The work of Glauber Rocha

Film as Social Critique on Cinema

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a review of
Glauber Rocha, Ismail Xavier, editor; I.B. Tauris, 2019

The fiftieth anniversary of the global upheavals of 1968 has provoked a spate of books examining political cinema and its relationship to the era.

It's an almost frenzied demand to re-examine the camera as a weapon of rhetoric, and to grapple with cinema's apparent decline as a radical medium over the decades.

Ismail Xavier, editor of *On Cinema*, acknowledges as much in the introduction. He is elated that the long and arduous product of producing the first collection of Glauber Rocha's writings translated into English should coincide with the anniversary.

Rocha (1939–1981), a film director, actor and screenwriter, is regarded as the leader of Brazil's Cinema Novo movement, the country's most prominent theorist, and one of the towering figures of the tricontinental Third Cinema.

Rocha's films, such as "Black God, White Devil" (1964), are disorientating, violent, and deliberately imperfect works of frustrated poetry. They were accompanied by manifestos such as "An Aesthetics of Hunger" (1965) and "An Aesthetic of Dreams" (1971), which proved as influential as the films.

These two legendary works are included in this collection, along with a comprehensive survey of Rocha's other musings on politics and film. He is revealed as an incisive and querulous critic of his peers and industry.

Rocha's faults as a thinker do not shed new light on the traditional picture of the New Left. As an auteurist, he worships the "man of action" over the collective voice. As a revolutionary, he prefers the "new man" vanguardist embodied by his hero, Che Guevara, rather than democratic action. He is a male chauvinist and prone to grandiosity and bitter polemics.

In spite of this, there are innumerable flashes of liberating insight, exciting ruptures and contradictions, much like a Rocha film. His most powerful critiques are aimed at the film industry.

In "The Cinematographic Revolution" (1967), he savages the distribution process as the "pernicious point" of filmmaking in the capitalist world, particularly problematic for global markets that rely on "American money" to deliver their films and front financing costs with loans.

He urges filmmakers to become their own producers and distributors. He connects film's commercialization accurately to State censorship: "The State exercises on the product vigorous action…the predefined set of ideological guidelines," he writes.

Moreover, he sees the global reach of Hollywood as a pervasive propaganda machine that wedges filmmakers in the majority world between insidious imitation and the paternalism of the European art house.

The ambitious goal of these writings becomes clear: create a new cinema, built upon the foundations of scarcity, the creation of "sad, ugly…screaming films" made by the incomprehensible violence of hunger, and in turn provoking violence.

Hunger is a consistent theme, from films born from starvation and Hollywood films that "devour people's alienations," to his writing on Tropicalism and anthropophagic cinema, a cannibal cinema that ingests Brazil's complex culture.

The writings are presented chronologically. It's a compelling portrait of a filmmaker's unresolved contradictions, ideological dead-ends, and polemical exhaustion.

"The historical role of surrealism in the oppressed Hispano-American world was to be an instrument of thought in the path toward anarchic liberation, the only liberation possible," written in the dizzying buildup to his exile from Brazil in 1971 during the military dictatorship.

What if Rocha had embraced that anarchic surrealism, the trajectory seen in his best work, instead of insisting on the didactic-epic of his rigid Marxist-Leninist politics?

The reader of *Rocha* is left with the same questions as the audience of his bewildering films.

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