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A Mina dos Vagalumes

Raphaël Grisey

2015, 3-channel video installation, color, 86 min., Portuguese. **Producer** Olivier Marboeuf, Júnia Torres, Raphaël Grisey. **Production companies** Spectre Productions (Rennes, France), Associação Filmes de Quintal (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), Raphaël Grisey (Berlin, Germany). **Written and directed by** Raphaël Grisey. **Director of photography** Raphaël Grisey. **Sound** Raphaël Grisey. **Sound design** Jochen Jezussek. **Editor** Raphaël Grisey. **With** Miriam Aprigio Pereira, Maria Luzia Sidônio, Victor "Pantera" Sidônio, Nubia Negrissi Sidônio, Firmina Paixão, João Vicente Dias, Rita Dias, Maria Aparecida "Tuquinha" Dias.

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A quilombo, a community of descendants of former slaves, is about to be born, or rather to reacquire visibility, in a valley threatened by a multinational mining company. In town, real estate speculation is invading another quilombo, while the women are valiantly fighting to preserve what remains and win back stolen lands.

A Mina dos Vagalumes is a video installation about the ongoing territorial and environmental struggles of quilombolas, their history, their ecosystems, and their metaphysics of liberation in the region of Minas Gerais in Brasil.

The struggle of quilombolas for recognition of their territory and affirmation of their Afro-Brazilian culture is little known both in Brazil and in other countries.

In Brazil, frequently the only thing people know about the history of quilombos is the figure of Zumbi dos Palmares, a former slave who led an armed revolt in the 17th century against the colonial powers and founded the 'maroon' community of the dos Palmares quilombo. Outside of the country, the history of the resistance to slavery in Brazil is often resumed by the folkloric image of Capoeira. *A Mina dos Vagalumes* shows the struggle of quilombolas in the context of both globalization and the capitalism at work in the countryside and towns of the Minas Gerais region. The quilombola struggles have been only slightly visible in recent times, much as they were in the past, both on a national and international scale, in the media as well as in the cinema.

After the release of Carlos Diegues's controversial film *Quilombo*, an epic narrative about the dos Palmares quilombo made in the 1980s, and a few documentaries which touched on the racial question in Brazil, few films or art works have directly approached quilombo issues. The representations of black minorities and Afro-Brazilian culture in the media, film, and television are usually limited to musical and religious demonstrations and the repetition of the positivist myth of Brazilian racial democracy.

The obscuring of the history of struggles and practices specific to quilombola communities can be understood as the consequence of the ongoing process of marginalizing and segregating these populations, which has lasted for several centuries. And so the quilombos and their communities are often perceived in the Brazilian imagination as an evocation of the past, disconnected from current events in today's Brazil.

But invisibility has also served as an unsuspected political tool for the quilombolas themselves in the process of liberation, existence, survival, permanence, and institutionalization of some of these communities. By remaining in the background and disappearing from the field of vision of colonial power, they were able to endure. This has resulted in the development of quilombos in territories that are remote and difficult to access.

After the abolition of slavery, the quilombola revolt was long confined to the local level, and only recently has it acquired the tools necessary to converge and organize on a national level, resonating with post-colonial currents of thought and integrating those emanating from the African diaspora.

The decrees and laws of positive discrimination in favor of Afro-Brazilian minorities and indigenous populations, enacted during the Lula administration in 2003, were fundamental in broadening the struggle for a judicial and penal plan to a larger scale. Former demands and grievances were reformulated and new ones affirmed: the recognition of quilombola territories is one of them.

What remains of this strategy of invisibility? Is it still pertinent in the current process of political representation? How is autonomy and the self-representation of these communities redefined in this context? It is this quandary, this paradox, that *A Mina dos Vagalumes* tries to approach. The installation evokes the quilombola communities in the present, even as it tries to sensitize viewers to the psychic, temporal, and spatial amplitude of the movement in its globality. It aims to evoke what could be called a metaphysical quilombola, which would, in the first instance, be a metaphysics of liberation, which obviously is essential to the history of the fight against slavery, but also defends and circulates differentiated value systems, relations to the world, and social organization.

And finally, *A Mina dos Vagalumes* evokes the complexity of internal struggles (generational, communal, and for identity) as well as external (territorial), the diversity of the actors and points of view involved (the quilombolas, anthropologists, NGOs, the State, the justice system), variations of thought, and the quilombola heritage in both cities and countryside.

Raphaël Grisey

Taking Part in Festivities of One Hundred Years Ago

After I graduated in History I began attending a post-graduate course. I am now doing a specialization in science and cultural politics with the aim of contributing to the construction of an as yet unrealized quilombola cultural politics.

This is a passion I have had since I was young. Always. I do not relate to people of my generation. My relationships are linked to the past as if I had lived with my great-grandma and my great-aunt; as if I had taken part in festivities which happened at the beginning of the last century.

I have a strong connection to them even though I didn't know them. When I was a child, there were still a lot of houses from the time of my great-grandma. The place had a lot of forest vegetation, so it had the sense of the origin of the territory. I grew up in this ambience and this was always part of me.

When my family migrated from Nova Lima to Belo Horizonte, abolition had already taken place. We have documents showing this transition, dating from the end of the nineteenth century. The city of Belo Horizonte didn't exist yet. We know about the historical transgression of the law, but the long history of our habitation clarifies who owns the land.

When my great-grandma was still alive and I was small, I could go freely to all four corners of the place. I was never disrespected. But new inhabitants arrived, invaded what is ours and thought they had the right to discriminate against us. It was awful: the invasion, the loss of what was characteristic of the territory, and especially the treatment that we received. Now, we are the ones seen as invaders when in fact they are. Their permits are recent, not more than twenty years old. Why didn't someone regulate construction? Because the way the property was acquired was 'irregular.' Why, then, is it us who have to suffer prejudgments? People should understand, know, and respect us. To me, this would be a great start. What form could this respect take? What I would like, if it were possible, would be to demolish the buildings that have invaded this space. The solution for the majority would be to be seen as the rightful landowners, to be able to earn rent, for example, or to get compensation, in acknowledgment of the invasion. But this capitalist proposition doesn't interest me. I am not worried about that. What I would like to see is the protection of our history and our community's bond. I would like it to be made clear that the struggle of our ancestors was valuable.

I know that it might not have been easy for them under the circumstances, particularly the indifference toward black people at that time. Today, we have many resources; we have access to education and other things. Imagine them in the middle of that unequal, unjust, absurd struggle. My great-grandma was illiterate. This may have been the case for most of them, but they remained until the end of the struggle and secured the land for us. I'd like this to be somehow valued and recognized.

I see the quilombola movement as very shy. During the age of the quilombos – the hinterland settlements founded by quilombolas, most of which have already been destroyed or are still being destroyed – the movement could have been bigger, more visible, stronger. Now, I feel that we get inspired by other examples more than we are an example to others: I see a lot of strength in the MST (Movimento dos Sem Terra; Landless Workers' Movement) and the indigenous movement. I think – and that is why I began this specialization – that it is possible to build a cultural politics which could embrace other fights. In my case, for example, I take a lot from activism, but also from the law too. Knowledge of the law can help secure our rights, which allows us to continue the struggle.

This extract is taken from Decree 4887/2003 of the 20th November 2003:

[Regulation] for the procedure in the identification, recognition, delimitation, demarcation, and titling of lands occupied by the remaining descendants of quilombo communities according to Article 68 of the Transitory Constitutional Provisions Act. Article 68 defines that "the definitive ownership of the [remaining] descendants of the quilombos to the land they are occupying will be recognized and the State shall make every effort to issue them title to these lands." This affirms that the quilombola communities were founded by the ancestors of the black people, and were occupied ancestrally in various cases. There has been a reformulation of the law that previously required a minimum occupation of one hundred years.

We also have Article 215:

The State guarantees to all the full exercise of cultural rights and equal access to sources of national culture, and to support and foster the appreciation and dissemination of cultural expression. The State shall protect the expression of popular culture, indigenous and Afro-Brazilian, as well as other groups participating in the process of national civilization. The law provides for the establishment of commemorative dates of significance for the various ethnic groups of the nation.

There are various other articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the constitution of the International Labour Organization. What are not lacking are resources in the law.

There is such a thing as 'black Brazilian.' We arrived here and we constituted a nation called Brazil. This has to be made clearer, because this point is always put aside. Black Brazilians are always described as 'Afro-descendant.' But the non-black Brazilians are not constantly described as Luso-Brazilian, nor Italian Brazilian. Why is it necessary to raise the black question? This necessity comes from the discourse of separation, devaluation, and segregation that have occurred throughout history and to the number of contingents of black slaves brought here.

It is important to consider the reparation of these historical ambiguities. In our society, the non-black Brazilians have a very distinct history from the black Brazilians. Discrimination is latent; we experience it all the time. Yesterday, I came home very tired. I was getting out of my car when a passer-by saw me and hid her bag. It is very painful to experience this.

In reality, who are we? We are simply the Brazilian people. Here nobody is a purely A or purely B. We are a nation of mixed people, but the discourse that was instilled in us and the experience we continue to live through is that there are indeed differences between us on the basis of the color of our skin. If you are black

you are inferior. Today, if you are black you can't live in a region considered rich.

What connects me to the struggle are my ancestors. I have a very strong relationship with these people, as if I had lived with them, or as if they are all gone but I remain. It seems that it is my responsibility to secure this place. For us – and particularly for me, as a teacher – there is a need to clear up and undo these ambiguities which occurred during our history. To show people that equality is possible; to find a form that proves it.

The fact that people who aren't from the quilombo or who aren't black comprehend our struggle makes clear that there are others who share our feelings.

Others value this identity, and are part of it in some way. They share our pain, and organize a wide defense of our struggle. But what happens is this: at the moment of real struggle, when the judicial fight begins, we can no longer count on this wider community to help us in an efficient manner. We can only count on our own community, because we are the ones who hold the documents. Our families' names are contained in these documents. Only we have shares in the territory.

An edited transcript of Miriam Aprigio in interview with Raphaël Grisey, 2011

Raphaël Grisey, born 1979 in Les Lilas, France, lives and works in Berlin and Trondheim. His video, editorial, and photographic works gather or produce narratives on politics of memories, migration, and architecture. His films and installations, using diverse documentary, fictional, or essayist forms also deal with social and political concerns of the day such as immigration and post-colonial issues in France. Since 2001 his work has been shown in many international film festivals and venues.

Films

2003: *Bridge Over Troubled Water* (54 min.). 2005: *Sand Quarry* (6 min.). 2006: *Prvi deo* (co-directed by Florence Lazar, 86 min.), *The Red Star* (co-directed by Florence Lazar, 10 min.). 2008: *Co-operative* (76 min.). 2011: *The Indians* (31 min.), *Minhocão/The Big Worm* (30 min.), *National Motives* (Forum Expanded, 28 min.). 2012: *A mãe* (39 min.), *The exchange of perspectives is a dangerous game* (33 min.). 2014: *Amor e Progresso* (32 min.). 2015: *Remanescentes* (97 min.). 2016: *A Mina dos Vagalumes*.