



Movie Theatres for a World in Progressive Dissolution

by Gabriel Menotti

photo: Cine Falcatrua

This is a historical report on Cine Falcatrua, a grassroots Brazilian film society that aims to rethink the cinematographic circuit using digital domestic technologies. The report focuses on Cine Falcatrua's first two years of activities, 2004 and 2005.

Expanded and digitized, movies may have overcome many of their traditional expedients of production and escaped from all narrative conventions, but they have not yet been freed from the place of the story. The movie theatre, the temple around which all cinematographic institution is built, constrains our audiovisual experience, defining a certain viewing regime that is propagated through other socio-informational systems. We have learned to move the camera, but the projection apparatus remains static. No matter how non-linear the plot, the movie will always start when the lights go out and will end as soon as they are turned back on. It does not matter how eccentric the framings may be, they will be invariably conformed by the *perspectiva artificialis* of the dark chamber. We watch movies in the same way that, six centuries ago, we contemplated Madonnas and Holy Suppers.

Even now, when cinema's structures of distribution and exhibition become digital, completing the metamorphosis that started with computerized post-production, movie screening retains an anachronistic essence. The dark room creates an intermission in the compressed space-time, a pause in the traffic of bodies and data. It's a place where people park their bodies, turn off their cell-phones and PDAs, disconnect from the ever-connected

world and surrender to incipient boredom. As celluloid film becomes obsolete and movies are released almost simultaneously on the cinematographic circuit and in the home market, the movie theatre is one of the few factors that still guarantees cinema's specificity. But, far from being a romantic trench, it works as a corridor for consumption. Its architecture is equipped with technologies of comfort, which intend to mortify human presence (of the *ego*, of the other) and plaster the cinematographic experience, transforming it into a commodity that exhausts all of the movie's potentials. The ongoing debates about digital cinema reflect this trend. The established industry is only interested in defining which standards must be adopted and who will pay the bills. The most intriguing capacities of the medium are neglected in the name of preserving the sterile integrity the cinematographic institution.

Instantaneity, decentralization, hybridism: precisely the capacities that render Cine Falcatrua possible. Cine Falcatrua is a nomad film society that applies to the cinematographic circuit techniques adapted from cultural guerrilla, tactical media, VJing and urban intervention (*falcatrua* translates as "hoax" or "scam" in Portuguese). Using domestic equipment—obsolete CPUs, DLP projectors, sound speakers, a white screen and lots of cables—Cine Falcatrua emulates a conventional movie theatre and, from the inside out, aims to expand its capacities.

The society started in 2004 as an extracurricular project at the University of Espírito Santo State (UFES/Brazil), involving students from different courses, people interested in giving a practical (and inevitable) extension to the debates about audiovisual distribution and exhibition within the new media ecology. The project began with free weekly screenings on Goiabeiras, a UFES campus, in the city of Vitória. These first screenings involved mostly university students and teachers. As the film society's popularity grew from promotion over e-mail and through social networks (Fotolog and Orkut, for example), its audience enlarged considerably. Today, each screening attracts about 250 people, sometimes reaching as many as 600.

One of the defining characteristics of Cine Falcatrúa is its lack of editorial direction. Unlike other film societies, it does not privilege any genre or kind of movie; works made in the most diverse formats, from webcams to 16mm film cameras, have their turn in the digital projector. Most often, the material is brought by the audience itself, or downloaded from the Internet. The debate over the legality of this practice sparked some arguments in the Brazilian press, attracting the attention of big companies and resulting in a lawsuit against the University for "Unfair Competition." The claim, lodged by the film distributors Lumière and Europa in July 2004, was accompanied by a criminal complaint from the Brazilian Intellectual Property Defense Association (ADEPI) against the members of the project.

The Lawsuit and the Market

It seems absurd that established companies would complain about unfair competition from an academic project with non-commercial purposes that reaches an insignificant portion of companies' potential consumers. But, as inappropriate as this claim may seem, Cine Falcatrúa's popularity is on par with the accusations. In fact, Vitória's cultural market practically caused the formation of the film society. When Cine Falcatrúa appeared, there were only eight screening rooms in the city, seven of which were "commercial," dispersed among two shopping mall multiplexes, and one "alternative" theatre, at the University.¹ All of the theatres suffered from a serious delay on the national film circuit. Even the season's blockbusters took a long time to reach the city's theatres, even though Vitória is a state capital, situated near Brazilian economic centers (Rio and São Paulo). Depending on the movie's appeal, it could be released with a delay of weeks, months, or simply not screened in Vitória, at least not in theatres.

To date, however, thanks to technology, all of the latest Hollywood releases were as available to Vitória's inhabitants as to those in any other part of the world. The combination of high-compression video codecs (for example, DivX;-) and peer-to-peer file exchange broadband networks (propelled by the BitTorrent protocol) resulted in an extensive online collection of movies of all genres, national origins, and dates. Cine Falcatrúa's activities only made public the private consumption enabled by these networks, creating a bridge that reunited the films with the markets on which they fed. Along with the anonymous and involuntary collaboration of thousands of peer-to-peer users, the film society created an informal circuit for cinematographic distribution that, given its objectives, was much more efficient than the established circuit, especially in Vitória.

The city's cultural void resulted in the authorization of Cine Falcatrúa's screenings of movies of suspicious origin, which came directly from the cultural underground of the Internet. In these screenings, the cinematographic institution and the international computer network touched each other dangerously, in a caricature of what is meant to be the digital cinematographic circuit. Using widely available instruments to exhaust market demands, Cine Falcatrúa rendered evident that their present media configuration and structures are about to become superfluous. From this perspective, the film society seems to be an ultra-capitalist project, almost perverse. But we have to consider that, from the point on which cultural market dumping can be practised by anyone using home appliances and a broadband connection, something is wrong with the copyright legislation.

There certainly is a tension between two different models of cultural economy: one that aims to approximate producers and consumers through new technologies, and another that insists in the inertia of the technological park, assuring the subsistence of several layers of mediators. This is a competition that is unfair only under archaic laws.

Open-source Cinema

Situated in the crossway between different systems, networks, and cultural practices, Cine Falcatrúa is not configured as a technique of its own, but as an articulation of borrowed techniques. The film society works with almost opportunistic appropriations, worthy of a *script kiddie*, which refers to "inexperienced hackers who use scripts and programs developed by others, without knowing what they are or how they work."² To them, it does not matter what it is that they are doing, but rather what effect they can provoke. They do not study

programming languages or the system in which they act, they only look for ways to affect it. In fact, this kind of n00b³ engineering served Cine Falcatrú because its objectives were situated beyond the subsystems it employed. Guided by the impulse of supplying a certain cultural demand, the project aimed to promote cinematographic experience, spectacular and collective, apparently incompatible with the *warez* (pirate software) scene of dispersed individuals and 15-inch terminals.

That is also why the content of the screened movies didn't matter, neither did the method used for screening. What was in question was their mere exhibition, which created a space for social interaction and cultural exchange. Despite its Machiavellism, the film society's practice was directed towards an "open-source cinema," whose functioning could be replicated by anyone, with as little equipment as possible. In every screening, leaflets with instructions for building your own movie theatre were distributed among the audience. As well, the projection apparatus was always assembled and disassembled in front of the public, who could witness the transformation of ordinary spaces in movie theatres and even assist with the proceedings.

These practices involved a will to expose the trick and still insist in the illusion of the audience, a complex game of seduction and sincerity. The screened movies themselves denounced their false, intermediary condition. As we have said, the word "falcatrú" could be roughly translated as "hoax," a term universally used to describe Internet scams—a direct reference to the way the movies were obtained. Bootleg copies found on the net, by chance; who could assure their legitimacy? If fake musical albums can leak in file exchange networks, why not whopper movies?

In that sense, it may be important to point out that a good deal of movies found on peer-to-peer networks (especially the latest releases) are either illegal telesync copies or screeners, copies distributed to the press and to possible exhibitors before its premiere. Telesync copies have an organic image, characteristic of the film reprocessed through digital video, which alters its colours, framing, and speed. They are movies of the movies, made in precarious conditions, sometimes going out of focus, sometimes suffering the intermission of some spectator that was present at the original screening. The copies contain irreversible marks from their transformation(s) through different formats. Autobiographical, these marks tell a story that is not the movie's. Screener copies, on the other hand, have perfect technical quality, but their content is almost never definitive. Some have

not yet gone through all stages of post-production (lacking special effects or image treatment), while other have specific marks that identify their extra-commercial condition, such as on-screen warnings or periods in which the image turns black and white. By disregarding the veil of the cinematographic apparatus and by screening movies that deny their own truth, Cine Falcatrú kept the audience away from the representation, establishing a viewing regime that includes the mechanism and its effects. Exposed, the movie theatre loses its discursive authority and is diluted in a dialogical media, an interface not only with the film, but of the audience with itself. Through the movie theatre space, spectators are not only capable of getting in contact with a diegetical reality, but with each other as well.

The Age of the Festivals

To extend these questions to other instances of the cinematographic institution, Cine Falcatrú started to carry out some extraordinary actions, beyond the so-called "habitual programme" of a film society. The first of these actions was the Free Content Exhibitions, composed solely of works licensed under modalities of copyleft, licences that allow for free distribution and exhibition for non-commercial uses. Produced since the beginning of 2005, these exhibitions have an institutional-educative approach, and are specially directed to an audience unconscious of the existence and advantages of other kinds of copyright.

After the Free Content Exhibitions, Cine Falcatrú developed the August Cinema Club, "a festival for discussing cinema at the bar." Its first two editions (in 2005 and 2006) involved four weekly screenings in the month of August. Four renowned cinema specialists were invited to do a subjective curation of these screenings, choosing a film from their personal collection that has marked their lives; symbolizing their first kiss, their discovery of cinema, or a painful farewell. Then, overcoming their passion and partiality, each one had to write a critical review that was published in the local newspaper in the same day of the screening. Just after the session, both the specialist and the audience went to a bar to discuss the movie, based on their personal opinions and tastes.

If, on the one hand, August Cinema Club has opened space for specialized articles about cinema in Vitória's local press, on the other, it took cinema debate to the pub, an ultra-democratic forum in which curator and public face each other as equals. The event's intention was to subvert a film society's traditional practice of "discussing the movie," forcing

it to its two extremes: the unilateral discourse of the expert and healthy, passionate disorder.

This kind of contrast was also part of the Low Resolution Festival. Produced in December 2005, the event was an attempt to create a competitive exhibition for Internet videos, a “genre” Cine Falcatra has always showed on the big screen. By Internet videos, I am referring to works of several kinds, from small parodies to domestic records, from vectorial flash-based animations to TV-captured news. What allows us to gather such different works under a common rubric is their medium of propagation, the Web. Purposefully chosen, the medium imposes restrictions that define similar characteristics for all these works, as the aforementioned low-resolution.

Spectators distribute Internet videos progressively, as they watch and circulate them. Their legitimation with the audience depends more on a memetic deviation than on their artistic quality or marketing investments. Therefore, the role of the creator loses its relevance (and even the condition of authorship) to the filter, the agent that discovers the work and reveals it to the world, that is, publicizes it on a blog or starts sending it out through mass e-mails.

The Low Resolution Festival intended to apply these practices to the structure of a film festival. Until the day of the screenings, everything happened online: from the call for works (on usenets and blogs) to posting the videos via e-mail. The competitive categories were defined by kilobyte, a measure that, just like *métrage*, refers to a certain kind of volume and duration. The contestants did not need to be the authors of the works they sent. According to the festival’s regulation, they should only be responsible for their inscriptions. In the case of more than one person sending the same work, it became automatically a “collective work.” Hence, even considering the participation of some actual moviemakers, we may say that the true competition of the Low Resolution Festival was among different curations of the Web.

After the Low Resolution Festival, Cine Falcatra continued to investigate the film festival as an interface with the Short[CUT]s Festival, which was part of the Rumos Visual Arts program, commissioned by the Itaú Cultural Institute (March to May 2006). Publicized as festival for “expanded and into pieces” cinema, Short[CUT]s was open to every genre and format. There was no kind of pre-selection, all works submitted to the festival were automatically part of its program. But the choice of which works would actually be screened was left in the hands of the projectionist, who would “curate”

the exhibition in real time. This proposal evokes the pre-history of cinema, when the operator of the projection mechanism had almost complete autonomy over the projection. He had to define the order of the film rolls, and could even interchange portions of different works, creating a unique spectacle. It also suggests contemporary VJ performances, the screening of real-time generated, edited or composed video.

By using the projection mechanism—a supposedly transparent medium—as a tool for creation, the Short[CUT]s Festival demonstrates the separation between technologies and their uses. If the detractors of digital cinema fear it because it may transform “screening rooms in gigantic TVs, subjected to broadcast,”⁴ the Short[CUT]s Festival reminds us that, in a given system where everything is potential, there is no tool that is more than a conviction, and there is no conviction that cannot be corrupted. It is a small inference, but after all, maybe it is the most important one that is worth taking from Cine Falcatra’s transitory and controversial actions.

NOTES

1 For comparison purposes, according to the 2000 census, Vitória’s metropolitan area—which comprises five cities—has 1.2 million inhabitants.

2 “Script Kiddie,” *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Script_kiddies> accessed 13 Feb 2007.

3 From *newb*, newbie, a way to designate neophytes in some online communities.

4 From the introduction of Short[CUT]s Festival catalog.