

63. EXTERIOR RAIMUNDO DO SÜR (TELEPHONE) DAY

D. Luisa and Ariana are waiting next to the white car.  
The man, with the earphones round his neck, appears  
carrying six bottles of water.

Ariana: *Is that water?*

Antropóloga: *Yes.*

Ariana: *I've never seen anyone buy water before.*

The man stows the bottles in the boot.<sup>1</sup>

# TRADITION, TRANSLATION & TRANSLITERATION

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from the screenplay of *Itamatatuiua: pez, pedra, rio* by Iban Ayesta Aldanondo. Moztu Filmak y Sonora Estudios, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Bhabha, Homi K., *O Local da Cultura*. Translators: Myriam Ávila, Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis and Gláucia Renate Gonçalves. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 1998.

What gets in the way of the search for a happy ending is that, while it is possible to find happiness, there is no possible ending. Nearly five years after I first came into contact with the Quilombola community of Itamatatuiua, I am now planning to go back to photograph the inhabitants and the landscape. Any notion of concluding a text about the place and its people would be mere speculation. For this reason, translation can be seen as being infinitely open and imperfect; open, because a story is not considered to have come to an end, nor are the ties of friendship or hatred that bind the observers and the observed broken. When one returns to a piece of work, writing about it again for a magazine or another publication, there is a fresh encounter; or, because we recall «that visit» again with affection, nostalgia, or even with a sense of wariness, we are not free from that encounter—and nor are they; we live in the encounter, *we are searching for the encounter, we want the encounter... we want the encounter*<sup>2</sup>; we do not write the last full stop when the paragraph comes to an end.

The imperfection lies in the element of variability in human relations, constructions of constructions that lead not only to mere stereotypes, but to archetypes that translate the conditions of the visitor and the visited, whose expectation of extracting some satisfactory meaning from the encounter leads them to continue the contact. But it is not always easy. Imperfection lies in acts that are never entirely clear: is a wink really more than an opening and shutting of the eyelids? Or is it something else? A paranoia, perhaps. That variety of human relations imposes itself on the observation, establishing a situation in which observation is storytelling and author and actor develop storylines and compete for power through their cultural codes.

That is where lies the liberating element that overly affects any interpretation or translation, whatever way we understand it. In my opinion, this is not an established, constant element, rather it is shown to be

something that changes. From an «ecological» point of view, I have difficulty believing that thoughts and theories are not recycled. The «encounter» renews human relations; it involves people or groups that are changed through contact, and this alteration generates reflections at conscious and unconscious—and sometimes even conflictive—levels. Yet if it is no longer the same, then it is another, and if it does not cease to exist, then it remains alive; something different has happened, the old has been modified and the new has been adapted to everyday needs. Everything in life is mutant; it interacts, it is adapted. It must be said that the impossibility of translation does not signify the impossibility of production. Transcultural cinema positively celebrates that impossibility by producing art out of an encounter between different cultural codes. What all ethnographers do is to transliterate—through facts if they can, or in narrative form—yet this is presented as a construction that depends on a point of view, offered as a translation; one translates for someone, not because of someone.

#### Tradition and translation

Itamatatua, in the north of Brazil, is a community of Quilombolas who inherited their land from a religious order in the colonial era. They live communally, all sharing the same surname, «de Jesús», and they are all devout followers of Saint Teresa of Avila. The film «Itamatatua: pez, piedra, río» is intended to be a translation of the life of the black Quilombola communities in the north of Brazil in a situation of loss of cultural identity. The documentary, filmed over a three-year period, has turned into a fictional account of the life of a girl from the outskirts of São Luís who moves to a shanty town. In this regard, the project has changed as much as the people involved in it.

Five years later, I am going back to the community to shoot the final scenes of the film, and the changes are evident. Motorbikes have arrived and the landscape has been spoiled by high voltage cables, pylons and wires. The local culture of pottery making has lost ground in recent years among the younger people as a consequence of the increased use of plastic containers, which are lighter, odourless and insipid. Only a small group of women are still making handmade pieces, but even that tradition is being lost as a result of the requirements on standardisation and reproducibility imposed by the government's production aid organisations. A revival of the tradition of pottery making and the popular folk dances has come through a reinvention by the NGOs and state cultural aid agencies and propaganda agencies. The film is moving along and there are already some copies of a cut which has been edited more as a documentary than as fiction in circulation. Strangely, this version has turned into a film by the Saint instead of about the Saint, and it has been distributed in the shanty town and in the outskirts of the city of São Luís, where relatives of the inhabitants of Itamatatua live. If the community could not communicate with the exterior, isolated as it was by a lack of telephones, postal services or safe and passable roads, this film now gives

3 Brandão, F.M.L., *O Encontro do Adeus: cinema transcultural em Itamatatiua*. São Luís, 2006.

it a record of its most emblematic festivity: the feast of Saint Teresa.

The film will take images of «that place» to «other places» and will be understood in different ways. When we write about it, we are re-addressing the encounter from a particular perspective. Its reproduction and distribution springs out of another, different point of view, which is just as original as ours.

### Transliterate

What is it that the ethnographer does? An *auto da fe*? How can one write about someone who is observing one and creates images and associations about his or her constant presence? The cultural codes interfere with the apprehension of reality, but the very dynamic of the field work is a cultural code that establishes an ethos, which in turn interferes in that understanding. The ethnographer is somewhat schizophrenic in trying to be another person, trying to be in another world, constantly charting a course among memories and the need to concentrate on the real. In a world where everything is recalled, the oral tradition of those communities is collective memory passed on through tales, legends, accounts of their origins, songs, poems, and improbable stories that routinely build a metaphor of the real in the mouths of mothers, old people and children. The greatest threat to the culture of the common is the forgetting of those stories, of the people, of the tradition. What is the space of rationalisation when it parallels the unconscious processes of acquainting oneself with the social game? Telling the imponderables of common life with facts or in narrative form? Writing a novel, making a documentary or a drama? No translation can present any more than a point of view, a particular look; it is not the other; this is untranslatable; we only pass words from one language to another; there is no conclusion or end, but rather possibilities which are chosen and presented in journals and conferences. And what is the reaction to the legacy of the researchers? How do the cultural codes interpret those translations of the local culture to the universal culture of the researchers? The word appropriation comes to mind in this context; however we need to relativise roles and actions. Is there a first version? Who appropriates what? The products actually suggest representations in the social groups from which they come, and despite that, each product continues to be a product in itself, a thing. The anthropological monograph, if it does not end up hidden on university bookshelves, liberates itself in order to be able to be understood in several ways. In the end, the cultural code is what gives sense to the translation. In this way, the film, the monograph, the article, and the photograph as production are free to attend to the needs in any possible trans(betrayal)lation.

The encounter between film and the Itamatatiua community was «an encounter with the farewell, with the memory of the parting that never fades»<sup>3</sup>. It still remains to be seen in upcoming encounters what this has all meant for them...

— *Fig. 1* —