

Humberto Mauro's educational cinema: an analysis of the film *Cantos de Trabalho*^{1 2 3}

O cinema educativo de Humberto Mauro: análise do filme Cantos de Trabalho

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Abstract:

The film *Cantos de Trabalho* (“work songs”), from 1955, is one of the short films of the *Brasilianas* series directed by Humberto Mauro at the National Institute of Educational Cinema (Ince) between 1945 and 1956. Analyzing it within the theoretical assumptions of the Sociology of Art and Cinema, it was possible to establish relations between the visual construction and the values of that time, in which Brazil still sought its identity as a nation. In the film, populated by simple men and women, mostly Afro-descendants, it is possible to notice a nation being drawn, with a certain valorization of the patriarchal and slaver past.

Keywords: Educational cinema; Humberto Mauro (1897-1983); National Institute of Educational Cinema; nation; sociology of cinema.

¹ Funding: Fundo de Apoio ao Ensino, Pesquisa e Extensão (Faepex/Unicamp); Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (Fapesp).

² The author thanks Espaço da Escrita – Pró-Reitoria de Pesquisa – UNICAMP – for the language services provided.

³ References correction and bibliographic normalization services: Andressa Picosque (Tikinet)

Resumo:

O filme Cantos de Trabalho, de 1955, é um dos curtas-metragens da série Brasilianas, dirigida por Humberto Mauro no Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo (Ince) entre 1945 e 1956. Analisando-o segundo os pressupostos teóricos da Sociologia da Arte e do Cinema, foi possível estabelecer relações entre a construção visual e os valores da época, em que o Brasil ainda buscava sua identidade enquanto nação. No filme, povoado por homens e mulheres simples, na sua maioria afrodescendentes, é possível notar uma nação sendo desenhada, estando no passado patriarcal e escravista a sua principal referência.

Palavras-chave: *Cinema educativo, Humberto Mauro (1897-1983), Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo (Ince), nação, sociologia do cinema.*

The *Brasilianas* and the idea of nation

Since the end of the 19th century, an immense need to understand the country can be perceived in Brazil, to map its history, its roots. However, this trend began to gain more definite contours from the Modernism, in the 1920s, and in 1930 it gained support from the government. As Antonio Candido (1999) points out, at that time there was a great advance from the point of view of thought, accompanied by a politicization (left or right) of the intellectuals. It was in this movement that the studies on the country's past intensified, with development of research about black people, countryside populations, immigration, and the contact between cultures, from the application of modern currents of sociology and anthropology (Candido, 1999).

The book industry also gained great momentum, with the birth of collections specialized in Brazilian affairs, “at a time when the country seemed to feverishly analyze its spirit and its body, in rapid development, to get to know its true nature and trace the directions of its destiny” (Candido, 1999, p. 79). Among these collections was *Brasiliana*. According to Pedro Corrêa do Lago, four general categories define a collection of this type: works of art; books and printed material; manuscripts; and cartography (Lago, 2009). The first years of the 20th century were marked by such collections in several American countries, such as the United States, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, which, after the USA, was the country from the continent that formed

the largest number of significant collections on its national culture (Lago, 2009). This shows, especially from our Modernism, a need to collect knowledge about the country.⁴

According to Heloisa Pontes (1998), based on the observations by Antonio Candido, this need to systematize the knowledge about Brazil began in the 1870s, especially from the literature, which would be responsible for shaping the Brazilian thinking. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, the literature began to share its space with science, especially after the publication of the book *Os sertões*, by Euclides da Cunha, in 1902 (Bridges, 1998). For Antonio Candido (1999), Euclides based his book on the deterministic currents of the time, which considered that social groups were conditioned by the physical environment, and his writing transformed the scientific objectivity that intended to testify and denounce the army of Canudos, of 1897.

Over time, science became the space of legitimacy of this “national identity”, marked in Brazil by diversity. This scientific knowledge was responsible for seeking an element that was typical to help forge an image of the so-called “Brazilian Man”, something that, from an institutional point of view, initially competed to museums (Schwarcz, 2008).

In the early 20th century, much of the social thought developed from the search for the identity of the nation people wanted to build. The social science produced was abundant and materialized in several Brazilian studies, many of which helped to compose collections such as *Brasiliana*, founded in 1931 by Octalles Marcondes Ferreira, director and owner of Companhia Editora Nacional, and directed by Fernando de Azevedo, being “the largest editorial project aimed at gathering systematic knowledge about Brazil, still without equivalent in the history of the country’s edition” (Dutra, 2006, p. 301). The collection was one of the subseries of the Brazilian Pedagogical Library and contained 387 volumes, plus 26 of the so-called Large Format series and two of the Special Edition. Being one of the first manifestations of interest in national history after the Revolution of 1930 (Hallewell, 2005), the *Brasiliana* collection was born with the purpose of mapping the country with works that offered a “completeness of knowledge”, and, in such pretension, was well received by intellectuals and public figures (Dutra, 2006). In a

⁴ According to Marlyse Meyer (2001), from Modernism there is a kind of outbreak of searching for the national roots, especially between the 1930s and 1940s, when discoveries and rediscoveries multiplied. It is no coincidence that, in this period, 19th-century European travelers, such as the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848), begin to show great interest, from collectors and intellectuals but also from the editorial market (Trevisan, 2015).

period that was trying to forge a modern nation, a collection like this could provide broad knowledge about the country, with the ultimate goal of developing a national consciousness:

These various studies, legitimated by the convocation and seal of science, aim to disseminate a pattern of knowledge and understanding about Brazil, as well as accurate diagnoses about the Brazilian reality in those 30 years, to define a profile of nationality and support public policies projects. (Dutra, 2006, p. 308)

Certainly, this form of dissemination of knowledge (from verbal thought)⁵ is important and characteristic of a collective “way of life”, a “structure of sentiment” of a particular society (Williams, 2003). However, if the interest was to reach a greater number of people, so as to promote a sense of unity, i.e., to forge a nationalism, other strategies should be employed, such as cinema (in this case, a manifestation of plastic or visual thinking).⁶ It is at this point that we are interested in the film series *Brasilianas*, directed by Humberto Mauro between 1945 and 1956 in the National Institute of Educational Cinema (Ince). From the analysis of one of the films in this series, called the *Cantos de Trabalho* (1955) (“work songs”), this article shall discuss the role of educational cinema as one of the ways to construct the modern Brazilian nation, especially from the New State.

Methodological considerations

When studying the relationships between society and culture, it is possible to tread various paths, ranging from the analysis of the language of their objects to their reception or circulation. In a schematic way, it can be said that two theoretical-methodological positions delineate the approach of the objects of culture, especially the visual ones, and there may be several alternatives and combinations among them.

⁵ According to Vigotski (2008, p. 58), “we can imagine thought and language as two intersecting circles. At the overlapping regions, thought and language coincide, thus producing what is called verbal thought”.

⁶ The concept comes from Pierre Francastel (1993), for whom the work of visual or plastic art is expressed from specific codes that are irreducible to other languages. In this sense, “the work of art is not the double of any other form, whatever it may be, but, in fact, the product of one of the systems through which mankind conquers and communicates its wisdom at the same time that it carries out its works” (Francastel, 1993, p. 5). On the subject, see also Fabris (2003).

The first addresses them together, highlighting the common characteristics, emphasizing more the movements than the works themselves. In this conception, the analysis of cultural products, such as paintings, films or literary texts, is put aside in favor of an approach that considers only external aspects, which would explain their meanings (Menezes, 1997). In studies of this type, production, distribution and consumption are emphasized, and the works become only reflections of an external structure that determines them.⁷ According to Raymond Williams (2000), the idea of reflection in the analysis of culture presupposes that “the works of art directly incorporate the pre-existing social material” (p. 23), so that both its form and its content are presented as dependents of already known facts. Williams (2000), a Marxist author,⁸ criticizes this conception and proposes an approach of the “works of art for themselves”, which he understands as “a sociocultural category of the highest importance, therefore, however, it cannot be empirically presupposed” (p. 120).

This leads us to the discussion of the second possible way to approach images, which, according to Menezes (1997), does the opposite, placing the visual objects in the foreground during the investigation. In this approach, which aligns with the path that I shall tread in this article, cinema is no longer just a reflection of a more general structure and emerges as a fundamental point of sociological analysis. This way of working comes from the same referential of any study of the relations between culture and society, which cannot be limited to the investigation of cultural or artistic objects in themselves (as does Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-

⁷ The discussion of art as a reflection or spirit of an epoch is complex and full of nuances, and could not be deepened here. In a schematic way, we can say that it begins to be systematized in the 19th century from the studies by Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) and Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), in which the images were conceived as witnesses of the past and of the development of the human spirit. Thus, all art would be a “portrait” of its time (Burke, 2017). In the first half of the 20th century, authors of the institute created by Aby Warburg (1866-1929) developed systematic visual analysis methods that focused on themes and their meanings, in contrast to an analysis that was restricted to the artistic form (Burke, 2008). A synthesis of this methodology was published by one of the most important exponents of this institute, Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), in his work *Studies in Iconology*, of 1939 (Panofsky, 1986). In a Marxist tradition close to the conceptions of Georg Lukács (1885-1971), authors such as Frederick Antal (1887-1954) and Arnold Hauser (1892-1978) would also work with the idea of art as a reflection of society. Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001) presented a hard criticism to Hauser’s (1982) book, *The social history of literature and art*, saying that in it “all human activities are closely linked to each other and to economic facts, [and] the question of knowing which witness to invoke to write history must be left to the momentary preference of the historian” (Gombrich, 1999, p. 87). For a synthesis of the visual analysis methodology that goes from Warburg to Gombrich, see Ginzburg (2003).

⁸ However, it is necessary to make clear that Williams’ position is very particular in this sense, moving away, in a large extent, from the so-called “orthodox Marxism”. According to the author, the “Marxism” of which he is part is one that seeks to discover the connections between political and economic formations and cultural formations, but above all the “formations of feelings and relationships”, which allow to relearn the senses of the “real” (Williams, 1997, p. 133).

1945)),⁹ which does not mean, however, exclude them from the research. On the contrary, it seeks to signify the works from its analysis and interpretation as images (Menezes, 1997). This means understanding art as “an expression of something that is visual and, therefore, can only express itself *through* it” (Menezes, 1997, p. 19), considering that it reveals information otherwise inaccessible. The artistic object becomes, in this sense, a privileged way to understand certain aspects of the social world, but it is not disconnected from its roots. This perspective aligns with the assumptions of authors such as T. J. Clark, Raymond Williams, Pierre Francastel, John Berger, Peter Burke, Fredric Jameson, and many others. In Brazil, authors such as Antonio Candido, in the literature field, and Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, in the cinema, would be examples of critics who approach the relationship between culture and society in this dynamic way, valuing the works without forgetting the historical ground from which they emerge and in which they fight their symbolic struggles.¹⁰

An important step in this direction was given by Pierre Francastel (1900-1970), who creates, in France, the discipline Sociology of Art in the 1950s (Menezes, 2015). For this author, “only at the level of an in-depth analysis of the works it is possible to constitute a sociology of art” (Francastel, 1970, p. 15), being fundamental to refrain from conceiving the images as a reflection of the material world or the spirit of a time. Conceived in this way, art is not seen as the double of a given reality, but as part of a system whereby mankind communicates its wisdom (Francastel, 1993). In these terms, art informs “more about the ways of thinking of a social group than about the events and the material framework of the life of an artist and his environment” (Francastel, 1993, p. 17).

If Francastel proposes a method to address figurative objectives in general, Pierre Sorlin (1977) makes paradigmatic pathways emerge for the sociological analysis of films.¹¹ Like Francastel, Sorlin does not accept a filmic analysis that is limited to “revealing” elements of the social world that we would already know beforehand. For him, a film is not just a game of social

⁹ Wölfflin (1989) reads work of art in a strictly aesthetic way, giving the artistic styles and forms their own life, without any relation to the social environment. Therefore, the transformations in painting styles from the 15th to the 17th century are presented by the author from conceptual pairs (linear x pictorial, plane x depth etc.), which explain art as a natural evolution of the forms, unrelated to the social world. Due to this approach, Wölfflin is read as a positivist author (Holly, 1985).

¹⁰ The list of authors cited so far allows us to perceive, as Menezes (1997) points out, that regardless from where the most general theoretical assumptions come (Marx, Weber or Durkheim), “thinkers of all currents are found in the two analytical postures discussed here” (p. 17).

¹¹ Although even Francastel (1983, p. 172) problematizes, to a certain extent, the film analysis, from what he calls “*science filmologique*”.

forces that translates the conceptions of its filmmakers and which, by extension, would correspond to the social structures in which the film was produced (Sorlin, 1997). After all, if a film only reflects what is already supposed to be known about society, it is of little use (or no use at all) to analyze it.

Both Francastel and Sorlin conceive the visual material as a language that must be investigated in itself, moving away from the traps of conceiving it as a faithful representation of information that could be found elsewhere. Therefore, Humberto Mauro's film shall provide, here, the central bases for the problematization of educational cinema as an element of the construction of the Brazilian nation. However, it is certain that, if the images present this relative autonomy, we cannot be extreme and, in the form of a formalism in Wölfflin's style, ignore the social roots of the artistic production, especially because the film analyzed here was produced within an Institute fostered by the Brazilian government. This means we must broaden the debate centered on the dichotomy State/cinema, comanditary/artist, etc., common in interpretation studies on art and society – especially regarding productions of official character.¹² As Antonio Candido (2003) points out, the fact that an artist works with the public power does not necessarily mean that he identifies with the dominant ideologies and interests, nor that his work cannot oppose an oppressor regime. In these terms, the relationship between cinema and society must be problematized.

Therefore, before addressing the short film *Cantos de Trabalho*, I will indicate the political and institutional scenario that allowed its realization. To this end, it is essential to talk about Ince. After that, I will analyze the images created by Mauro, trying to understand to what extent they contribute to the visual construction of a nation.

Cinema, daily life, and knowledge

Ince emerged as part of a large project of creation of the modern Brazilian nation. The cinema was seen as a way to know, especially for the millions of people who did not know how to read, as testified by the speech of Getúlio Vargas to the Association of Cinematographic Producers:

¹² In this case, the main reference is Haskell (1997).

Therefore, cinema shall be the *book of luminous images*, in which our coastal and rural populations learn to love Brazil, adding confidence in the destinies of our Homeland. For the mass of illiterate, this will be the most perfect pedagogical discipline, easier and more impressive. For the literate, for those responsible for the success of our administration, it will be an admirable school. (cited by Schvarzman, 2004, p. 135)

Cinema and education, together, would attempt to bring knowledge to a greater number of people than that corresponding to the literate population. As Sheila Schvarzman (2004) points out, it was believed that education was the engine for transforming men, and cinema became, in this sense, a valuable instrument to act in an immense country like Brazil, full of illiterate individuals, and so distinct in geographic, cultural, and ethnic terms.

In Ince, the cinematographic production of scientific character (including, here, historical films)¹³ was immense, most produced by Humberto Mauro. According to Schvarzman (2004), science had a central place in the Institute, given its recognized importance in the construction of the nation. However, the *Brasilianas* series escapes a little of this scientific profile by bringing picturesque and informative images about customs in various regions of the country, having as guidance the creation of short films (at the time called “complement films”). However, if the films do not discuss science in the biological sense (as Mauro would, for example, in *Lição prática de taxidermia* (1936) (“practical lesson on taxidermy”) or *João de Barro* (1956)), they bring forth elements dear to the Brazilian social thought of the time, as the rural way of life, with emphasis on work, as well as the issue of progress. Thus, *Brasilianas* can be thought of as expressions of social thought, or, rather, as an aspect of social thought, presented in the form of images, sounds, informational charts, and narrations in voice over. Two fronts geared towards the same goal: to create an idea and a feeling of nation from an object of knowledge. Thus, we can say that these films are part of the Brazilian visual thought.¹⁴

¹³ Such as *O descobrimento do Brasil* (“the discovery of Brazil”), of 1937 (produced by the Instituto do Cacau da Bahia with the support of Ince), *Os bandeirantes* (“the explorers”), of 1940, or *O despertar da redentora* (“the awakening of the redeemer”), of 1942. For a sociological analysis of the first, see Trevisan (2016). For an in-depth historiographical analysis of *O descobrimento do Brasil* and *Os bandeirantes*, see Morettin (2013).

¹⁴ I return here to the concept created by Pierre Francastel (1993), which explains the plastic (or visual) thought as one of the ways through which man informs the universe about his values. As we investigate the cinema from this concept, we can affirm that “every filmmaker is a thinker, who thinks through the images he builds” (Menezes, 1996, p. 91). Thus, we can understand Humberto Mauro as an agent in the formation of Brazilian visual thinking when we conceive his filmic works as the result of an accumulation of knowledge and as proposals for reflection on a given social environment.

Brasilianas were released between 1945 and 1956, starting with the film *Chuíá chuíá e Casinha pequenina* and finishing with *Meus oito anos*, in a total of seven blocks of short films. It is a series in which images of the country, in the case, rural landscapes, are presented to the spectator, always with the soundtrack of a song that gives them rhythm and provokes some perceptions: in these landscapes,¹⁵ what we see is an ordinary country, inhabited by docile animals and picturesque nature, but not wild, which is controlled according to the will of man – in this case, also an ordinary man, figure of a rudimentary daily life.

One of the most striking characteristics of these films is the idea of day to day figuration, seeking to explain the Brazilian nationality from what would be its primordial elements. According to Agnes Heller (2004), daily life is not “out” of history, but in its “center” – it is the true substance of the social. Humberto Mauro, by giving visual materiality to this daily life, contributed to the construction of a certain image about the country – in this case, a prosaic image linked to traditional values, suggested by the life in the countryside. To look at simple or ordinary life, therefore, is to seek this substance from the social. When it appears in a film, it is about perceiving the relational systems (Sorlin, 1977) proposed by it and how it unfolds in analogies with social life, its values and ideologies. In the case of the short films of the *Brasilianas* series, we see the attempt to present several images that, together, would point to a unit: the figuration of the “Brazilian man”, as a strong and cunning character of daily life, the one who is responsible for the development, maintenance, and identity of the Brazilian nation. What can be perceived in most short films in the series is that this social type will be the black worker, who occupies the center of the analysis of short film no. 5 of the *Brasilianas* series, titled *Cantos de Trabalho* (1955).

¹⁵ According to Edgar Morin (2008), the task of landscapes in films is to express the states of the filmmakers’ souls.

The “Brazilian man” in *Cantos de Trabalho*

The short film on work songs is divided into three integrated parts, with “canto de pilão” (“pounder song”), “canto de barqueiro” (“boatman song”), and “canto de pedra” (“stone song”).¹⁶ All allude, as the title already suggests, to the world of work, in this case a rural world, highlighting the songs that give rhythm to the manual activities presented. In these films, Mauro presents workers in their chores, mostly black people, almost invariably happy in the execution of their tasks.

According to the *Enciclopédia da música brasileira* (“Encyclopedia of Brazilian Music”) (Marcondes, 1998), work songs were “tunes that accompanied the work, regulating and coordinating the movements of the body”. In Brazil, there is a great variety of them, “the majority referring to the colonial period, when the slave labor was widely employed in farming, mining, and cities” (pp. 149-150). Despite this kind of popular manifestation being, even in Mauro’s time, something rare, due to the process of modernization of rural life (Marcondes, 1998), the film informs that it was, at the time, something common in various parts of the country.¹⁷

Shortly after the title (*Cantos de trabalho*) and the information of the production team, to the sound of a music that will be the soundtrack of the first part of the film, a card appears, with a black background and white letters, containing the explanation of what is going to be presented: “Work songs is music to soften and brighten up manual tasks. Work songs – inspired by the task itself – exist throughout Brazil, and they are contain much of the most beautiful fragments of Brazilian folklore”.

Then, the music accelerates and a general plan appears, with a view of a farm at a high angle. It is a valley, an image present in all short films in the series. Then, in an American plane, a woman appears in a shed, with her back to the camera, working with a pounder. She is a black

¹⁶ The film can be watched online, in full, in the Banco de Conteúdos Culturais da Cinemateca Brasileira, available at <<http://www.bcc.org.br/filmes/443389>>.

¹⁷ Mauro did not appreciate the process of modernization of farms, and his affectivity was linked to the rural landscapes of his childhood (Gomes, 1974, p. 71).

young woman, wearing a plaid skirt and a white blouse.¹⁸ The title of this film sequence is presented on her, in white letters: “Pounder song – Central and Northeast Brazil”.

Other women can be perceived in that environment, but without the emphasis of this first, which then appears filmed from the bottom up, as if the camera were at the height of the pounder. From this angle, the woman seems giant, strong, concentrated in performing her task, while constantly singing a song that will impose a rhythm to the work. Despite the unsuccessful attempt to synchronize sound and image, we have a feeling of listening to that person singing: “So many people to eat, just I to beat”. In addition, interspersed plans between the woman’s face and the food (rice) that she is beating in the pounder are quite evident. The next plan opens with the same action, but now the product being beaten is the coffee. Before the girl leaves the scene, we have a close-up of her face, now serene, when a chorus chanting the same verses is introduced. The scenery is pleasant, despite the song suggesting a complaint about the precariousness of that condition.

In the next plan, another woman appears cooking something in a pan, but the game of light and shadow does not allow us to see her face. The internal, obscure, environment receives all its light on the left side, which will focus mainly on the pan. Without cuts, the camera descends so we see that it is on a wood stove. This is a typical farm scene, part of Mauro’s imaginary.¹⁹ Soon we can see what is being cooked: sweet rice. Thus, the film tries to show the path traversed by the grain until it becomes food, especially the human work necessary for it.

¹⁸ According to Costa (2015), the image of this woman, “a young black girl, with shaggy hair and body taken by sweat”, contrasts with the time’s ideal of film beauty, represented, for example, by Sandra Amaral, “with a white face colored by make up and encircled by carefully combed blond locks” (p. 22), in the film of Adhemar Gonzaga, *Carnaval em lá maior*, also of 1955. I agree with the idea of a contrast between the social types presented in both films, but the author may exaggerate a little in his analysis, because if the character of Mauro’s film does not have Sandra Amaral’s blond locks, she also does not have “shaggy” hair: her hairstyle is simple and consists of the hair being tied back, in a bun shape. Similarly, if your skin does not have Sandra’s “whiteness”, it is not taken by sweat. As Jean-Claude Carrière (1995) reminds us, the spectator plays an active role in watching a film, sometimes coming to see things that are not actually shown. He cites the example of the end of *Rosemary’s baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), in which many people claim to have seen a monstrous child, describing it in detail. This image, however, does not appear in the film: the perception went beyond and the spectator ended up seeing the invisible (Carrière, 1995). According to Francastel (1983), the imagination is fundamental to read the images we see. However, when analyzing them rigorously, we must make sure that we are starting from what is being shown, and not from what our imagination has led us to “see”.

¹⁹ Humberto Mauro was born in Volta Grande, state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, in 1897 and his childhood was marked by the rural environment. It can be said that his spirit was “sentimentally crystallized in the past” (Gomes, 1974, p. 73). This image ended up being his greatest legacy, especially for the culture of Minas Gerais. In the Memorial Minas Gerais Vale, in Belo Horizonte, there is an environment called “The farm of Minas Gerais” that brings elements of the interior of these properties from the 18th and 19th centuries, with references to the cinema of Humberto Mauro. In this space, it is also possible to watch some videos made by him, which refer to the rural world (“A fazenda mineira”, n.d.).

All in all, when the film shows the sweet in the cooking process, we no longer see the pan, but a smaller pot, with another shape.

The images shown are the prelude of a feast: intercalated plans between the making of sweet rice also show rolls being baked, when finally the sweet is distributed to various dishes. The coffee, which had appeared before, being beaten, now appears in its final product, the drink brewed and ready for consumption. The way the film suggests these processes of transforming raw material into consumable products is very interesting, all coming from human work. However, these are not the humans who will consume food in the film, but rather another social group, of whom we see only the hands. The table is sophisticated, with fine dishes and beautiful napkins. The nails of those who are eating appear to be painted with nail polish, which denotes that those are the mistresses of those working women. Therefore, in this first moment of the film, we were able to see the work of transforming grains into food for humans – in this case, of a higher social stratum.

In the sequence, what we see is corn being beaten by the pounder by the same young woman, who still sings her work song. The corn will become cornmeal, and we quickly know to whom this product is going, since a chicken is filmed next to its chicks. The act of scratching and pecking the floor suggests that they are already feeding on the fruit of the woman's work. What is most bizarre, however, is that the act of beating the cornmeal is only the beginning of a cycle, which does not end in the feeding of the animal, but again in human meals, given that in the next plane it is possible to see a roasted chicken on the table, being cut with cutlery.

It is very curious how Humberto Mauro tried to be didactic by demonstrating the transformation of nature from work, in the various stages until the raw material became food. It is worth noting that the work was performed by a black woman, built as a giant, strong, committed to work and cheerful during its execution.

The sequence, still in the block of the pounder song, shows three black men, wearing hats but shirtless, beating not food, but the earth, with bigger “punchers”. Filmed on *contre-plongée*, such as the girl from the previous sequence, they also look like giants. This angle positively favors the character of the film, enhancing his value, giving him a greater

importance.²⁰ However, as Schwarzman (2004) points out, this does not alter the fact that they remain obedient in their heavy physical work, which consists in shaping what nature has of sturdy, the stones, while gaining unity as a group. For the author, this docility accompanies the national character of the time, pointed by Fernando de Azevedo, in which suffering, resignation, tolerance, hospitality, and other feelings were valued.

From another angle of the camera, it is possible to perceive that there are four men, not only three, but this new character does not wear a hat. They also chant a work song:

And the pounder beats (aroeira)/ in the land of the weir (aroeira)/ put strength in the hand (aroeira)/ in the body health (aroeira)/ the sun goes burning (aroeira)/ this skin of ours (aroeira)/ and we sing (aroeira)/ and the earth suffers (aroeira).

The music, unlike that sung by the young woman of the initial sequence, is monotonous and somewhat melancholic.

In general terms, the theme resembles a social image known in Brazil, eternalized in one of the watercolors of Jean-Baptiste Debret, *Paveurs*, in which black men work in the city's pavement. In this watercolor of 1824 (*Paveurs*, 2017)²¹ the French painter presents urban slaves in the task of paving the city of Rio de Janeiro. Only the two men, who are in the foreground, use an instrument similar to what we see in the film, but the similarity in the theme approximates the two visual creations. It is worth remembering that Debret is in the context of a slavist country, while Mauro talks about the work of free men, even though his nostalgia sometimes confuse temporality a little. In the film, the frames oscillate between beating the earth, the face of the workers, their feet or their hands. Many images are shown at very close angle. We can see the sweat on their faces, and the actors, beautiful, now remember, more than the black men by Debret, the *Mestiço* of Candido Portinari (1934), which portrays the image, from the trunk upwards, of a black man, shirtless and with his arms crossed (“Mestiço”, 2017).

²⁰ The term “*plongée*” corresponds to the “high camera”, and “*contre-plongée*” to the “low camera”. The idea that these camera angles value or devalue the characters is a convention not always accepted (Xavier, 2008, p. 159, footnote 3), but very shared in the film studies.

²¹ The watercolor was the basis for the creation of the lithography that composes the second part of the Print 80, Plank 33, of the second volume of Debret's book *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, edited in 1835, titled *Scène de carnaval. Paveurs. Marchande d'atacaça* (“Digital collection”, n.d.). The most recent edition of Debret's book has a preface and was organized by Jacques Leenhardt and was edited in 2015 in Brazil (Debret, 2015).

The comparison may seem somewhat arbitrary, but it is possible to understand that in both works it is important to present the figure of the black man associating his great capacity for work with beauty, which is achieved by showing his tough musculature and the brightness of his skin in the sun. As Annateresa Fabris (1990) reminds us, the participation of Portinari in the Modernism of Rio de Janeiro, after 1930, was crucial to establish the figure of the black man as a constitutive element of nationality,²² and we used this to further the debate around the short films by Humberto Mauro.

Something recurring in these films is the attempt to combine what is said in the song verses with what the images show. Thus, when “put strength in the hand” is sung, the detail plan is in the hands. The same happens with “the sun goes on burning”, when the sky is highlighted. The close-up is an attempt to avoid ambiguity in the images shown, and, in the case of the face, show the subjectivity of the characters (Balázs, 2008) as if they suffer along with the earth that is being beaten. In the verse “and the earth suffers”, there is a close at the foot of one of the workers, which resemble the modernist feet painted by Portinari.²³

Thus, black people, as they are presented by Mauro in this film, have something of Portinari, even more than of Debret. Thus, we can say that the director uses an already accomplished and successful scheme of visual construction of the Brazilian black man.²⁴ While they sing/work, Mauro merges images of the landscape, general plans that do not intend anything but to make the sequence more dynamic, because it does not, as in the first scenes of the film, show the result of the work. In turn, he again binds man to the rural environment, to life in nature, which is transformed by his work.

²² The author speaks especially about the participation of the artist in the preparation of the murals of the building of the Ministry of Education and Health (from 1951, Ministry of Education and Culture), an emblem of the official Modernism of Rio de Janeiro (Fabris, 1990).

²³ Sheila Schvarzman (2004) points this out in her brief analysis of this short film. Her book on Humberto Mauro is rich in documentary information, organized so that we can know certain aspects of the life and work of the filmmaker, especially his work at Ince. However, with the exception of the film *O descobrimento do Brasil*, deeply studied by the author, the others compose a wide scenario of analysis, well accomplished and organic, but without concern with details. The opposite is what I propose here, not wishing to establish a history of cinema, but rather to perform a sociological analysis of the film by Humberto Mauro, which implies analyzing the images in depth, in the sense of perceiving the social forces that are at stake there, in their symbolic form, and that only have meaning when they are watched.

²⁴ According to Ernst Gombrich (1996), as much as a visual artist intends to record “the truth”, he will always tend to work from something familiar, from a known representation. In the face of a new form, he will seek to make an adjustment between what he wants to represent and a known scheme called “*schemata*”. Any new representation, therefore, will be the result of a work between the need to construct a figurative object, a mental scheme, and the correction of the object according to this *schemata* (Gombrich, 1996).

Therefore, Mauro emphasizes the relationship between man and nature from work, showing only black people in this task. The protagonists of the next block are also black, now on “boatman song”, built more simply, with only two characters.

The first scene, under the letters that name this block (“Boatman song – Jequitinhonha River”), presents a black man, seen from the front, on the edge of a river, which, due to the lack of movement, looks more like a pond. He wears a striped T-shirt and a hat, and we can see him right at the moment he says goodbye to someone, waving. Until then, we did not know who this is, but it is still a farewell scene.

The man, who carries a scupper, goes away down the “river” rowing his boat. Only then we see the person who he left on the land, a black woman, short-haired, wearing a white dress, with her back to the camera, on the shore of that “river”, waving a white handkerchief at the departure of the one who is probably her husband. The whole scene, of course, is accompanied by a sad song, which talks about longing and about the fear of the companion dying. As if listening to the music and sensing a sad future, the woman lowers her head in a sign of great sorrow.

Following the scheme being used so far, the film shows, with images, that which the song sings.²⁵ When the melancholy verses say “I went down the river, in a damaged canoe”, we see that there is actually water inside the boat, demanding that the boatman removed it with a mug. We then returned to see the young woman – now in close, so that we have no doubt about her desolation. Behind her, a small white house, at the foot of a hill, completes the landscape.

In the next plan, we see again the paths traveled by the boatman, which are laden with heavy vegetation, especially *taboas* (*Typha domingensis*). Detailed plans show the water very closely, as to indicate and suggest the devious and, to some extent, dangerous paths where the man passed with his damaged vessel. Since the scenery is composed of a river of calm waters, seeming like a pond, only a very close plan allows to give an idea of bumpy roads to be overcome. There would be no other way of giving a dramatic aspect to the adventure, since the music itself, the singing of a boatman, does not help, being monotonous and melancholic.

²⁵ After all, a film is more than a sequence of images. According to Roland Barthes (1990), the use of subtitles, cards and dialogues in the films configures what he calls “*relais-words*”, which have the function of pursuing the actions, giving to the images meanings that they would not have in themselves. Music also participates in this process. According to Edgar Morin (2008), it operates in the sense of uniting film and spectator, stressing with a thick dash the emotion and action of the scene.

Along the sequence the waters gather, appearing more like a river, supposedly the Jequitinhonha (Minas Gerais), indicated in the title of this part of the short film. A general plan gives the sensation of much more water than in the beginning, especially by the boat appearing small in that aquatic universe. Nature, thus, begins to impose itself upon man, becoming bigger and more savage.

The film ends with the small boat lost in the middle of the river, practically static, almost a photograph, as if waiting for the music (or life) to end. According to José Carlos Bruni (1993), of the various symbolologies attributed to water, one of them is death:

If we look more closely at the symbolism of water, such as fluidity, movement, purification, and regeneration, we will see the theme of death slowly begin to be insinuated. Thus, the time symbolized by the river, the transient character of existence, indicates the death of things. Things not only dissolve in water, they also disappear in it. Purification is the annulment of the unclean, of sin and of evil; is the annulment of the past. Water is a symbol of life and death. (p. 62)

Judging by the initial sadness of the female character when saying goodbye to her companion and the end of the sequence, it is quite possible that the male character succumbed to the strength of the Jequitinhonha River – the gap of the ending allows for this interpretation. In this case, the game of forces between man and nature had the latter as victorious.

In the third and final block of this short film, “stone song”, we will have a more elaborate production work, which emphasizes again the importance of physical labor and the singing that contributes to its execution. once again, we see black male workers, most often shirtless, working heavily under the sun. This song, according to the information of the title, is not specific to any region of the country, and can be heard in several Brazilian states.

As a type of rule, the title of the film is superimposed on the first images shown, in this case, the quarry that will be the scenario of the story, already with several characters in activity. Next, we can see one of the characters up close, under a sort of tent or kiosk, which protects him from the strong sun. It is a white man, in one of the few times that this type of person appears performing manual labor. He prepares the tools for cutting the stones in an improvised forge under the kiosk. In this sense, the white man works, but it is a more technically qualified work. This is confirmed when we see, on the next plane, a black man using a tool to cut a stone, sitting on the ground. Other characters appear performing several works in the quarry, two of them breaking a big stone; while one, also white, holds the iron, the other, who is black, give sledgehammer blows so that the stone may break.

Quickly, the great stone appears rolling down the hill, but gets trapped halfway, in a small depression of the terrain. In this moment, a task force of four men is called in an attempt to get it out. This is the moment when it is sung: “Hi, mate/ Hi, raise the stone...”. A black character, who was in the distance, looks at the scene in profile. In the background, we see his hammer. It is an image of great figurative effect, with the black and shiny skin, due to the sweat caused by the strong sunlight, contrasting with the white quarry in the background, again reminding us of Portinari’s *Mestiço*. And the stone falls, thanks to the work of the four men, but an effort is still necessary to reach the ground, to be fragmented, and carried in the form of small blocks.

The next step of the work is to carry the stones in the ox cart (which is a strong fixation point²⁶ of Mauro’s films, a stronghold of memory, his proustian *madeleine*). It is a heavy work, performed by two black men. The stones are not small, but large pieces, much larger than the organized blocks, in the same scene, by two other characters, to the left of the screen. In the end, the ox cart goes on, and the tools are put aside, as to indicate that the heavy workday had ended. The last image is of one of the workers, filmed from below, full body, on a stone, looking at the landscape beneath him, with his sledgehammer on his shoulders.

This concludes the three blocks that make up the short film *Cantos de trabalho*. Mauro’s formula to accomplish it was to show, in the most didactical way possible, the process of nature being transformed by man. To this end, he used mostly black characters, suggesting that the workforce would not come from anywhere other than this population. Regardless of this being a fact observed by Mauro at the time, I believe that it refers, rather, to values linked to the patriarchy and to a time of which the filmmaker shows to feel a nostalgia.²⁷ If many of the images of black men resemble Portinari’s art, it is also possible to perceive the great influence of Debret, who over one hundred years ago pointed out that, in Brazil, everything was based on the work of black people – in this case, slaves.

²⁶ A fixation point is a recurring problem or phenomenon in a homogeneous film series, characterized by allusions, repetitions, visual particularities, image or even a construction effect (Sorlin, 1977). Thanks to the fixation points, it is possible to discover relational systems in the films, i.e., how the social environment is configured there and from which regulation mechanisms. This allows the author to relate the film to values of the social environment from which it emerges (Sorlin, 1977).

²⁷ For, even producing seemingly faithful images of the observed world, art chooses and modifies the relationships of value and greatness between things (Francastel, 1993).

The French painter says in the introduction of his *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*:

Everything is, thus, based, in this country, on black slaves; in the field, he waters with sweat farmers' plantations; in the city, the merchant makes him carry heavy burdens; if he belongs to the capitalist, he is as a factory worker or an errand boy who increases the lord's income. (Debret, 2015, p. 149)

Mauro, however, lives in a country of free men, but does not cease to suggest that the basic work, the least qualified, was performed by black people, while the white character, when he appears, even if performing physical labor, executed something more technically qualified. Women, in their turn, appear in domestic work, or suffer from the departure of the husband – all in all, something that refers to a patriarchal picture of the organization of life. If, as already pointed out, the redefinition of the importance of the figure of the black men was one of the marks of our Modernism (which allows us to think Mauro's cinema, in thematic terms, as part of this cultural current), on the other hand, the filmmaker does not defines his film as informative concerning the past (enslaving), which should be thought of in historical terms and critically on a situation already overcome.

From the way the film is built, there seems to be an appreciation of the work of black people, of their strength, so necessary to build the desired nation, but nothing that indicates that the condition of exploitation has been overcome. The black people in the film are not slaves, there are no overseers or anything that suggests this, but they are placed in the last level of the patriarchal pyramid, which is evident in the scene where white hands painted with nail polish and wearing jewels are served by the hard work performed by the black woman who worked with the pounder. Mauro, in valuing the pounder song, for example, ends up defending an outdated social structure, in which black people are only the workforce.

We can, of course, do an optimistic reading and see in Mauro something of a machadian irony,²⁸ but I think that would be taking the argument too far. The filmmaker is much more connected to a structure of a romantic, idyllic feeling, and if the images suggest any criticism, it is of the modernization of the country. All of this, of course, is somewhat ambiguous and we can only talk from the film construction. We cannot deny, however, the highlight of black people in the film, which makes us ask a question: are black people the figure elected by Mauro

²⁸ For an analysis of irony in Machado de Assis, see the critical studies by Roberto Schwarz, especially *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo: Machado de Assis* (1990).

to be the “Brazilian man”, character sought incessantly during our Modernism, with a view to the creation of an image for the nation? Following the clues found, in which references to Debret or Portinari were perceived, I believe the answer is “yes”. However, the analysis of the images allows us to assume that, more than recognizing in this figure one of the pillars of the nation, still incipient, the feeling suggested by Mauro is of certain nostalgia.

The question of background, therefore, is nostalgia, and in this Mauro’s nationalism is founded, something that refers, in a certain sense, to his local roots: Mauro was born in the rural area of Minas Gerais and grew up in Cataguases, where he filmed his first works. According to Maria Armanda do Nascimento Arruda (1999), “the memorialism from Minas Gerais mobilized the conceptions of belonging to the state, in a sort of sacralization of the memories of the land” (p. 29). For Mauro, the past was a sacred thing, and simple life in the countryside was his ideal universe. It was there that he sought the cement to build his filmic nationalism, which will have affinities with the project of nation that began to be delineated in the 1930s, always in search of the roots of nationality.

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Datasheet of the analyzed film

Mauro, H. (Director), Mauro, J. A. (Director of Photography), & Taranto, A. (Arrangements). (1955). *Cantos de trabalho (Brasilianas no. 05)* [short film] (35 mm, sounds, black and white, 10 min.). Brazil: Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo.

Submitted to evaluation on January 31, 2017; revised on October 6, 2017; accepted for publication on March 7, 2018.