from the sound of trotting horses and the silhouettes of armed men as night falls. The film's climax builds over distorted music that grows in unison with a huge and beautiful smoke column. Miró da Muribeca then reads another appeal to an authority referred to as "Your Honour" to ambush and exterminate the "evil" blacks. This appear was written in 1835, which is possibly the date when the last main Malunguinho leader was killed. Now the music from the Jurema celebration in present time has almost taken over, as the silhouettes of Malunguinho's followers tremble on the wall. This game of revealing and concealing the characters' identities is first linked to the lack of historical documentation, but stylistically it appeals to the senses, particularly when the percussion comes to rhyme with the plot suggested by the voice-over, combined with the runaway man and woman. Will they escape? Will Malunguinho take shape and intercede for them?

Fig. 2 - Still taken from *Malunguinho*. Led by soaring drums, the Malunguinho's followers perpetuate the traditions. © Filipe Peres Calheiros.

Interrupted by a shotgun sound, the sequence blends a rainfall stream with a close up of Miró da Muribeca's face in pain at night. The choice to identify the poet is crucial here, as his artistic expression becomes tied up in the percussion-led ritual: "Every day, by noon / Me, my mom and my cousin / Chew up Brazil's history / And become more cultured by the day / Marshals, generals were lost / Each one drowned in our teeth holes / Burning remembrances / At the four

table legs / Every day, by noon" ("Todos os dias, ao meio-dia / Eu, minha mãe, minha prima / Mastigamos a história do Brasil / E cada dia ficamos mais cultos / Perderam-se marechais, generais / Todos morreram afogados no buraco dos nossos dentes / Lembranças ardentes / Aos quatro pés da mesa / Todos os dias, ao meio-dia"). Together with the fire in the background and the rain that slowly ceases, giving way to the growing drums, a black man's legs standing up suggest some type of religious, Jurema-related embodiment. Miró's pungent and final verses are then succeeded by the fast-paced drums at a temple full of followers. Only in the last scene does the film reveal a strong black man with a torch in his hand, carefully walking into a pitch-dark forest and never facing the camera. Malunguinho has finally appeared, awakened not only by the cult, but also by a cinematographic process of bringing a story to life. When the poet's words associate the process of culture formation by a Brazilian history that is chewed up, torn with the teeth and violently swallowed, the use of the archives gains a different perspective. Miró is pointing to the powerfully sad persistence of a historical gap for a black family, one that widens the distance between subjective histories and the official one. The military ranks attest, without regret, to how Malunguinho's life achievements were recorded as threatening and monstrous acts.

Fig. 3 - Still taken from *Malunguinho* by Peres Calheiros: with the torch in hand, Malunguinho materialises, although briefly, the new archival readings.
© Felipe Peres Calheiros.

The rhythmic appearance of the title character needs no further voicing, since the Jurema drummers and chanters, in their spontaneous collective activity, challenge a tradition built upon the written word. Similarly, the poems that make up the film play with an uncertainty that is no less critical, insofar as its metaphors enhance the complexity of the *quilombolas* and their descendants. Rather than presenting a portrait as victims of an oppressed religious practice, the film decides to use its own metaphorical potentialities (bringing into existence shapes, forms and details such as fire, rain, darkness, brightness, chanting, breathlessness, chopping) as ways to reveal alternatives to a double-charged violence which extinguishes populations and the right to tell stories. Oral practices here take centre stage so we can see certain methods overlapping: the fictionalised scenes following the State archives take us to a chase in the woods. The documental sequences blend with the poet's creation. The shades in between fiction and documentary, history and art, somehow find an original place in restituting sounds and colours for *Malunguinho*. More than re-enacting a story that could only be faithful to the executioner's account, Peres Calheiros opts for a mysterious, if not disturbing imagining about it. A certain hybridisation, as García Canclini (2008) would put it, is at hand in *Malunguinho*. If staging the popular has been a particular trait of Latin American national projects, one might ask why Jurema rituals have been so under-represented in Brazilian artistic production so far, a situation that serves to demonstrate the effectiveness of hybridising cultural practices (poetry and archive, digital and performance) as a survival strategy in an environment that remains aggressive and exclusionary.

The association between literacy and modernisation (García Canclini, 2008) has been so fundamental in shaping Latin American cultures by the elites that the exclusivist written norm, still able to retell histories, is now perceived by some artists as a part of a critical process, a starting point to propose representative temporalities. It is through visibility, as García Canclini notes, that marginal sectors have been able to find new protagonists by staging what is popular. Arguably, what is performative in *Malunguinho*, retrieving oral and musical practices, also finds a cinematographic expression to give name, narrative and affect to Malunguinho's trajectory. However, it is thanks to its digital life on YouTube, where it was uploaded on 19 September 2015, that the film opens up to a very contemporary reception practice. The users' comments celebrate the making of the short, acknowledging the importance of the religious archiving implied in audiovisual form. A reception embedded in online networking makes for a truly hybrid experience, where sharing the video equals spreading the word about Jurema, thus incorporating a telling of history that is

accessible even in so-called illiterate contexts. Although a pedagogical facet is definitely in action, the film's subtleties, particularly the use of poetry, make for a more suggestive than prescriptive work of art. In any case, an overarching criticism to the written establishment is ever more coherent when the concept of spectatorship is also adapted to its time. The audiovisual extravaganza that is often taken as an opposition to literature and traditional assumptions of culture could very well give voice to expressions that cannot be contained in the written domains, as *Malunguinho* demonstrates.

Like the religion of Jurema itself, which syncretised indigenous and African practices, this film honours modes of re-signifying, mutating and tearing apart – something that theorists like Jesús Martín-Barbero and Diana Taylor spotted as possibilities in contemporary art to disrupt the idea of "art with a capital A". Taylor's work (2012) provides us with good examples on how Latin American performance, sometimes retrieving ancient practices from the native and those who later were forcedly brought to the Americas, deals authentically with the violence of late modernity. In that context, the Internet and new technological devices (Taylor, 2012, p. 98) have been tools of preference for many artists who contest and propose discussions about identity, space, time and body. In that sense, Martín-Barbero's essay on cultural mutations (2010) offers a possible reading on the political effects given an online film reception. The author writes:

> La relación del *arte* con las *tecnologías de la información señala* hoy no sólo un modo de divulgación o difusión de estilos y modas, de configuración de públicos y mercantilisación de formas, sino un espacio de tensiones fecundas entre residuos y emergencias, entre contemporaneidades y destiempos, un espacio de *desordenamiento cultural*. (Martín-Barbero, 2010, p. 21)

In a digital life following exhibition at festivals, Peres Calheiros' film operates in the aforementioned space of tensions, forging a new time of perception within and outside of fiction: the character that jumps through the centuries to contemporary Recife recalls the strict visibility of the documental life of Jurema, even nowadays, by hegemonic media corporations. Becoming a new item online, which refers to past events from the moment the video is uploaded, *Malunguinho* strives to create future connections, proposes orders and hyperlinks, and re-presents what it means to follow Malunguinho. Most of

the videos suggested after the film has played relate to the Jurema tradition, to religions of African descent, or to African music. If that is indicative of a certain persistence of marginalised cultures on the web, works such as *Malunguinho* definitely play a part in *rearranging* what is perceived as Brazilian culture. Moreover, the online environment, depite date-stamping the videos, establishes a space with a theoretically suspended hierarchy, depending on the way the user searches for information. That is not to say advertisement-led suggestions do not emphatically decide what is popular and what is not on YouTube, but the temporal process involved in the appreciation of a film is decisively different than the traditional, festival-theatre circuit. Especially considering the usual span of a short film, the projection it can experience after it is uploaded on the Google platform is immensely wider. Mutating in both form and content into an online art piece, this is what I describe as a process of coming up with notable rips in time. Nevertheless, let us not take this robust creative process as a self-assured solution to contemporary problems, nor as a cold poetic device to find beauty in persecution. Miró da Muribeca's poetry, though understood as the oldest of possibilities to resist, besides music and rituals, does not make the film any less dark, as the worrying situation of such religions both then and now attests, be it for issues of the right to the land of minorities, environmental crises, or plain normalisation of racism in Bolsonaro's Brazil. Serving as background or build-up, the documental fractions, the Jurema temple, and thus Malunguinho's heritage, seem alive for some brief fifteen minutes – the threat is felt, but what burns out, such as the torch's light that fades away, could be either the power of imagining, or the history that killed Malunguinho.

The process of "ripping time" that forms the basis of the perception of the historical character in *Malunguinho* deserves credit for its timeliness. If the political distress affecting minorities observed in recent times in Brazil is the basis of the film's critique, a proposition about time that mixes up a colonial register with popular intervention in the 21st century pierces both a black identity moulded by white perception and the latter's narrative devices, which remain in effect. Impacted by the compression in time described by Stuart Hall in *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1992), affected by globalisation and constituting a considerable blow to the modern and historicised subject and its institutions (such as Pernambuco's Public Archive), *Malunguinho* embraces the disorientating official records to rescue humane traditions that escape that logic. Repetition and persistence, as demonstrated in Miró's poem, and also by the actual documental footage showing the Jurema, render the archive as a contemporary experience – contesting causality by dislocating the characters

from its own time. This artistic endeavour crystallises what film historian and media archaeologist Thomas Elsaesser calls an important spatial turn in history, which directly affects narrative modes and how they are appropriated in postmodern cultures. A broader crisis in historicisation hints at how new (or should we say old?) practices gain prominence to tell modern-day stories. As Elsaesser recalls, the appropriation of archives proposes different logics for understanding the world:

> Along with song, poetry, and prayer, narrative has been mankind's privileged storage mode for some 5,000 years, modelling itself on the human experience of time as a succession in sequence, and thus following the logic of the "post-hoc ergo propter hoc", while taking as its dramatic arc (as well as its default value) the life cycle of beginning, middle, and end. But now that archival principles increasingly compete with narratives, other storage modes and methods of access and recall may arise that reduce narrative, also with respect to history, to one special instance of how to render the past both present and intelligible. (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 338)

The film's strong stance regarding the possibilities of history-making through knowledges related to "song, poetry and prayer" thus proves to be more than a response to archival limitation. Narrative and historical modes of telling – accounting for what happened to and who was Malunguinho – are the actual protagonists of Peres Calheiros' film, insofar as the leap of faith demonstrated by Malunguinho's believers is also related to alternatives to institutionalised readings of history. In order to transfer affects and anecdotes associated with the quilombos' resistance, religious chanting and ritual have cultivated this character's attributes that are still relevant to this day. They reinforce the way black peoples can find points of reference in the past, regroup, honour their ancestors, and deal with contemporary struggles. The corrosive poem, which stresses the wounds of slavery in Brazil, when narrated by the same voice who accused of bias in the official records, ensures that the associations between past and present will not go unnoticed when it comes to the suffering inflicted to Malunguinho. There is no sacred instance that simply overturns violence, Miró seems to indicate, but that cathartic effort (the huge fire followed by the rain exemplifies this) enables a critical and emotional response from the audience that would hardly be attainable through the reading of criminal files only.

Another dimension of the use of archives here questions the status of such documentation back in the 19th century: As complaints and exhortations to exterminate the quilombos, do the records promote, prevent, denounce, and revel in the narrated crimes? What Miró's voice-over indicates in a contemporary context is that a simple dislocation from spectatorship might very well create discomfort and detachment from the morality that normalised such writings, but that is not enough to create any real rupture in the racist structures observed in Brazil. As his verses show, the national history that has been shoved down people's throats not only persists, but pervades a spatial and familiar construction, by no stretch confined to history books, printed media and, of course, television. The association of crime and the black population has always been an issue in journalism, with vast news documentation in the post-abolition period in Brazil condoning the criminalisation of vagrancy and loitering for Brazilians of African descent. In the late 20th century, TV programs stole the spotlight to narrate, as spectacle, how crimes happened in the poorer areas of the cities, with ongoing resonance to this day. The relation between crime narratives and their time is subverted in *Malunguinho*, as the threats denounced in written form (accusing the victim!) give way to the retelling of the leader's killing. Without falling into the graphic or glorifying aesthetics to give an account about death, the filmmaker leaves the explicit horrors to the written files (which our imagination is able to capture with critical distance), while grading with sombre colours the possible emergence of new lives after Malunguinho's murder. As much as the short film documents (and this word retrieves the actual public archives) a crime, it purposefully strays away from the spectacle of violence so prevalent in "true crime", understanding well how cultural artifacts work as active, influential constituents of unequal societies.

The violent historicity the film invokes so frankly by the comparison between racist and anti-racist texts could only be transformed through a performative act that dealt with the temporal conundrum – criticising a past that has built a problematic present, and at the same time escaping it. This seeming paradox, or strange pairing of a past-present in aesthetic form, is typical of the art of poetry, as Octavio Paz once wrote:

> [The poem] is a complete world in itself, unique, archetypal time, which is no longer past or future but present. And this virtue of being present now forever, by means of which the poem escapes from succession and from history, binds it more inexorably to history. If it is present, it exists only in this here and

now of its presence among men. (Paz, 2009, p. 159)

In a complex composition that recuperates the theatrical experience, but now establishes a filmic archive, the scene in which Miró da Muribeca performs his heartfelt piece is the central point of the short film, less because it gives a *truer* account of Malunguinho, and more for its temporal mechanics that, like Paz posits, play with the presence of the written files while directing our attention to their fissures. As much as causality forms part of the discussion in Miró's poem, its internal logic is not as simple: the fire/water coupling ("drowned"/ "burning") disturbingly incorporates the authorities to the narrator's lost teeth, to his history, to his remembrances. Launching new pasts, as poetry has traditionally played with, the unequivocal instant in which Miró utters each word reminds us of the urgency of a spontaneous act. His impetuous persona does not sound like a document read out aloud, and that devilish machination is what the cinematic, performative archive makes possible before our eyes. Simultaneously plotted and unprompted, cinema has the capacity to discover ghosts while proving they are nothing but make-believe – such adoration for the ephemeral bonds with poetry quite beautifully. When the topic is historical in itself, the meta-play becomes even more evident and subject to the most creative transformations.

It is, indeed, the body-made-present as an act of re-signification of the black experience that three scenes, in particular, reveal as the film's most powerful proposition. Thanks to Miró's recitation, the short's attachment (even if critical) to historical formulation advances in unexpected ways. The unknown man's feet standing up, as well as the late apparition of the man with a torch in his hands, inheriting Malunguinho's boldness through the night, could only have happened after poetry and music, that is, after new modes of feeling history were accessed. Far from ignoring the not-so-well documented tragedies that have afflicted generations of black Brazilians, the film's structure engages in an "archival embodiment" that is neither a substitute for Brazilian documentation nor a festive explanation of alternative resistance. Short-lived like the fire burning behind Miró da Muribeca, like the melancholic rain that shows up for brief moments, the poet's personified words exist to reinvigorate the ritual, to bring Malunguinho to our screens, and are surely aware of its limitations, and of the long journey ahead of us, one that will truly change minds. Yet in no way does *Malunguinho* negate the historical potential to forge new realities. On two levels, the short film invokes the need to deepen our relations to Brazilian history: firstly by documenting cultural practices known to be at risk; and secondly by making its own audiovisual expression a critical

and sensorial counterpart to hard facts. Caught up in an apparent contradiction about the importance of recording the unrecordable and the perseverance of ancient performances, *Malunguinho* sets in motion a much-needed dialogue with the past: merely reconstructing what the archives tell would possibly affirm a timeline that becomes more and more unbearable. Thanks to the film's effort to surround official documents with oral traditions and practices, a mark of profound resilience is left imprinted in the spectator's mind. *Malunguinho's* killers, who have dictated how dreadful times should be subdued or swept under the rug, are barely in control of the narrative now. If anything, they have crossed centuries to attempt similar violent acts, denying the existence of *quilombolas*; but with the reframing of the tale of Malunguinho's murder, new horizons open. Issues concerning identity, compensation, preservation are suddenly revitalised on artistic and digital grounds. In a way, closer to how the mentioned practices have defied a marginalising conception of history, Peres Calheiros' film proves to be an essential, although distressing, archival envisioning, one to get a glimpse of who Malunguinho *is*, in all the presence this verb could possibly embody.

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