

Herbert Duschenes' Amateur Exilic Films: Cinematic and Social Territories in the Family Film *Ronny* – 1949-1950

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Submitted: February 15, 2020 – Published: July 30, 2020

Abstract

In this article, we ponder how exile impacts the act of filming and its results in amateur filmmaking. I do so by studying the family films made by Herbert Duschenes, a German, partly Jewish architect and art history lecturer who moved to Brazil in 1940. I specifically analyze a sequence of the short film *Ronny – 1949-1950* (1950), part of his earlier work focusing on the family he started in São Paulo. Thus, I address the sensitive relationship between the native household help that appears on camera and their European employer behind it, by bringing to light the interaction between the African-Brazilian nannies and the family they assist, and the blurry boundaries regarding the place these servants occupy not only in the home and society, but in the frame.

Keywords: Herbert Duschenes; Amateur film; Family film; Film archive; Exile; Nannies.

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1 Some questions of territory

In this article, I analyze a sequence of Herbert Duschenes' film *Ronny – 1949-1950* (32 min., black and white, silent, 1950).¹ More specifically, I refer to the notion of immanent analysis (Xavier et al. 2003), a method that allows the researcher to ask what the images say by combining the stylistic analysis and the interpretation of a film, thus avoiding the predominance of established concepts that could override the immanent dynamic of the film in question. By using this procedure, my goal is to see beyond what the filmmaker wants to show – or make the viewer see –, penetrating the structure of some of the relationships Duschenes developed in his adoptive homeland, Brazil. Furthermore, this approach is particularly fitting in the case of films like Duschenes', that were never studied until I wrote a thesis on them at the School of Communications and Arts of University of São Paulo.

Duschenes was a German, partly Jewish architect, born in Hamburg in 1914 in a cultivated and affluent family, and with a passion for photography since adolescence. Even though his life was far from uneventful, two facts were pivotal in giving it, still today, a dimension worthy of attention: firstly, his exile from Nazi Germany in 1940 and, secondly, the collection of 227 short silent amateur films² in 8mm and S8, both in black and white and in color he left when he died in Curitiba, in 2003. I articulate the notion of exile in relation to amateur filmmaking, focusing on their points of confluence, how they interrelate and impact each other, engendering films that are “both a cinema *of* exile and a cinema *in* exile” (Naficy 2001, 10) with a very particular gaze and commentary upon the world.

Exilic amateur filmmaking offers an inverse perspective to official representations of History and this is the motor of my interest, the rupture with “the distance generally adopted by filmic historic representations that [...] seek to create the illusion of making us face the past as it would have been, with no mediation between events and the images on the screen” (Morettin 2016). I point out that, by amateur filmmaking, I here understand primarily the works that precede the surge of digital video and digital platforms that brought substantial changes to image production and diffusion modes, not to mention its effects on the course of the debate in the audiovisual field.

I begin by reflecting on how the notion of displacement may lend itself to the study and comprehension of amateur films and archives. I then narrow the focus on the context in which Duschenes started filming after his arrival in São Paulo. Since his cinematic work is little known, I use as a reference Jonas Mekas, a filmmaker who, like Duschenes, David Perlov and many others, is part of a tradition of exilic cinema and worked in an authorial, artisanal key. But, above all, we owe to Mekas “the recognition given to personal cinema today, thanks both to his own work as a cinematic diarist and to his work as a critic and programmer” (Blucher 2007, 26). Through this analogy, I seek to better understand the circumstances and results of this particular kind of filmmaking, which may mobilize the life of the filmmaker without necessarily penetrating commercial circuits.

In the last part of the article, I close in on a sequence of a film Duschenes made on his six-year old son Ronaldo, or Ronny. Among nearly a dozen films featuring the boy, I chose *Ronny* because it is one of the most complete and expressive examples of the late 1940s, early 1950s period, when family was still Duschenes' main subject. Usually portrayed alone or interacting with family and friends – for the most part European émigrés –, in the sequence, the boy is shown playing with his nanny, a house maid and her daughter. This fleeting moment of amateur filmmaking – the entire scene lasts no more than two minutes –, is an extraordinary example of the relationship between people from different countries who, through force of circumstance, have to live together, as well as the type of coexistence and cultural friction it entails: on the one hand, a white European male exile and his Brazilian-born son, and on the other, the Afro-descendant Brazilian women who work as maids for him and his family. In order to substantiate the differences between the representation of household servants by Brazilians and by foreigners, as well as emphasize Duschenes' original approach to the matter, I refer to the documentary *Nannies (Babás, 2010)*, by Consuelo Lins.³

1. *Ronny – 1949-1950*, dir. by Herbert Duschenes (1949-50). (excerpt). <https://vimeo.com/420931934> (password: ronnydu1950) (Last accessed: 21-05-2020).
2. The Herbert Duschenes film collection was donated by the family to the Multimedia Archive of the Centro Cultural São Paulo, in 2010.
3. *Nannies (Babás)*, dir. by Consuelo Lins (2010). <http://portacurtas.org.br/filme/?name=babas> (Last accessed: 14-05-2020).

The first parallel I make between exile and amateur filmmaking is the sensitive matter regarding their definition. In his essay "What Exile Is", Victor Hugo – an exile himself for nineteen years – offers an interpretation of the term by exalting those living in this condition by way of all that, with the loss of a homeland, was denied and taken away from them. His words imply that the loss of a physical territory may bring distress, but grants exiles the access to a greater and nobler place in a metaphysical, moral terrain:

A man so ruined that he has nothing but his honor, so stripped that he has nothing but his conscience, so isolated that he has nothing but impartiality, so disowned that he has nothing but truth, so thrown into darkness that he has nothing left but the sun, this is what an exile is. (Robinson apud Hugo 1994, 68)

If what exile is remains an open-ended question, the same happens with amateur filmmaking. Nonetheless, in both cases, the question of territory is crucial. Just as a person, for a number of reasons, may have to look for a new homeland and, more than that, search for a sense of belonging to a territory away from his or her roots, when we broach the subject of amateur filmmaking, one of the chief questions that arises is, too, the designation of a rightful place for these films in world cinematography. So could Hugo's laudatory take on exiles be applied to amateur films?

It is appropriate to remember that, at the dawn of cinema, films weren't generated in pre-existing, distinct territories. The migration of certain genres to a peripheral area of production occurred after film studios set the boundaries that separated industrial from independent filmmaking. What differentiated these two types of film was not so much the skills of amateurs versus professionals – many amateurs, like Duschenes, took their craft quite seriously, both in technical and artistic terms, setting themselves apart from family filmmakers (Odin 1995) –, but their attitude towards the social, political and economical context they lived in.

Amateur filmmaking meant the preservation of the private sphere from the ever-growing demands of a capitalist economy, as well as the protection and thriving of personal life. In Duschenes' case – as in other filmmakers of exile –, having escaped the war in Europe, it represented much more: his family films constituted the visual diary of his new life in a new continent. Moreover, after being deterritorialized, the act of filming was lined with the affirmation of his regained freedom and bore witness to his reterritorialization as well as its benefits: the continuity of his name and blood.

As studios became more prolific, film distribution also expanded, embedding industrial cinema in social activities and culture. The narratives of these mainstream films could pass as unsophisticated, sometimes downright naive, yet they influenced the way history was conceived and represented a form of national identity (Shohat and Stam 2006). Dominated by fiction, they conformed to specific aesthetics, story lines and narrative constructions – not to mention production modes – that shoved aside other types of less stereotypical works, such as experimental, cinema made by ethnical and racial minorities, documentary and amateur. The tight circle formed by companies that held the patents on film equipment (cameras and projectors) and film negative (separating amateur from professional gauges), as well as studios and theater owners, guaranteed control over every segment of the film industry (Zimmermann 1995).

A predominant viewpoint sprouted from this now structured territory, the one of a hegemonic Eurocentric culture or, of the "neo-Europeans" of the Americas (Shohat and Stam 2006). This viewpoint helped set the guidelines that subordinated filmmaking not only to market laws, but to politics (notably foreign policy, in the US). It dictated how the world – seen through a camera –, should be perceived, leaving little space to individual interpretations. Though they represented a significant share of the sales revenues of companies like Kodak and Bell & Howell in the small-gauge segment, amateur films had a limited diffusion range. This obliterated their commercial value, pegging them as irrelevant to the industrial, indeed colonizing production oriented towards global distribution. However, as the Duschenes' sequence we are going to analyze reveals, this Eurocentric perspective could also percolate through the gaze of amateur filmmakers, who replicated in their films a cultural model that preceded the invention of cinema. But amateur cinema was not scorned only commercially. In the case of family films, the lack of interest of researchers for films and videos of this kind is flagrant, and their absence from studies in cinema history and theory that boomed after the 1960s is a proof of this oversight (Odin 1995).

The general lack of acknowledgment of the public, researchers, institutions and the film industry ostracized pre-digital amateur films and archives, leaving them in a vulnerable position. Without a clear territory to accommodate them, more often than not, their destiny has been oblivion, deterioration and plain destruction, evidences that give us a grasp of the state of permanent crisis involving this genre, a crisis that acquired new layers of complexity after the digital revolution. The nonexistence of a proper address, of a domicile that guarantees the stability by way of the preservation, access and visibility of amateur films is at the root of the chronic dialectical play between public and private, visibility and invisibility, belonging and not belonging which has sentenced them to a sort of vagrancy in the territory of cinema for decades.

Unlike a number of accented films (Naficy 2001), a cinema made by minorities or filmmakers from outside the European and neo-European axis, amateur cinema was never given the chance to confront mainstream production in festivals or in the film market. They were not even regarded as an exotic alternative to mainstream, industrial cinema since they were hardly ever screened outside their own circles (home, film clubs, specialized festivals). The fact that they are heteroclitc has not helped getting them out of the ghetto that stigmatized them as elusive and minor cinematic works, when reckoned as cinematic at all: they can be fiction or documentary, with a multiplicity of genres and subgenres.

Duschenes' films alone cover family, travel, architecture and arts. Though he spent most of his time (leisure and work) preparing to film, filming, editing and screening, Duschenes is a good example of the difficulty in recognizing the cinematic value of amateur production, and also the battle that preserving archives of this nature represents. Known as an architect and an art history lecturer, he was never really acknowledged as a filmmaker, neither by fellow filmmakers, nor by his public, nor by researchers. Seventeen years after his death, his films have become invisible: stashed away in the basement of a public cultural institution in São Paulo, they still await proper digitizing, organization and preservation.

Exile can keep people as well as their creations (I of course think here of amateur films and archives) in a limbo. However, though forgotten by researchers until the 1990s, absent from traditional film historiographies and removed from the eyes of mainstream viewers – not to mention banned from movie theaters and ignored by glamorous award ceremonies –, the darker, ill-mapped part of the territory of cinema that harbors amateur works is far from void or sterile. Just as Hugo exalted the abundance of advantages and moral qualities of the exile instead of pointing at his or her dispossession, by analyzing an infinitesimal, but highly expressive part of Herbert Duschenes' work, I hope to draw attention to the magnitude and uniqueness, both in their perspective and approach, of the historiographical, artistic, indeed cinematic capital ensconced in amateur films.

2 Rebuilding life through filmmaking

With the increase of Nazi persecutions, Duschenes fled to Brazil. In São Paulo, he married Maria Ranschburg, a Jewish Hungarian dancer and choreographer. After the birth of their first child in 1943, Duschenes bought an 8mm camera and became a prolific amateur filmmaker. Today, he is remembered for his films on dance and even more so for his travels featuring architecture, visual and performing arts, crafts, folklore, museums and exhibits around the world. These films were screened during the art history lectures he gave in art and architecture schools, cultural institutions, but also at his home.

Nevertheless, his early, more intimate production focusing on the family he started in Brazil is not without interest. The films that portray his young wife, his in-laws and European émigrés friends engaging in activities like the very German *Waldspaziergänge* (strolls in the woods) (Figure 1), or visiting coffee farms in the scorching heat of the São Paulo countryside (Figure 2), offer an ethnographically rich look at the group of Central Europeans as they wander in the tropical wilderness in suits and tailored dresses, at times donning neckties and felt hats, halting to make picnics as the camera closes in on apples, plums, wild berries, nuts and sandwiches, none of which common items of Brazilian menus in the 1940s.

These images evoke *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (Mekas, 1972),⁴ particularly when Jonas Mekas walks with friends in the Catskills woods near New York City, around 1957 or 1958 (Figure 3).

4. *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, dir. by Jonas Mekas (1972). <https://rarefilmm.com/2018/03/reminiscences-of-a-journey-to-lithuania-1972/> (Last accessed: 14-05-2020).



Figure 1. Jorge Kornbluh and Ronaldo Duschenes (H. Duschenes, *Ronny-1949-1950*, 1950)



Figure 2. Visiting a coffee farm (H. Duschenes, *Christmas 1951*, 1951)



Figure 3. Mekas (right) and friend (J. Mekas, *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, 1972)

Mekas and Duschenes' exilic status came about in the course of their lengthy pilgrimage across Europe: Mekas, as a D.P., or displaced person, roaming from one refugee camp to another right after the end of the Second World War (Mekas 2017), and Duschenes, in the year and a half that preceded his boarding a British ship to Brazil in 1940⁵ (Duschenes 2003). On the other side of the Atlantic, this status designated not only geographic transit or homelessness, but encompassed a state of emotional and psychological bereavement. This explains why, in *Reminiscences*, after a decade in the United States, Mekas still speaks of himself and his fellow Lithuanians in New York as displaced persons. He and Duschenes deal with exile by way of the diary films they make on a present that, when considered alone, may look disjointed, fragmented, somewhat aimless but celebrate "the ordinary moments of life by paring them down to such essential simplicity" (Naficy 2001, 143). But what do these ordinary moments conceal?

As in *Reminiscences*, Duschenes' family films offer two main layers of reading of the images. On the first layer, not much seems to happen. Everything is apparently peaceful as the characters wander about in the sun-bathed scenery, friends killing time in a bucolic environment. The drama contained in the images unfolds in the second layer of reading. At this underlying level, images echo something that does not happen on camera, events that took place years before the actual making of film but still haunt the filmmakers: the pain and fear they experienced as they left Europe, breaking away from everything they knew and, subsequently, the adaptation to a very different reality.

There is one key element in this temporal articulation: Mekas and Duschenes may show the viewer many things, but not the war. They did not film it and, therefore, the idea of past in Duschenes' is related to the time that preceded the war, and, in Mekas', to the time that followed it. With no graphic depictions of what they saw and went through, they resort to the seemingly triviality of day-to-day life to devise a narrative in which the past is a fundamental element to understand the significance of the present. What we see on-screen goes beyond "diegetic facts" (Aumont; Marie apud Souriau 2003, 77), on and off camera. This remote, extradiegetic area comprehends events that are not part of the circumstances of the shooting. Nor are they directly implicated in the diegetic universe where the narrative unfolds.

Borrowing an editing term, I think here of a temporal *raccord* (Vitella 2009, 91) not between frames, with the purpose of marking a hiatus in the narrative, but between a past that is not visibly contained in the images – at least not in the first layer of reading – and a future that is just beginning. There is not an attempt to reconstruct the past, either, by making a film *on* the past, or *a* past that would serve the purposes of the present (Moretin 2016). In this temporal *raccord*, the present is not an ellipse. On the contrary, it is the juncture where the abrupt discontinuity between the past in Europe and the unexpected, still unfathomable future on the American continent is smoothed out. By giving significance to the present, this *raccord* allows filmmakers to make the transition that is part of their reterritorialization and healing process.

There is an antinomy in Duschenes' family films between space and characters, as if they did not really belong to the settings they are in and have to make an effort to adjust. The images give the impression that he is filming the life that he would have had in Europe, had it not been denied to him by the war. In this not fully conquered environment, he molds an ideal past – not unlike a new memory –, that will lay the foundations of his life from this point on. With each stroll on dusty Brazilian countryside roads, each smile of his Brazilian son his camera registers, he challenges the past that nearly claimed his life. Each frame enunciates his survival, a personal triumph Hamid Naficy describes as the empowering aspect of the films made by exiles, as they document, narrativize, and celebrate the lives of the filmmakers, giving "their chaotic, fragmented existence a narrative order and a performative coherence" (Naficy 2001, 143).

Hence, the film is the space and time where a rite of passage occurs, and I think here of Jean Rouch's notion of participating camera that, at its pinnacle, translates into a state of ciné-transe in which the filmmaker's cinematic reality overlaps descriptions of the outside world (Colleyn 2009). It is the space where the exilic filmmaker makes the transition from being a displaced person deprived of a physical territory, to owning a new territory that, captured on film, becomes his rightful home. The film also marks the time of the filmmaker's deliverance from a state of psychological exile, when he repossesses his life, which may now be rebuilt.

5. In his memoirs, Duschenes describes his departure from London as the battle of Dunkirk unfolds.

3 The frame as territory

The differences between Germany and Brazil in Duschenes' family films are not only climatic, topographic or gastronomic. The social context in which he lived and filmed is an important element in the analysis of his work, not only because he did not make films before emigrating, but because, as we will see, it impacted the narrative strategies he used. When he and other émigrés arrived in cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, they found an elite of Portuguese descendants whose ancestors had been not only émigrés, but colonizers. They detained political and economical power and regarded post-war European exiles differently from the Europeans who had come to Brazil a half-century before, running away from poverty.⁶ There were many highly educated people among this new wave of émigrés, making them socially welcome until a certain degree, regarded as somewhat exotic, cultured and even entertaining. Yet, the local elite were not eager to yield economical or political power to them, neither did they look forward to have their heirs and heiresses mingle with these émigrés through marriage.

So, for their major part, war refugees found themselves squeezed between the local white elite and the racially mixed lower-classes, constituting a particular type of middle-class that, at least for a couple of decades, maintained a certain distance from local culture and habits, even after becoming naturalized Brazilian citizens, as it was Duschenes' case. By living in predominantly European enclaves, they reproduced a Eurocentric gaze in their iconographic representations of Brazil and Brazilians. Therefore, we find a colonial, Eurocentric matrix, as defined by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (2006), both endogenous and exogenous, both in the centuries-old social structure that stemmed from the country's not so distant colonial past and in the way foreign war refugees looked at their new homeland.

The two-minute sequence from *Ronny* that we will now analyze grants the viewer access to a very particular subject matter: the emotion-ridden interaction between Brazilian nannies and the family they assist. It also raises the question of the blurry boundaries concerning the place these servants occupy not only in the home and society, but in the frame. Duschenes filmed his son's nannies interacting with the boy: through his lens, the viewer has a first-hand look at the seldom portrayed relationship between the local household help that appears on camera and their European employer behind it. There is an undeniable element of playfulness in the sequence that corroborates the fact that amateur and family films accompanied the increase and multiplication of leisure activities in the first half of the 20th century (Blank and Lins 2012, 58). But, the fact that the women in question are Afro-descendants and Duschenes is a white European male confers an increased sensitive quality to the images: the foreign eye that, though assuming a well-intentioned stance by giving the nannies leading roles, imposes a *mise-en-scène* on the racially, socially and economically more vulnerable natives. This is also visible in the remarkable documentary by Consuelo Lins, *Nannies*. Her approach is deliberately critical, even soul-searching, while Duschenes' in principle is not, but in both films one issue is central: the power play where the employer (Brazilian or not), the outsider or the foreigner, exercise their control of the situation through the act of filming.

The fact that Ronaldo was the first member of the Duschenes family to be born outside Europe is of great relevance. In the 1940s and 1950s, Brazil still relied on a rural-based economic system which had benefited from slave manpower for centuries, but strove to join the club of industrialized nations. Hence, the continuity of the family in a land that looked into the future while Europe tried to come to grips with its bellicose history was a providential break from the past. Ronny symbolized the rebirth and survival of the entire family and quickly became the central character of his father's films. Over his cradle, leaned his mother, his father and the camera. At times, given the relentlessness of the filming that would accompany Ronny until adolescence, it is possible to consider the father and the camera as one single entity.

The boy seems to take intuitively to the ever-prying lens and accepts the filming regime proposed or, more likely, imposed on him since early childhood. He sometimes talks to his father looking directly into the lens, marking the merge of the camera and the father-filmmaker, a juncture Perlov, when filming his daughters for *Diary 1973-1983* (1983) describes as follows: "Observation has become part of my being" (Feldman and Mourão apud Perlov 2011, 34). Duschenes makes an all-inclusive panorama of the life of his son, featuring him

6. Between the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, Brazil welcomed waves of Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish, Syrian, Lebanese and Japanese immigrants.

in a mosaic of situations: celebrating his birthday, making fire, braving waves to dive into the sea and traveling by all possible means of transportation. The sequences are shot on different days and places, but Duschenes constructs a temporal unity in every film, thus giving the impression that the action took place in one day.

Ronny opens with the boy playing on several locations outdoors and the editing seems to follow the boy's search for new adventures. Seven minutes into the film, a cut takes Ronny back home, to the sequence where he interacts with the house maids. Firstly, a panoramic shot leads the viewer's eye to Ronny playing with a black girl. She is wearing a jumper dress and he is wearing pajamas and slippers, and we conclude they must be at the Duschenes home, maybe in a laundry or utility room. The first shots show Ronny and the girl sitting on the ground and trying to make fire with stones (Figure 4). Based on the social and racial status quo of his country, a Brazilian viewer might assume that the black girl is the daughter of a maid or nanny, while the white boy is the son of the masters of the house, and they would not be wrong. Nevertheless, the usual approach to the crossing of socio-racial borders in Brazilian amateur film, with maids banned from the center of the frame, does not occur.

Of the sixteen shots that compose the first sequence, four of them show both children, five show Ronny and seven show the girl. This proportion favorable to the girl deserves our attention as it inverts usual priorities in this kind of image production. Another important aspect is that the children are displayed without any noticeable signs of social or racial hierarchy. There is no flagrant difference in their clothes and they are both sitting at the same level, in the same shot, performing the same activity. However, there are two critical details: firstly, it is not possible to determinate exactly where the filming takes place, but it does not happen in the living-room or in any other quarter of the house maids do not have access to for social purposes.

Secondly, Duschenes wanted to show two children playing together, but what we see are two children playing *for* the camera instead of playing *with* each other. The *mise-en-scène* does not mitigate the social issue that, in Brazil, goes hand in hand with the racial one. This is not so much demonstrated by Duschenes' look upon the children, as by the way the girl looks at the camera. Ronny is visibly more at ease than his playmate and never really looks at her, while the girl reveals her insecurity by glancing his way in order to imitate his gestures (Figures 4-5). The boy displays the confidence of one who is used to this kind of attention intermediated by a camera, and is familiar with the circumstance of filming. Besides, the person that holds the power that the camera bestows is his father.

Since the first shots, the girl's posture is the opposite, and tells the viewer she is not used to occupying the center stage or being invited to share this space with the master's son. Not only the situation is new to her, but the uneasiness that emanates from it indicates it precedes the moment of filming and will probably outlive it. Sometimes, she looks askance at the lens and we must remember that, behind it, she's seeing a white, foreign, adult male giving her instructions with a heavy German accent, while pointing the camera – a strange, luxury item, restricted to people belonging to higher social classes – in her direction. Her eyes enclose something that a well-meaning European (like Duschenes) could take for shyness, but from a Brazilian perspective could be interpreted quite differently: a self-effacing demeanor due to a long history of prejudice, and a sense of oppression that trickles down several generations of African-Brazilians (Figure 6). Nevertheless, the playful atmosphere takes over and the girl lowers her guard as her eyes light up. (Figure 7)

Yet, a happy ending is not secured. The scene goes on, cutting to a dance sequence where Ronny is held in the arms of a young nanny. This choreography probably would not have taken place without Duschenes' *mise-en-scène*. The fact that the nanny occupies a central space in the frame is uncommon in Brazilian family films and she takes part in the action in a position that could have been filled by any relative or family friend. In *Nannies*, a dance takes place, too, but Lins candidly confesses that she was not capable of conceding this central role to her son's nanny when, at the eve of the 21st century, she filmed the woman and other house maids teaching the boy "the first steps of a dance I would probably never teach him (Lins 2010)." Lins' affirmation reveals that it took six decades after Duschenes filmed his son dancing with his nanny for a Brazilian filmmaker to reflect critically upon this kind of relationship and its representations.

For instance, there is a picture in *Nannies* where Lins' son, Joaquim, is seen dancing at the center of the frame with three maids surrounding him: one in the forefront, to the right, practically turning her back to the camera; one in the background, also to the right of the frame, busy with some domestic chore, and a third one, whose



Figure 4. – *Ronny -1949-1950* (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 5. – *Ronny -1949-1950* (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 6. – *Ronny -1949-1950* (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 7. – *Ronny -1949-1950* (H. Duschenes, 1950)

head barely points in the upper left corner of the frame (Figure 8). The women are not entitled to a full-body in the image: only body parts are visible and the frame seems to amputate them. It is as if they hang on to it by their fingertips before being completely excluded. What this image shows quite explicitly is that the maids are confined to the margins of the frame, to the margins of the family they wait on and to the margins of society. The dance Lins would probably never teach her son is the “little butt dance”, or *dança da bundinha*, popular in poorer neighborhoods – where maids come from –, as peripheral, relative to the city’s geography, as these maids are, relative to the position they occupy in the frame. The detail should not go unnoticed here that the word *bunda* (diminutive: *bundinha*) commonly used in Brazil today, is an African term incorporated by the Portuguese language spoken in Brazil.



Figure 8. – *Babás* (C. Lins, 2010)

Duschenes, too, probably would not have been able to teach certain Brazilian dances to his son. Of course, intimacy between domestic servants and their masters always existed, in different degrees and of different natures – often abuse was not excluded from the relationship –, and the mixture of races in Brazil is an eloquent proof of it. But, this interaction did not appear on photographs or films and, if it did, it was by chance.

Therefore, this type of representation that includes affection and portrays a closer relationship between masters and servants can be considered a taboo. In my analysis of the sequence, I contend that Duschenes breaks with this social taboo around the presence of servants in Brazilian amateur cinema. More precisely, the way he includes the nanny in the frame is no small matter, because he staves off archetypes in the representation of these women (Blank 2012), long before any critical approach to the matter was current. This two-minute sequence is the only example of this kind of interaction in his films. On the one hand, this fact corroborates that

house maids were never central characters in family films in general, regardless of the level of their personal and emotional involvement with family members. However, on the other hand, the representation Duschenes makes of his servants, from their casual clothes and physical position in the frame to the central role he assigns them in his mise-en-scène can be considered groundbreaking. As I will show, the results of this staging exercise were not entirely successful, especially from the servants' perspective, which exposes a cultural and social gap larger than the circumstances of the filming.

This gap is visible in the historical iconographic material used in *Nannies*: for instance, when the Brazilian bourgeoisie dressed their African-Brazilian nannies in the European fashion for a portrait – in lace and with their hair tied up – they did so in order to formalize, or, at least externally, purge the relationship from the inequities of slavery, “institutionalizing” these women, who were being photographed in attires and poses that hardly corresponded to their daily reality (Figure 9). Or, when the masters allowed the African attire to be captured by the camera, it is unlikely this was a sign of respect for the nanny's culture of origin. On the contrary, it stressed the difference and reinforced the distance and hierarchy that needed to be preserved (Figure 10). Moreover, if by chance, a more intimate iconographic testimony of the relationship between servants and the masters' children was made, it surely was not intentionally generated by the master himself. I observe here that if it is often possible today to know the names of the children in the photographs, or at least the families they belonged to, the nannies remain anonymous.



Figure 9. – *Babás* (C. Lins, 2010)



Figure 10. – *Babás* (C. Lins, 2010)

In *Ronny*, the nineteen-shot dance sequence opens with a panoramic that starts with the family dog, Bolinha, quite agitated by the pandemonium staged by Duschenes (Figure 11). It tilts up to a shot of the nanny dancing as she holds Ronny in her arms (Figure 12). Another element, other than the maids' central position, is noteworthy: her physical proximity to the boy. Sometimes, their heads seem to merge (Figure 13). This action unfolds with the father's goading and mise-en-scène. The close-ups tend to focus on the nanny's face rather than on Ronny's, and the young woman smiles and reacts to the camera (Figure 15).

Ronny and his nanny are presented as equals and this is validated by the proximity of their bodies (which, from a Eurocentric perspective, corroborates the worldwide stereotype of warmth and sensuality usually associated to Brazilian women, in particular Afro-Brazilian), the harmony of their mood and movements, and by the



Figure 11. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 12. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 13. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 14. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 15. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)

convergence of their gaze (Figure 14). In many shots, it is the boy who is at the edge of the frame and the action, provoked by Duschenes, is guided by the nanny's improvisations.

In the eight shot, a second maid joins the pair. The girl is also back on camera and tensions begin to build up in what seemed to be a shadowless moment of fun and happiness. Ronny is now on the ground and dances with the two women and the girl. We assume that the girl is the daughter of this older maid. In the next two shots, there are close-ups of the women leading the dance, then a long shot of the group. The women and the girl are at the center of the frame and for a moment, Ronny is almost entirely cut off (Figure 16). This is the moment a crisis surfaces: the girl, probably exhausted by the length of the filming and the peculiarity of the situation bursts out crying and breaks free from the group, while her mother tries to calm her down (Figure 17).



Figure 16. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 17. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)

The mother looks sideways, probably at the girl who is now off camera, but she does not go after her daughter to console her (Fig. 18). Instead, she looks awkwardly at the camera, with a tense, half-smile on her lips (Fig. 19). The question arises if she did not go tend to the child because she did not want to, or because she did not leave her employer's set in fear of disobeying him: just as her daughter before her, what she saw behind the camera was someone who had financial and social power over her.

After one more shot of the maids, comes a cut to a close-up of the girl in a corner, hiding her face and crying (Figure 20). Then, a second shot, in which she pulls herself together and, visibly hurt, tries to walk out on Duschenes and his persistent camera, out of the set, out of the frame. But before leaving, she glares defiantly at the camera (Figures 21-22). This look is the exposed nerve of the situation. It synthesizes the power play between the filmmaker and the characters of his *mise-en-scène*, but also what transcends the circumstance of the shooting. In other words, it exposes the intricate structure between employers and employees in a country where this relationship was molded in a colonial system of masters and slaves, and where the latter had no rights.



Figure 18. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 19. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 20. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 21. – *Ronny - 1949-1950* (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 22. – *Ronny - 1949-1950* (H. Duschenes, 1950)

The sequence is an example of the amalgamation of professional duties and personal life. In this gray area, the separation between good intentions and abuse is not always clear. Though Duschenes suffered himself the agony of oppression in Europe, he fails to perceive that his *mise-en-scène* also represents a form of oppression over the women who work for him, and over their offspring, too. Through the girl's eyes, we understand that the camera has become an instrument of power, intimidating and coercive, as it disregards personal boundaries and promotes more discomfort than joy to her and her mother. Before the girl has the chance of exiting the frame, the young nanny grabs her and tries to bring her back to the dance. This time the girl's reaction is violent and we can almost hear her scream in anger and revolt (Figure 23).



Figure 23. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)

After the girl's outburst, there is a cut to her mother, looking down at something that is off the frame (Figure 24). This time, she is not looking at her daughter. In the next shots, we find out that she is paying attention to the company that is left: Bolinha, the dog. After a moment of suspense, there is a new cut to a close-up of the mother now dancing with the dog in her arms. Bolinha also ends up squirming and running off. Less trusting than her younger colleague who surrendered to the game of the *mise-en-scène*, the woman glances at the camera, as if she were looking for the approval, not of the cameraman, but of her boss and employer behind it (Figure 25). It is important to remember that this woman belonged to the first generation of African-Brazilians born outside slavery.



Figure 24. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)

In the following shot, she calls the dog back, in vain. There is a cut to the final shot and we see Bolinha in the same corner where the girl had taken refuge to cry (Figure 26). When the dog understands that it is about to be brought back to the dance by force – just like it happened to the girl –, it runs away (Figure 27). This parallel creates a visual rhyme that mitigates the brutal exit of the girl. At the end of the scene, there is the image of the now empty corner, deserted by both the girl and the dog, while the woman's hand hovers in the air (Figure 28). With this narrative construction, Duschenes "exorcizes" the corner where the girl had expressed her agony, her fear and defiance towards a hierarchy she perhaps understood more viscerally than rationally,



Figure 25. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)

but, unlike her mother and the young nanny, she did not comply to and explicitly rejected. In this notable sequence of *Ronny*, Duschenes does not stop filming when the crisis surfaces, nor does he cut off the scene from the final edit. On the contrary, the narrative acknowledges the girl's point of view as well as her absence from the frame, which signifies her bittersweet victory over Duschenes' camera.



Figure 26. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)

Filming the crisis may not have solved the social or racial problems of his country of adoption, but it is commendable that he did not avoid the situation that got out of his control. Instead, he looked for a filmic solution: Ronny lost the central position he usually occupied in his father's narratives and did not reappear until the end of the scene. By doing so, Duschenes tackled not only a crisis within his film, but a social tension that, maybe hitherto unnoticed, existed in his own house, as it probably did in every Brazilian bourgeois home. At that point, the father and the casual family filmmaker gave place to the documentarian of the space, the time and the society he lived in. This sequence is the testimony of his attempt to understand and deal with this social structure, not as an outsider or a foreigner anymore, but as an integral part of this structure. By devoting his full attention to the girl while looking, within what was possible, for a less traumatic closure for his film, Herbert Duschenes became more Brazilian.

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Figure 27. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)



Figure 28. – *Ronny* - 1949-1950 (H. Duschenes, 1950)

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