

FILM REVIEWS



The Cambridge Squatter [Era o Hotel Cambridge]. Dir. Eliane Caffé. Prod. Rui Pires, André Montenegro, Edgard Tenenbaum and Amiel Tenenbaum. Aurora Filmes. 99 mns. Portuguese. 2016

This film establishes a connection between the plight of refugees and the struggle for housing in a globalized city, focusing on the daily life of a squatted building in Brazil's biggest conurbation, São Paulo, which is occupied by urban social movements such as the 'Front for Housing Struggle' (Frente de Luta por Moradia – FLM) and the 'Downtown Homeless Movement' (Movimento dos Sem Teto do Centro – MTSC). Among the squatters, we find Brazilians, refugees and immigrants. It is a fictional film, but could also be classified as a docu-fiction. Brazilian actors play the building's residents. Refugees, immigrants and activists appear as themselves.

Among the refugee characters, the Palestinian Isam Ahmad Issa and the Congolese Guylain Mukendi stand out. The Palestinian refugee plays one of the squatters. 'From occupied land to occupation' is one of his lines in the movie. He arrived in Southern Brazil as a refugee and was invited by the director to be part of the cast. Isam Ahmad Issa's charisma, deep voice and poetic narrative are one of the highlights of the film.

Guylain Mukendi, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, plays himself. In one of the scenes, he asserts his right to housing and the responsibility of the Brazilian state to protect refugees: 'In case you don't know, Brazil cuts a nice figure in international politics at the UN, then grants us refuge. When we arrive here, though, it's every man for himself. Yes, we are Brazil's business because Brazil granted us refuge.' (A 2016 report by the Brazilian Ministry of Justice claims there are 28,670 refugees in Brazil, a small number vis-à-vis a population of 204,450,649 Brazilians according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics IBGE, 2015).

Some of the main characters interact with Apolo, played by Brazilian actor José Dumont. Throughout the movie, Apolo is engaged in training actors to play 'tableaux vivants' and is transforming the squatters into actors in order to produce promotional videos about the occupied building. Apolo's aim was to build and disseminate alternative narratives to the hegemonic discourses about the occupation. In response to the criminalization of the occupation, Apolo builds, from the statements of the building's residents, a biographical narrative for the occupation that emphasizes the rights of the squatters.

Erected in the 1950s, the building became the Hotel Cambridge. Though considered a grand hotel for decades, the property was abandoned by the owners and occupied in 2012 by the Frente de Luta por Moradia (FLM). With taxes overdue, the

place was then a hotbed of diseases such as dengue fever, and a locus for parasites, insects and rats. The present residents and the social movements took responsibility for the cleaning up of the building, making it habitable despite infrastructure problems such as a lack of elevators in the 15-storey construction.

Initially, Eliane Caffé, the director, wanted to make a film about refugees, but when she actually met them, she came across an important issue in their lives: the political struggle for their rights, such as to housing. This movie succeeded in helping to connect urban movements, refugees and immigrants – the Homeless Refugees and Immigrants Group (GRIST) was formed during the post-production phase.

Brazilians and foreigners share the same experience of a lack of the economic and bureaucratic conditions necessary to finding housing. In the movie, activist Carmem Silva says: 'Brazilians, foreigners... we are all refugees, we are all fleeing our lack of rights.' The speech of the activist, winner of an award at the International Frontier Movie Festival in Uruguay for her performance, highlights a common denominator between Brazilians and foreigners: the lack of rights. The right to housing is shared by all – Brazilian or not – but the right to fight politically for it is not guaranteed for foreigners; and this movie raises the question of the lack of political rights for foreigners in Brazil.

In one fictional scene, depicting the occupation of Hotel Cambridge, activist Carmen Lucia announces an order of eviction for repossession. In that moment, all the residents are called to fight for their right to housing, taking part in political activities organized by the social movements and in the management of the occupation. In Ahmad Issa's home, a young man refuses to take part in these political activities. The character, played by refugee Qadis Khaled Abu Tahar, justifies his refusal by quoting the prohibition on foreigners taking part in political protests.

The film approaches and discusses many issues and challenges of daily life in a multicultural context. I would like to end this text, though, underlining the merits of this production in showing a challenge – housing – that is common to Brazilians, foreigners and immigrants, and in exploring the differences in political rights among them.

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Escape from Syria: Rania's Odyssey. Dir. Rania Mustafa Ali. Prod. Rania Mustafa Ali. The Guardian. 22 mns. Arabic with English subs. 2017.

This short movie shows two important aspects of the intense migratory flows from Syria to Europe. First, it sheds light on the importance of high-tech devices for people on the move. The camera acquires the role of a means of communication and spreads information among an immense group of people. Second, this short testimony also emphasizes the paradoxes of the rules to access the EU. After a series of attempts to