

**Sustainability at the Margins:
Avant-Garde Cinema and the Environment in Rogério Sganzerla's
*cinema do lixo***

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At the limits of growth, pollution is the sign of
the world's appropriation by the *species*.

—Michel Serres, *Malféasance: Appropriation through
Pollution?*

In the late 1960s, Brazil's influential *cinema novo* movement was accused of abandoning the most radical aspects of its aesthetics of hunger and selling out. Filmmakers such as Rogério Sganzerla and Julio Bressane were simultaneously rejecting some of the new tendencies among *cinemanovistas* and rethinking and reshaping some of their early aesthetic and political ideas. *Cinema do lixo*, or *cinema marginal*, was a short-lived movement that emerged in this context, taking shape in downtown São Paulo and producing around 20 films.¹ The movement took its name from its place of origin, the

¹ There is no consensus concerning the exact number of films that may be considered as part of the movement. For more on this, see Shaw and Dennison, *Brazilian National Cinema*, 88-89.

Boca do Lixo district, situated in Bairro da Luz, São Paulo.² Its films are obsessed with polluted urban environments, crime, drugs, and prostitution, which could easily be found at the Boca, in the late 1960s.³ Film criticism in Brazil and abroad has generally been more interested in the highly formalist and elitist *cinema novo* than in its low-budget cousin, *cinema do lixo*. It has frequently described the latter as a rebellious, transgressive avant-garde movement whose most original contribution was replacing the focus on the Brazilian Northeast and the unforgiving environment of the *sertão* [backlands], which defined the early production of *cinema novo*, with a fascination with the urban space of São Paulo's red light district.

While filmmakers like Sganzerla accused *cinema novo* of selling out, *cinemanovistas* such as Glauber Rocha criticized the supposed frivolousness of *cinema do lixo*, claiming that its obsessive emphasis on toxic (and unsustainable) environments was nothing more than pointless artistic provocation.⁴ This critique, which somehow echoes previous attacks against avant-garde movements from the early 1900s, has remained rather uncontested, even as, decades later, the influence of *cinema do lixo* in contemporary Brazilian cinema became widely acknowledged by critics.⁵ In this article, I propose an environmental reading of a quintessential movie of *cinema do lixo*, Rogério Sganzerla's *The Red Light Bandit* [*O bandido da luz vermelha*] (1968), which counters the assumption that *cinema do lixo* is, in general, apolitical and frivolous. By reexamining

² Boca do Lixo is the popular name given to a particular part of Bairro da Luz. This part of São Paulo had already played a crucial role in the history of film in Brazil, when *cinema do lixo* emerged in the late 1960s.

³ Sganzerla explains why the Boca do Lixo district gave its name to his dirty cinema: "Se escolhi o bairro para falar do Brasil é porque esse bairro se chama Boca do Lixo. Não é símbolo, mas sintoma de uma realidade" (Sganzerla 2007, 29) ["If I chose this district to speak about Brazil, it is because it is called Boca do Lixo. It is not a symbol but a symptom of a reality"]. All translations are mine.

⁴ In an interview from 1968, Sganzerla argues that "[o] cinema brasileiro, mesmo o Cinema Novo, está se aburguesando; virou cinema novo-rico" (Sganzerla 2007, 29) ["Brazilian cinema, even *cinema novo*, is becoming more bourgeois; it became a newly-rich cinema"]. Two years later, Sganzerla would go even further, saying: "Eu sou contra o Cinema Novo porque eu acho que depois dele ter apresentado as melhores ambições e o que tinha de melhor, de 1962 a 1965, atualmente ele é um movimento de elite, um movimento paternalizador, conservador, de direita. Hoje em dia, como eu estou num processo de vanguarda, eu sou um cineaste de 23 anos, eu estou querendo me ligar às expressões mais autênticas e mais profundas de uma vanguarda e eu acho que o Cinema Novo é exatamente a antivanguarda" (Sganzerla 2007, 54) ["I am against *cinema novo* because I think that after having presented the best of ambitions and its best, from 1962 to 1965, now it is an elite movement, a paternalizing movement, conservative, and right wing. Right now, since I am an avant-garde artist, only 23 years old, I want to use the most authentic expressions of the avant-garde and I think that *cinema novo* is precisely anti-avant-garde"].

⁵ For more on its legacy, see *Brazilian National Cinema* (Shaw and Dennison 2007, 88-89).

cinema do lixo and Sganzerla's 1968 film, in particular, through the lens of contemporary ecocriticism, this article offers a look into the complex intertwining of aesthetics and environmental politics in *cinema do lixo*. It argues that Sganzerla's *cinema do lixo*, in fact, marks the moment when a certain ecological sensibility, linked to notions of sustainability, emerged in Brazilian cinema and culture, shaped by both the rise of twentieth-century environmentalism and the dramatic worsening of the toxic consequences of industrial modernity that occurred after World War II. In doing so, *cinema do lixo* exposes a suggestive correlation between avant-garde developments in Brazil and environmental conditions, particularly those of São Paulo's urban environments. Moreover, *cinema do lixo* responds aesthetically to its context of environmental degradation and social injustice in ways that are still relevant today, proposing a model for a more sustainable cinema and what I will describe as an avant-garde aesthetics of sustainability.

The avant-garde, in Brazil and abroad, has been traditionally described as being at odds with nature.⁶ Unquestionably, twentieth-century avant-garde artists and critics from the most diverse origins have on several occasions voiced a radical antagonism between their artistic practices and the natural environment, concomitantly rejecting any ecological preoccupations. For example, early twentieth-century futurists like F. T. Marinetti are notorious for celebrating pollution and toxic environments, as is the case in his "The Futurist Manifesto" (1909). A similar modernist celebration of toxicity and industrial pollution appears in works of the British Vorticists and, as far as Portuguese-speaking modernisms are concerned, in the poetry of Fernando Pessoa's heteronym Álvaro de Campos, particularly in his "Ode triumphal" (1915).⁷ However, as critics such as Joshua Schuster and Hubert Berg have recently maintained, defining the avant-garde as being radically at odds with nature results in the erasure of key individual contributions, as well as in the obfuscation of the complexity and heterogeneity of the avant-garde.⁸ In a truly ecological society, to put it in Timothy Morton's words, humans will be "accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no

⁶ The importance of Brazilian environments for the making of the Brazilian avant-garde has yet to be studied in depth. In case of Brazil, this is in fact crucial. This article aims to be a first attempt to do so.

⁷ Campos's celebration of urban environments and toxic refreshment is more complex than it may appear. For a detailed discussion of the topic of "toxic refreshment," see the introduction to *The Ecology of Modernism. American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics*.

⁸ See *The Ecology of Modernism. American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics*, by Joshua Schuster, and "'Towards a Reconciliation of Man and Nature': Nature and Ecology in the Aesthetic Avant-Garde of the Twentieth Century," by Hubert Berg.

animals or trees or mountains appear in it” (Morton 2012, 11). Schuster’s call for a reevaluation of the relationship between the avant-garde and the environment, in *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics*, points to an important step in the direction of Morton’s ecological society, urging critics to look for environmental sensibilities and ecologies in rather unsuspected places.

The modernist invention of the “toxic refreshment” (Schuster 2015, 2) that we find in the cultural production of the early twentieth-century avant-garde was important, as Schuster argues, for breaking with a long-standing paradigm, codified in the Judaico-Christian tradition, which equated the clean with the good and the dirty with the evil other (Schuster 2015, 132-3). In Schuster’s words, “[k]eeping clean meant maintaining constant borders between polluted others,” with their many faces (Blacks, Jews, homosexuals, the insane, etc.), and “normative selves based on regimes of meticulous categorization of anything deemed dirty” (Schuster 2015, 132). The avant-garde notion of regeneration through pollution offered a radical attack against this often-dangerous paradigm, celebrating pollution and toxicity and, concomitantly, questioning borders, social boundaries, and social categorizations. However, World War II and the consequences of what is now known as the Great Acceleration (the dramatic increase in the rate of impact of human activity) made the links between toxicity, unsustainable environments, and empowerment a short-lived one:

By the 1940s, with a world war of incredible violence and ecological decimation, praising environmental damage lost its rebellious edge in avant-garde aesthetics. Yet toxic refreshment as a creative aesthetic trope did not wholly disappear, [...] urban grime and environmental decay persisted as powerful aesthetic coordinates for a new generation of avant-garde artists who carried dystopian realist tendencies and antisocial leanings, from cyberpunk to beat poetry to the Black Arts Movement to punk. (Schuster 2015, 149)

In what follows, I will delve into the “unusual potential [of toxicity] for political [and environmental] critique” in Sganzerla’s work (Schuster 2015, 132). On the one hand, I will add *cinema do lixo*, and Sganzerla’s work in particular, to Schuster’s list of artists and movements for whom “urban grime and environmental decay persisted as powerful aesthetic coordinates” after World War II. On the other hand, I will explore *cinema do lixo*’s ability to position itself as a privileged locus for a critique of environmental injustice and unsustainable development. Sganzerla’s work exposes the inseparability of the three pillars of sustainability—environment, society, and economy—proposing a particular environmental politics that responded to the

challenges created by the link between environmental degradation and social injustice in São Paulo's urban environments of the late 1960s.

The Red Light Bandit is a quintessential work of *cinema do lixo*. It is loosely based on the crimes of José Acácio Pereira da Costa, who was known in the press of the time as the *bandido da luz vermelha*. In Sganzerla's film, the red light bandit is a criminal who spreads fear throughout São Paulo by way of home invasions of upper-class residences, robberies, and rapes. In the very first scene, the link between environmental injustice and violence is made clear by an apocalyptic scenario. Children are simulating a battle scene against a background of urban and industrial detritus, suggesting a struggle over natural resources in the context of a toxic, unsustainable environment (figs. 1 and 2). The intertwining of environmental degradation, social injustice, and crime is made even more pungent by the bandit himself as voice over, when he blames his social context for his criminal behaviour: "um cara assim só tinha que avacalhar para ver o que saía disso tudo" ["someone like me could only mess things up to see what would come out of all this"]. On his trail we find a detective who suggestively hates modern art and the avant-garde, which he calls *lixo* [garbage] in a dialogue that remarkably reminds us of the horrors that are associated with nineteenth-century notions of degenerate art and the absolute separation between the clean and the dirty that they imply.





Figs. 1 and 2: Initial scenes of *The Red Light Bandit*, by Rogério Sganzerla.

The term “degenerate art” was widely used in Nazi Germany to establish a hierarchy of art forms based on racist and eugenic discourses. Degenerate art forms, often produced by minorities deemed dirty (Jews, homosexuals, and the insane, in particular), were the opposite of art forms considered superior, produced by Aryan individuals. Suggestively, this detective is not only focused on tracking down the red light bandit but also in *cleaning* the whole Boca do Lixo district in São Paulo, which, naturally, implies the extermination of “human garbage.” When considered alongside the history of twentieth-century environmentalism, these words remind us of the above-mentioned dangers of the rhetoric of “cleanliness and properness” that, as Schuster points out, has “previously linked ecology with eugenically inflected rural and urban beautification movements” (Schuster 2015, 134). Against such rhetoric, *cinema do lixo* offers what I define as an avant-garde aesthetics of sustainability, in which environmental justice plays a crucial role.

Sganzerla’s *cinema do lixo* is among those avant-garde experiences that have yet to be critically addressed from an ecocritical perspective, which would allow the public to examine more thoroughly the various environmental sensibilities that emerged in Latin America during the long twentieth-century. In what follows, I propose a dialogue between Sganzerla’s dirty cinema and Michel Serres’ ecological manifesto *Malféasance: Appropriation through Pollution*.⁹ Serres’s manifesto suggests a continuum between the “general drive of living species” to appropriate through dirt—more precisely one’s own dirt—and modern industrial and urban pollution. For example, Serres cites the animal appropriation of a territory through urine and how, in the case of human animals,

⁹ Michel Serres’s text is hard to categorize. Despite its impurity regarding genre, its literary dimension is undeniable.

“whoever spits in the soup keeps it” (Serres 2011, 2). Serres claims that there is a similarity between these acts and pollution, arguing that “[t]hese objects we exclude or throw away once they have become useless emanate from us in new ways today to mark our territories” (Serres 2011, 38). From this perspective, pollution “is the sign of the world’s appropriation by the *species*” (Serres 2011, 53). Serres’s argument leads him to embrace an ecology that thinks through pollution and obliges us to think beyond pastoral ecologies. He proposes a sustainability model—which forces us to consider what we are leaving to the next generations—in which the environmental, the social, and the political dimensions are necessarily intertwined.

Serres’s argument is not a postmodern, slightly more environmentally-friendly remaking of the early twentieth-century celebration of toxic refreshment and the appropriation of the environment through industrial pollution. His manifesto proposes a new, more sustainable way to relate to the earth, which is based precisely on a critique of our drive for appropriation and mastery. In his words: “we need to reconsider our subjective and collective intentions and limit the will and means to appropriate” (Serres 2011, 70). For Serres, this would be possible through a refusal of mastery and possession, for example detaching oneself from mastery and sharing the soup instead of spitting in it. Serres suggests a “natural contract”: a kind of rental agreement with the planet, in which our duty would be to leave it as hospitable as we found it.

While fighting the law, the red light bandit is considered by the population of São Paulo to be a Robin Hood of sorts who steals from the rich to give to the poor. I do not wish to rehabilitate the figure of the red light bandit, presenting him as an eco-hero, to use an expression coined by Murray and Heumann (2009). By focusing on the intersection of aesthetics and environmental politics in Sganzerla’s film, read through the lens of Serres’s manifesto, this article will bring to light an ecological sensibility that has its roots in the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s and is still relevant today. This negative or impure ecology offers a sustainable alternative to dangerous pastoral ecologies that often tend to perpetuate distinctions between healthy and unhealthy, between clean self and dirty other. On the one hand, the notion of appropriation through pollution enables us to understand the artistic process in *cinema do lixo*, notably Sganzerla’s attempt to create a quintessential Brazilian cinema—a dirty cinema—that is shaped by a drive to recycle other cinematic traditions.¹⁰ This drive represents, among

¹⁰ The expression “filmes sujos e poéticos, impuros e pretensiosos” [“dirty, poetic, impure, and pretentious films”] is from Alex Viany and was taken from an interview published in *Tribuna da Imprensa*, on December 5, 1968 (Viany 1968).

other things, a critique of consumerism and its obvious consequences for the environment. On the other hand, *cinema do lixo*, as it emerges in *The Red Light Bandit* and in other works by like-minded directors, proposes a similar model for a more sustainable future to the one recently theorized by Serres. Sganzerla and Serres invite us to rethink the drive for appropriation. They reject the models of human relationship with the natural environment presupposed by both neo-liberal political rhetoric and left-wing populist discourse, which are defined alike by a drive for the uncontrolled appropriation of natural resources. *Cinema do lixo* wants us, instead, to imagine different ways to write back and design sustainable ecological solutions that do not follow a notion of human progress based on the exploitation of nature and an idea of wealth as the reward from a carbon-intensive economy.

Sganzerla never referred directly to any environmental preoccupations or ecological sensibility in *The Red Light Bandit*, or in any other of his films for that matter. He did, however, provide relevant material in his interviews regarding his work's relation with questions of uneven development, environmental justice, and the politics and ethics of cinema. When considered alongside his aesthetic choices and read through the lens of contemporary ecocriticism, this material offers important insights into the environmental preoccupations that emerge in *cinema do lixo*. In a passage from an interview Sganzerla gave to the *Journal do Brasil*—two years before the release of *The Red Light Bandit*—he described his political approach to the “alma e corpo [...] do homem brasileiro” in a manner relevant for my argument: “Todos pretendem fazer denúncias através do cinema. Eu também. Mas não me interessa constatar o desespero das almas sem Deus, a psicologia feminina e a incomunicabilidade. [...] Opto pela denúncia global da alma e do corpo subdesenvolvido, isto é, do homem brasileiro” [“Everyone wants to denounce things with their films. I do want that as well. However, I am not interested in the despair of godless souls, in feminine psychology, or incommunicability. [...] I choose the global denunciation of the underdeveloped soul and body, that is, the Brazilian man”] (Sganzerla 2007, 15). The “underdeveloped” body and soul of the Brazilian man, along with Sganzerla's attempt to create a Brazilian cinema—a dirty cinema—are deeply linked to questions of environmental justice and sustainability in Sganzerla's *The Red Light Bandit*. In other words, his choice to create an impure and dirty cinema is as much connected to his desire to denounce social inequality as it is to the environmental consequences of São Paulo's urban and industrial modernity: “diante desta realidade insuportável, somos antiestéticos para sermos éticos” [“in the face of this unbearable reality, we are anti-aesthetic so that we can be ethical”] (Sganzerla 2007,

28). In a time when ecology has reached the mainstream in a significant part of the world, this article suggests the importance of revisiting the marginal ecologies of the twentieth-century, both reassessing their place in the history of environmental thinking and reconsidering their relevance for the present.

It could be argued that Sganzerla's dirty cinema also shares revealing similarities with the modernist *antropofagia* and the *tropicalistas*'s "neo-cannibalism"—as Caetano Veloso would eventually put it forty years later (Dunn 2001, 6). Such an argument, as we will see, would not consider the originality of Sganzerla's *cinema do lixo* and its contribution to a particular current in Brazilian environmentalism that has offered a unique way of imagining an ecological approach to Brazilian culture—one which is still relevant today. Hopefully, this reading will also pave the way for other reconsiderations of Sganzerla's cinema, as well as its legacy and place in the context of the various ecological sensibilities that started to take shape in the late 1960s in Brazil.

Framing a Toxic World

Serres's distinction between soft and hard pollution is particularly useful for environmental readings of film in general, and, in particular, for analyzing the opening sequence of *The Red Light Bandit*. By hard pollution, Serres means: "solid residues, liquids, and gases, emitted throughout the atmosphere by big industrial companies or gigantic garbage dumps, the shameful signature of big cities." He categorizes soft pollution in terms of:

tsunamis of writing, signs, images, and logos flooding rural, civic, public and natural spaces as well as landscapes with their advertising. Even though different in terms of energy, garbage and marks nevertheless result from the same soiling gesture, from the same intention to appropriate, and are of animal origin. [...] [I]n combination with hard pollution, soft pollution proceeds from the same drive. (Serres 2011, 41-42)

In the first scenes of the movie, the spectator reads what the voice over is saying in a news ticker (fig. 3). The crawler itself reminds us of the avant-garde obsession with urban modernity and technology. It does so while exposing the contradictions behind Brazil's desire to establish a fully developed capitalist economy during this critical historical period, which was shaped by a military dictatorship. On the one hand, the words in the ticker locate Brazil in the "terceiro mundo," when describing the film itself as a "faroeste do terceiro mundo" ["Third World western"]. In other words, the desire for the modern that the avant-garde embodies, materialized in the ticker, coexist with a very different Brazil within the same territory. As for the scene that follows, it takes

place at a landfill site, making the contradictions of Brazilian modernity even more pungent, while exposing the consequences of unsustainable development in Latin America.



Fig. 3: Initial scene of *The Red Light Bandit*, by Rogério Sganzerla.

I claimed above that the initial sequence, and the landfill scene in particular, lays bare the link between environmental injustice and crime in Sganzerla's film. At this point, I will turn my attention to another important association proposed by Sganzerla's work, which becomes evident in the initial sequence. The news ticker, with its tsunami of writing, to use Serres's expression, emerges as an exemplary source of soft pollution. Its relevance for an ecocritical reading becomes even more striking when considered alongside the process of montage in these first moments of the film. The apparent celebration of technological development is followed by the above-mentioned scene, in which children play with (supposedly) toy guns amid garbage and empty barrels—obviously exposing the links between pollution, environmental injustice, the extraction of natural resources, and war (figs. 1 and 2). From these initial scenes and the process of montage used by Sganzerla, the urban space of São Paulo emerges as a toxic, unsustainable environment, where both hard and soft forms of pollution abound. *Cinema do lixo* has its origins precisely in this toxic environment. In what follows, I suggest that this continuum between soft and hard pollution plays a crucial role in the materialization of an environmental politics and aesthetics in *The Red Light Bandit*.

The spectator is introduced to the red light bandit as the police chase him through the streets of downtown São Paulo. Through fast-paced montage, the film gives the spectator a sense of urban disorientation, which frequently emerges in depictions of modern cityscapes. At this point, Sganzerla's film reminds us of the long

tradition of similar avant-garde representations of urban space, with its roots in modernist cinema of the early twentieth-century, such as *The Man with the Movie Camera*, from 1929, by Dziga Vertov, and, in the case of Brazil, *São Paulo symphonia da metropole*, from 1929 as well. However, the avant-garde of the early twentieth-century is not the only aesthetic reference in Sganzerla's movie. The voice over and the news ticker, in the first scene, announce the film as a “faroeste do terceiro mundo” [“Third World western”], as I have already mentioned. In fact, the red light bandit does often resemble a cowboy in the way that he hides his face with a bandana and tries to escape police persecution. At a certain point there is even a scene of a battle between cowboys and Indians (which seems to be taken from an American western) that arises suddenly and for no apparent reason during the film. It disappears as inexplicably as it had appeared. Other scenes remind the spectator of different styles, such as the French *nouvelle vague*, the Brazilian *chanchadas*, cinema noir, and European neo-realism (and concomitantly *cinema novo* itself, strongly influenced by neo-realism). While the initial scene of the news ticker points to the toxic dimension of the urban environment's soft pollution, Sganzerla's movie itself, by incorporating in various manners all these cinematic references, suggests that *cinema do lixo* itself is a toxic environment. It is made of a tsunami of signs and images, both local and global, which are “dumped” (sometimes quite literally, as is the case with the scene taken from an American western) in the film.

The notion of *cinema do lixo* as a landfill of forms of soft pollution has still other political and aesthetic implications, particularly when the importance of North American pop culture and Hollywood cinema in 1960s Brazil is considered. In the already-cited interview from 1966, Sganzerla makes an interesting comment about the relationship between his work and North American cinema, which is relevant for an ecological reading of the use of different styles in *The Red Light Bandit*. According to him, “É dessa troca entre um cinema superdesenvolvido e um cinema subdesenvolvido que nasce um conflito, uma dialética, uma energia. Os filmes que pretendo fazer terão aproximações com King Vidor e Howard Hawks. Não digo influências. Antes poderia ser uma revisão e uma crítica do cinema americano” [“From this exchange between an overdeveloped cinema and an underdeveloped one a conflict arises, a dialectics, an energy. The films that I intend to make will share aspects with King Vidor and Howard Hawks. I would not say influences. I would define them as remakings and criticism of American cinema.”] (Sganzerla 2007, 16). Serres's concept of soft pollution is particularly important for my argument at this point because it enables us to theorize

this process of revision and critique, to use Sganzerla's words, in two interconnected ways, which have both political and aesthetic consequences.

On the one hand, more than a simple pastiche of different styles, Sganzerla's process is analogous to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly process of recycling—recycling forms of soft pollution. On the other hand, when read through the lens of Serres's argument, the global expansion of the North American film industry (and to a certain extent the European film industry) might be considered as a tsunami of planetary proportions of writings, signs, and images. This tsunami turned Latin America and the whole world into a gigantic landfill of these forms of soft pollution, while creating a highly polluting industry.¹¹ As for the roots of this process, they are located in the same human desire to appropriate the world that drives the global proliferation of hard pollution. In turn, Sganzerla's appropriation and recycling of these authors and traditions emerge—when considered in relation to Serres's manifesto—as a response to this drive, a less appropriative and more sustainable one in terms of its relationship with the environment, precisely because it depends mostly on recycling. Moreover, Sganzerla's work proposes an aesthetic model for a Latin American appropriation of cinema itself, based on this process of artistic recycling. By the appropriation of cinema itself (following Serres), I mean the affirmation of a place through pollution—in this case resulting from recycled material—for his work and for Brazilian cinema in general, in the imaginary space of world cinema.

The process of affirmation of a space for his work both in Brazil and globally through an aesthetics at least in part based on recycling other cinematic traditions—which Sganzerla defines as the making of a dirty cinema—becomes even more evident when we turn to a comment Sganzerla made in an interview with Alex Viany, published in May 1969. Viany tries to provoke Sganzerla by reminding him that he had previously proposed the “destruição de Jean-Luc Godar [sic] [...], entre outros, em benefício do cinema brasileiro” (Sganzerla 2007, 32) [“destruction of Jean-Luc Godar [sic] [...], among others, for the benefit of Brazilian cinema”]. Viany's reference arises from his perplexity regarding the fact that *The Red Light Bandit* is, according to his taste, rather *godardiano*. Sganzerla's response is particularly relevant for my reading and as such it is worth quoting at length:

Procurei colocar Godard dentro do *Bandido* para—aproveitando-me do estilo, das facilidades que ele inventou para o cinema moderno—tentar fazer com que

¹¹ For a detailed study of Hollywood's environmental impact, see: *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret. The Hidden Environmental Costs of the Movies*, by Hunter Vaughan.

o próprio Godard fosse também um assunto do filme. Eu tinha de filmar Godard. Para que pudesse reencarnar Godard, esse tipo de cinema que influencia a maioria dos cineastas da nova geração, era preciso utilizar citações diretas, fazer quase um pastiche e, partindo da citação óbvia, chegar quase a um trabalho de limpeza. (Sganzerla 2007, 33)

[I tried to include Godard in *The Red Light Bandit*—using his style, the easy approach that he invented for modern cinema—so that I could turn Godard into a topic in the film. I had to film Godard. For me to embody Godard, that kind of cinema that influences the majority of filmmakers of the new generation, I had to use direct quotes, do something like a pastiche and, using the obvious citation, arrive at a work of cleaning.]

At first, it may not be absolutely clear what Sganzerla meant by “work of cleaning.” Sganzerla’s *cinema do lixo* shared with Glauber Rocha’s *cinema novo* the desire to create a quintessential Latin American cinema, as the latter famously stated in his influential manifesto “An Aesthetics of Hunger.” When read in this context, Sganzerla’s “work of cleaning” is, I claim, a very suggestive way of describing his process of collecting this very particular kind of dirt (soft pollution) and recycling foreign and national authors and traditions in the making of a national cinema. This process allowed him to create cinema from the landfill and bring it to the world, using recycled, impure material to find a place for himself and his vision for Brazilian cinema in a global context. In other words, *cinema do lixo* is an impure cinema that writes/films back from the landfill—understood in terms of a dump site for both hard and soft forms of pollution—in an attempt to create its own style, which places an ecological ethics of recycling at the core of its drive to affirm and occupy a place for itself in the context of world cinema. To use Schuster’s words: it hurls “contamination against the contaminators,” while imagining an avant-garde aesthetics of sustainability (Schuster 2015, 135).

The red light bandit is not necessarily Brazilian. No one knows where he is from, and he keeps asking: “Who am I?” throughout the film (from the very beginning). We can only be sure that he is Latin American. Nevertheless, the film, according to Sganzerla, is a quintessential Brazilian one, which, in turn, suggests that the red light bandit may also be a Brazilian bandit. It is possible to argue that Sganzerla’s aesthetics of recycling and appropriation, which I have been defining, represents a version of Oswald de Andrade’s anthropophagy, but with a twist. The director himself declared his proximity to Oswald de Andrade. In an interview from 1969, while rejecting the idea that he belonged to any artistic group, particularly the *tropicalistas*, Sganzerla declared that what brought him close to the *tropicalistas* was precisely his admiration for Oswald the Andrade (Sganzerla 2007, 40). Sganzerla’s place in the long tradition of

Brazilian artists who desired to create a quintessential Brazilian art is, however, unique. This uniqueness resides precisely in the ecological sensibility that emerges from the process of creating a dirty cinema, using avant-garde techniques, speaking against environmental degradation and social injustice, and proposing a model for a more sustainable cinema and an avant-garde aesthetics of sustainability for the future.

Undoing a Toxic World

The Red Light Bandit proposes a parody and a critique of both clean capitalism and right-wing populism, with their unrestrained drive for the appropriation of the nation's natural resources. The voice over in the first scenes defines Brazil's economic situation with short and strong statements; at a certain point the spectator hears "O Brasil à toa na última etapa do capitalismo" ["Brazil is lost in the final stage of capitalism"]. However, the most relevant part of Sganzerla's parody of Brazil's desire to participate in global capitalism comes in the form of a candidate for the presidency, *Boca do Lixo's* own candidate. The candidate's name is suggestive itself: J. B. da Silva. Silva is a very common name in Brazil—perhaps the most common in the whole Lusophone world. He is the common Brazilian man. As for J. B., it reminds us immediately of a well-known whiskey brand. J. B. da Silva is, thus, a synthesis of international corporate capitalism and the quintessential Brazilian man. While placing this intriguing character in context is beyond the scope of this article, it is important, however, to look briefly at some of his very peculiar campaign slogans and unsustainable policies: "O petróleo é nosso!" ["The oil is ours!"];¹² "sem miséria não existe folclore" ["without misery there is no folklore"]; "Viva a pobreza!" ["long live poverty!"]. He is, in sum, a parody of both Brazilian capitalism and those who believed in the redemptive value of populist nationalism in the Brazilian context of late 1960s. The celebration of poverty and a call for the nationalization of natural resources go hand in hand in his campaign. At a certain point, J. B. da Silva even goes so far as promising to his potential voters that he will distribute *picaretas elétricas* [electric picks], showing eloquently his lack of respect for people and his desire to pollute the Brazilian environment with another useless technology.¹³

The threats of environmental destruction caused by fossil fuels and nuclear Armageddon are also mentioned in the movie in other moments (starting with the

¹² "O petróleo é nosso" was a famous Getúlio Vargas's slogan.

¹³ Eventually, Sganzerla will call his films "filmes picaretas" (Sganzerla 2007, 10).

suggestive name of the producer: *Urânio* [Uranium]). Being a toxic metal—exposure to uranium has severe consequences for humans—and a hyperobject, to use Timothy Morton’s concept, uranium is both lethal and a challenge for human understanding (Morton 2013).¹⁴ As such, it shares crucial features with climate change itself—also an hyperobject that defies human understanding. However, the only “environmental disaster” that actually takes place in the movie is the distribution of fake money in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The police suspect Martin Bormann, the famous German Nazi who had escaped to Latin America after World War II, as being the perpetrator of this event. At a superficial level, the analogy between the Third Reich and corporate capitalism is obvious—J. B. da Silva also thought that he could solve the problems of Brazil by distributing useless objects (not money, but electric picks). Less obvious but perhaps more important is the possible analogy between money and pollution that the film proposes. Returning briefly to Serres’ manifesto, he calls our attention to the fact that the “general equivalent in Marx—money—serves as excrement in Freud, whose invaluable pages on the second anal stage define it as such” (Serres 2011, 47). Considering this reading, it is possible to affirm that the episode of the distribution of money (even if it is fake), in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, emerges as a similar process of appropriation, which, in Sganzerla’s film, exposes the mechanisms of capitalist appropriation of environments and lives through excrement/money/pollution.

Contrasting with this process of appropriation through excrement/fake money, the red light bandit represents the exact opposite: he is the one who offers dispossession. He rejects and transgresses the social borders imposed by money and dirt (excrement and pollution). Even if he is seen as pollution—by the detective who chases him and advocates for the social cleansing of the Boca do Lixo district, as I previously mentioned—he, in fact, responds to and works against the social boundaries established by pollution and environmental injustice in Latin America and its urban environments. *Cinema do lixo* emerged as the first toxic consequences of industrial and urban development were becoming visible in places like São Paulo. It is thus not surprising that it responded to environmental injustice by exposing the deep intertwining of the three pillars of sustainability—environment, society, and economy. In doing so, the aesthetics of sustainability that *cinema do lixo* proposes is still valid today.

¹⁴ According to Morton, an hyperobject is something that is so “massively distributed in time and space” that it questions traditional ideas about what a thing is in first place (Morton 2013, 1). Uranium, for example, is an hyperobject due to its half-life, 4.468 billion years—the time required for its radioactivity to fall to half of its original value.

It projected what we might consider to be a true avant-garde—able to grasp “what lay *en avant*,” what was to come (Gosh 2016, 125).

The anarchic nature of ecological transgression that we find in Sganzerla’s movie would emerge in different parts of the globe in various movements whose proposal was the “refusal to clean oneself up, get a job, and be productive in a world where productivity is defined by depletion of life energy and global resources” (Schuster 2015, 148).¹⁵ I do not wish to finish this article with an apology for criminal transgression and robbery as legitimate, sustainable, and ecological responses to the capitalist Anthropocene. The red light bandit is not an “eco-hero” (Robin and Heumann 2009, 10) who acts alone, attempting to save the planet from environmental disaster by his own example. I do believe, however, that the desire to change our relationship with the environment that *cinema do lixo* embodies, particularly when the figure of the red light bandit is considered alongside the ethics, aesthetics, and politics of recycling that Sganzerla’s avant-garde cinema proposes, resonates or should resonate with the way we think a sustainable future for Latin America. When imagining a Brazilian dirty cinema, Sganzerla created an aesthetics that reveals the power of film to act as a site for reflection and a transformative force for the construction of a more sustainable future for Brazil and for the world. Contrary to what could be expected, the avant-garde seems, thus, to have something to teach us regarding the forms that this sustainable future for Latin America might take.

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¹⁵ Schuster is referring to punk rock. The ecological ethics of *cinema do lixo* share several aspects with the ecological ethics of punk rock, as it is described by Schuster.

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