

# Like a Wrecking Ball: The Creative Queer Spaces of Gustavo Vinagre’s “New Dubai”

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The aim of the article is to analyse the creative queer spaces of Gustavo Vinagre’s movie *New Dubai*. The main argument indicates that gay sex creatively brings the possibility of resistance against gentrification and questions heteronormative rules in the organization of society and space. Sex and the violence of the interventions in the context of the real estate speculation point to the violence and voyeurism of filming, especially of filming sex.

*Keywords:* Queer spaces, Queer movies, Gustavo Vinagre, New Dubai, Brazilian cinema, Brazil, gentrification

## Introduction

Gustavo Vinagre’s movie *New Dubai* (“Nova Dubai” in Portuguese), released in 2014, is a hybrid work which combines aspects of a documentary and an art film and is set in a lower middle-class neighborhood of São José dos Campos, a city of nearly 700,000 inhabitants in the Brazilian state of São Paulo. The affective memory of a group of friends in the neighborhood is threatened by the real estate speculation. The group faces the brutality of real state speculation by having sex in the construction sites which will be transformed into a “new Dubai” by displacing the locals and building anonymous high-rise luxury apartments. Vinagre—who is the director and also a character in the movie—and his close friend Bruno D’Ugo challenge the link among architecture, finance, and gentrification with explicit and unsimulated sex in apartments and construction sites. Vinagre and D’Ugo eventually manage to penetrate the half-finished architectural landscape, where the buildings are being constructed, and explore the queer rebellion by using the body and sexuality as means to trouble heterosexist realities. Interspersed scenes with their friends Fernando Maia and Hugo Guimarães bring musings on horror films and suicide, respectively (Zeiba, 2014).

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## The Capitalist Occupation of the City and the Queer Spaces of Resistance

*New Dubai* is a movie in which characters occupy spaces and walk on the streets of a city in rapid transformation as the result of real estate speculation that brings towers, sets of buildings and offices that violate

the landscape and nullify urban and architectural identities at an accelerated pace in many parts of the Brazilian territory (Figueiredo et al., 2019; Jesus, 2011). In a Brazilian middle-class neighborhood, the real estate speculation threatens the affective spaces of the memory of a group of friends, and their response is to have sex in public places and buildings (Bonez, 2014). The characters walk through construction sites, pass on new buildings in the style of futuristic towers, talk and have sex with each other and with construction workers on sites for future construction. To occupy is to resist, even if resistance can be annihilated by more destructive forces of the capitalist occupation of spaces. The characters' actions and stories—particularly their sexual acts—are described in detail, either to each other or directly to the camera. The past is filled by melancholic memories, unfulfilled desires, and violence. Decoupage prioritizes the dialectical relationship between human types and scenarios, the displacements of the human amid a space in identity and symbolic degeneration (Oriente, 2014).

In the first scene of the film, Vinagre explicitly licks D'Ugo's anus. The sex scenes are intensified, and some become more violent in the movie, as a metaphor for the unstoppable growth of new and large constructions that take over urban spaces. Such sex scenes are interspersed with scenes in which one of the characters, a friend of the protagonists, appears lying in shorts on a bed talking about suicide, and another comments on horror films. Both express directly to the camera the horror of living in a society that oppresses their desires (Bonez, 2014).

In their leisure time, the life of Vinagre and D'Ugo—two middle-class young gay men—is characterized by friendship, even though they seem unable to become a couple. They go out to walk the dogs, talk to Vinagre's mother while they eat and then she takes them to sleep as if they were children. They watch television behind D'Ugo's father, before going for a walk. They watch video clips on YouTube and pursue new sexual encounters through platforms such as Facebook or Growl. The presentation of these scenes alternates with the "talking heads" of the documentary genre in a type of story like the testimonial ones, which introduce subjective narratives related to the sexual experiences of the characters. Some of the examples are observed when Vinagre remembers that he wanted to have sexual relations with his grandmother or the moment when his grandfather stopped carrying him because of an illness. D'Ugo's father says he was a victim of a collective rape and later reveals that the first time he had an orgasm was with a rape scene in a porn movie (Martinelli, 2017).

In another scene, Vinagre and his mother look at a magazine with luxury homes. The screen fills with swimming pools and advertisements with happy families. The sound replenishes the passage of sheets of the magazine. The house they live in is for sale but selling the house would not bring enough money to move to such expensive places. Vinagre's father no longer lives with them. The family game establishes a tinge of decadence on the middle-class characters with few expectations for the future. Clearly, the characters' home differs greatly from the comfortable spaces featured in the magazine (Martinelli, 2017).

At the same time, Vinagre and D'Ugo do not limit themselves to private environments. They are often confronted by the instability of things. Faced with the impossibility of inertia, they react through sex. Vinagre and D'Ugo become "sex machines". The dialogues and actions between them resemble gay porn clichés. The purely physical experience that takes place almost in the form of attacks during the film is not presented negatively. The appropriation of erotic commonplaces points creatively to their own deconstruction for other purposes, as if only sex could remind the characters of their condition as human beings in the light of so many capitalist interventions in the place where they live (Falkemback, 2014). The "desiring machines" do not stop deranging while they are working, and they work deranged: production is always grafted into the product, and the machine parts are also

the fuel. Art often uses this property and creates elements that “short-circuit” social production with a desiring production. It introduces a breakdown function in the reproduction of sociotechnical machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 2020). The powers of the body create zones of creative virtualities, which can face the power relations of social life, conceived in their character of dominance and paralysis (Lima, 2017). In the light of the criticism of the real estate speculation, the actor / director’s body reacts to the forces of uniformity in the city characterized by the real estate capitalism. Sex with other men changes the common order of the use of spaces and bodies by destabilizing the already learned notions of progress that the construction of large buildings is supposed to bring to São José dos Campos (Martins, 2017).

Vinagre says that he cannot have sexual pleasure indoors. He breaks not only with the discipline that prevails in the systematic occupation of space, but the repression of individual desires in a capitalist society. When he confesses his desires, he criticizes the techniques for the confession of personal desires that were followed by classification and interpretation, as if they should be regulated by systems of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1986). In an excerpt from the film, Vinagre has sex with D’Ugo’s father—who Vinagre calls “dad” because of the sexual attraction he feels for his own father—in a construction site, with explicit scenes of erect penises and body fluids. Sex is as explicit as the view of large buildings. Nothing seems to be left out of the view. Everything is exposed, from the bodies in action to the feelings of the characters, who strip themselves physically and mentally with their acts and statements. At the same time, the characters fail to create strong bonds among them. Vinagre and D’Ugo are unable to establish themselves as lovers. The sexualization of the environment has become so alarming as a reaction against the rampant advancement of real estate speculation and the desumanization of the environment, that it seemed impossible to connect with other people with no geolocalization apps for alternative gay sexual encounters (Bonez, 2014).

Male bodies of the most varied forms and ages are used in the film as objects of pleasure, which perverts the values of the Brazilian patriarchal and sexist society, which usually sees women as sexual objects. The destabilization of the patterns of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1995) is clear when Vinagre and D’Ugo have sex with a muscular construction worker in one of their sexual incursions (Bonez, 2014), in which such worker claims to have had sex with women and even with other male construction workers in that space. The queer space created by homosexual sex provided a place for the generation of new types of relationships (Foucault, 1986, 1996). Sex in the construction sites destabilizes the capitalist notion that male bodies should be organized for work (Jesus, 2014) and allows the existence of alternative sexual experiences in relation to the ones imposed by heteronormative rules. The experience of the transformation of the construction sites into queer spaces of resistance also reveals that the capitalist order does not allow workers to access the product of their work, especially in the context of the income inequality in Brazil. Like other local workers, the worker who had sex with Vinagre and D’Ugo revealed that he was going to raise a family with his female lover, but he would never be able to buy the luxury apartments he had built. Before having sex with Vinagre and D’Ugo, the construction worker gives an interview to them and reports his sexual experiences, according to a form of setting and scenic disposition that emulate the strategies of an interview in the field of classic documentary movies. Soon after, the sexual performance among the filmed subject in the previous shot and the two young men who interviewed him shows that the relationship between whoever films and who is filmed is radically transformed into an effectively carnal engagement (Lima, 2017).

The centrality of the sex scenes emerges as a response to the anxiety and sense of disconnection caused by the rapid transformation of the city, in the wake of countless real estate developments in the context of the "Brazilian economic boom" of the late 2000s and early 2010s (Jesus, 2012, 2013). The characters also react to the conversion of urban spaces into hostile environments with an immersion in media landscapes. Pop culture is used as a repertoire evoked in the viewers' memory. For example, the song "Wrecking Ball", performed by singer Miley Cyrus, was initially quoted in a video fragment incorporated into the film and later resumed in the scene in which D'Ugo sings the song looking at the camera about the demolitions involved in the real state capitalism and the need to destroy the basis of this system. The revisiting of pop culture was also visible in the case of the character who talks about horror movies to the camera. The horror narratives the character talks about are related to the universe of references that make up the terror promoted by real estate speculation (Ramalho, 2020).

### **Pornterrorism and Creativity in the Queer Spaces of "New Dubai"**

*New Dubai* presents itself as a "pornoterrorist" attack, as Vinagre defines the film. It is not just a story of two friends or a satire on porn or interpellations that present stories of encounters or horror. The terror takes place in the brutal capitalist expansion, which destroys memories and experiences the characters had in the place where they lived. Homosexuality, although almost free of affection and love in the movie, is a creative search for survival and the affirmation of marginal subjects in the context of the expansion of real state speculation. The scene in which Vinagre and D'Ugo visit an apartment for sale and sexually attack the real estate agent—who seems proud of the advances of the capitalist real state speculation in the landscape, which will look like a "new Dubai"—is a proof of the reaction to the capitalist ferocity. The aesthetics is based on the resistance of life through its most intrinsic elements, but sometimes difficult to deal with, such as melancholy and violence (Falkemback, 2014). The homosexual scenes throughout different spaces of the city open the way to dissident sexualities to interrupt the established boundaries. The ritualized transgression can be understood as a creative claim for the legitimacy of other sexualities to inhabit the public space (Martinelli, 2017).

In the scene mentioned above, a visit to a building under construction, along the lines of an apparently appeased contemplation of a future family life in spacious suites and gourmet balconies, turns into an act of sexual violence committed by Vinagre and D'Ugo to the real estate agent, who leads the tour through the rooms of a new apartment and is forced to have oral sex on Vinagre. Before the act of violence, the three characters were together at a window, looking out of the field. The real estate agent praises the view of the landscape of rising buildings, in the vertical city real estate project, composed by large office towers. For the market, the terrain is just a space to be filled by buildings. Then Vinagre and D'Ugo directly attack the enemy, personalized by the man who tries to sell the promise of the dream and starts to be sexually violated. The camera seems to be explicitly involved in the performances, asking the viewer to participate in an extremely aggressive and direct way. The constant tension between the staging and the real sex is a way of appealing to the spectator's involvement. The close and participatory filming contributes to strengthen the relationship with the viewer (Lima, 2017).

The movie also escapes the assimilationist logic of occupation of the city spaces by "pink capitalism" (Jesus, 2017) that expects LGBT people to adjust to the culture and orientations of the dominant heteronormative rules. Faced with the destruction of the affective space by the policies of the state and the market (Jesus, 2010), the unfolding of the film is structured in a set of practices of body appropriation of the city amid the reconfigured

landscape: outdoor sex scenes, alternated with conversations inside the houses about death, love, family relationships and memory. In addition to a nostalgic response that would try to rescue a lost feeling, the film goes on to a direct confrontation, which passes through the expression of the bodies' desires in the city. The expression of bodies in sexual performances becomes one of the combat elements, in the public space, between cinema—with an anarchic and iconoclastic attitude—and the world. The explicit sex scenes are part of the project even of putting in crisis a way of organizing urban space. The tactic is, then, to dialogue, on the one hand, with the pornographic machine that generates carnal resonance and belief in the real, and, on the other, to tension the social machine that organizes flows in the urban space. When D'Ugo enunciates a dream that he has of constituting a world where he and his friends could do whatever they wanted to do as a gang—accompanied by a set of Super-8 images, as a filter to make images seem older on Instagram –, the movie presents the possibility of other sensitive manifestations, in which all the characters can come together to create a different place for affections and eliminate the territory of restrictions (Lima, 2017). In the final scene, Vinagre and D'Ugo accompany their friend Guimarães—who has been interviewed and talked about an unsuccessful attempt to kill himself—to a tree in the open field. They help him hang there. This last turn is presented as the pessimistic trait of a generation that has no expectation about the possibilities of housing and the job market. In a general shot, the camera frames the tree with the hanged man. It is a reflective procedure in which it is possible to contemplate the horizon: the wide sky, the imposing buildings, and the mountains (Martinelli, 2017).

### Final Considerations

Vinagre's *New Dubai* takes the form of an intimate and erotic diary. The director uses his own body for the main character. The filmmaker overlaps with the protagonist and builds a narrative close to what has been called a "first-person documentary" without being one, due to the force given to the fictionalization process and also because the search for the film exceeds the interest of constructing a testimonial document. Public spaces are sexualized throughout the film in different ways. Sex is practiced in visible places or the characters watch a video of a muscular man masturbating on the internet in a train station, for example. Vinagre masturbates on a bridge over a highway and the camera records his ejaculation. The shot saves the moment in which the semen spills over the road (Martinelli, 2017).

The originality of *New Dubai* comes from the transformation of the dramatic structure into cinematographic matter, the recreated situations, the extremely frontal staging, the emphatic ambiguities of dealing with desire and overcoming sexual interdictions and the precariousness of the subjects' belonging in a turbulent world of difficult diagnosis. The movie is a political work of resistance, confrontation, and denial of a homogenizing status quo. The resistance is articulated by the subjects' self-affirmation through their acts and the powers of their bodies. Sex—which is both shown and narrated, a consensual act and an act of violence—is the affirmation of the confrontation, as well as the domination. The disconcerting sincerity and brutality of the movie are the driving forces that seek the imperfect truth of speech and images and, even more, the greater political gesture of filming (Oriente, 2014). *New Dubai* shows that the space practices are radically experienced by the sexual and tensioning experience of the stability of norms. The laws that organize places are combined with the ones that limit the expression of desire. The engagement of *New Dubai* brings, therefore, a double movement: there is tension with

a city crossed by real estate speculation, in the same step in which sexuality regulatory schemes are put in crisis (Lima, 2017).

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