

FILM REVIEW

Fradique, dir. *Ar Condicionado*. 2020. 72 minutes. Portuguese, with Portuguese, English or French Subtitles. Luanda, Angola. Geração 80. No price reported.

The movie *Ar Condicionado*, by Angolan director Fradique, tells the story of dreamers caught between revolt and resignation. The main dreamer, however, is the director himself, paying homage to Luanda, his city of birth, which was so dramatically transformed in the 1980s and 1990s by the arrival of thousands of people displaced by the civil war (1975–2002). In Fradique’s words, *Ar Condicionado* is “a reminder that our city is made up of people, memories and not empty, glazed skyscrapers, inspired by soap operas or American films” (from the media kit by Geração 80).

The film was shot on location in a building that sits right in the middle of the city. The sealed elevator, the graffiti on the walls, the labyrinth of electricity cables and water pipes in the backyard, and the colorful clothes hung on the rooftop are no artificial set. In this sense, Fradique’s dream is reminiscent of Jean Rouch’s direct cinema experimentations. Most people who appear in the film play their own role, be it boys running up and down the stairs, girls singing and dancing in the corridors, men playing ludo on the pavement, or women cooking in huge steaming pots. *Ar Condicionado* captures the beating heart of urban life in Luanda, with its diastolic hopes and its systolic despairs. Immersive sequence shots, along with meticulous soundscapes and impeccable photography, all contribute to this sensitive dive into the everyday.

What is the most admirable, though, is not the film’s ability to capture “the reality,” but rather the cautious effort to avoid romanticism or to unmake the brutality of a bare documentary gaze. The experimental jazzy soundtrack derails our contemplative attention. Silent sequences radically negate the viewer’s conventional expectations of documentary cinema by exposing the artificial juxtaposition of images and subtitles. Last but not least, the narrative backbone inspired by the magical realism of Angolan literature irremediably projects us into a world of fiction: air conditioners are mysteriously falling off the walls. Crackling radios reporting on the unexplained phenomenon punctuate the soundtrack, creating a background of conspiracy theories and apocalyptic preaching. In *Ar Condicionado*, the city has reached its limits,

and the loud noise of ACs crashing to the ground is a reminder of how unsustainable the whole Angolan “system” is. The realistic portrait of Luanda becomes dystopic illusion. Fantasy also allows the dreams of each character to assume lives of their own.

Kota Mino (David Caracol) is the only character who is able to realize his own dream. The repairman lives in a shop where the dismantled ACs become the fuel for a fantastic machine that transports its users into a parallel world made of the memories of those who once owned the broken devices. This fictional machine perfectly embodies the very act of film-making.

Zeinha (Filomena Manuel) works as a maid in the house of an authoritarian boss who is infuriated by the loss of his AC. Zeinha’s unruffled deference contrasts with the coarse language of her boss, but the contemplative slowness she enacts in stirring her tea suggests a subtle capacity for resistance. Zeinha uses daydreaming as a shield against aggression, fear, and domination. She enlists Matacedo (José Kiteculo) on her mission to retrieve the boss’ AC from Kota Mino’s shop. Matacedo’s inertia then becomes her response to the boss’ scornful behaviour.

Matacedo is an obliging handyman who feels a responsibility for each and every person who lives in the building. Skillful sequence shots show him taking groceries up the stairs, delivering heavy gas bottles, walking along dark corridors, or bathing in the water that falls from broken drainpipes. While Zeinha embodies the “quiet encroachment” of the working class described by Asef Bayat, Matacedo’s silent ballet in and out the belly of the building rather suggests the interiorization of an authoritarian value system where the petrodollars flowing at the top systematically obliterate the struggle of the majority underneath. It is as if his body slowly has become one with the cement envelope. Although I’m not sure AbduMaliq Simone’s idea of “people as infrastructure” easily fits with Fradique’s magical realism, thinking of Matacedo as the keystone of the “infrastructure” that allows Luanda to stand on its feet is to me a powerful way of responding to the director’s own dream.

“My desire is that the film may now join the fallen air conditioners and be part of the living memory of this city,” writes Fradique in the media kit. In October 2021, after being shown at more than thirty international film festivals, *Ar Condicionado* won the award for best feature film at the “Unitel Angola Move” festival, one of the first Angolan film festivals of its kind. Reacting to this victory, the creative director of Geração 80, Ngoi Salucombo, stated on social media, “we can go around the world but it is absolutely essential and always special when we are celebrated at home.”

Ar Condicionado has definitely met and exceeded the expectations of those who, like Kota Mino, are keen to escape by using the dreams and memories of others. But it is now time to find ways for Matacedo’s hard work and Zeinha’s determination to produce a ripple effect beyond the protected spheres of indie cinema and reflexive visual anthropology. My dream, if I

dare, would be that in the crumbling buildings of Luanda, bathing under the gutter or stirring one's tea a little bit too slowly become acts of freedom rather than of necessity.

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.53

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