

*Landscapes of Care: Photography, Film, Modern Architecture
and Landscape Heritage*



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São Paulo's Minhocão on Film

Richard Williams

Abstract:

This paper concerns the cinematic representation of São Paulo's Elevado João Goulart, a 3.5km elevated expressway close to the historic centre of the city, popularly known as the Minhocão. Built during the boom period of Brazil's dictatorship, the Minhocão opened to traffic in January 1971. Controversial at the beginning of its existence, it has been partially rehabilitated, a process in which film has been important. The paper describes three general modes of the Minhocão's depiction on film: in the first it represents a generalised fear of the modern city, in the second it is a normal part of the landscape, and in the third it is a form of aesthetic occupation. Key films discussed include *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), directed by Hector Babenco (1985) and the documentary *Elevado 3.5* (Maira Bühler, Paulo Pastorelo and João Sodré 2006). The paper responds to Sophia's Landscapes of Care theme by showing how over time film can, over time, help rehabilitate seemingly irredeemable infrastructure.

Keywords: infrastructure, film, expressway, occupation, Brazil, care

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Introduction

Can we learn to love the expressway?¹ Or can we at least learn to live with it? Can it be used, or inhabited, or represented in ways that at least partially rehabilitate it, and mitigate its worst effects? And how might film assist in that process? I try to answer these questions here in relation to São Paulo's Minhocão expressway, an unusually toxic object when opened in 1971, but one which has since become an object of sustained fascination for filmmakers, and artists in general – and it is one that through the attention of those artists has arguably found some form of redemption. The Minhocão case is good evidence, I argue, for Landscapes of Care, the theme of the present issue of *Sophia*. As the other essays here show, photography and film can expand the ways we understand modern architecture, and in particular what we consider valuable, and therefore worth preservation. With good reason the Minhocão started life as the most unloved of objects; through film, and film's documentation of its lived existence, it has become an unlikely subject of care.

More broadly, and in line with recent research on infrastructure, this paper treats the expressway as culture. For readers who know the work of the novelist J. G. Ballard, his autophile novels *Crash* (1973) and *Concrete Island* (1974) show precisely how this might come about. In *Concrete Island*, Ballard's protagonist is an architect who, after a bad accident while driving, finds himself marooned on the central reservation of London's Westway. After multiple failed attempts to escape, he chooses to stay, the expressway permitting the full realisation of his life, perversely impossible in civilisation.² He comes to love the Westway, as some (as we shall see) come to love the Minhocão. Those themes have proved irresistible to humanities scholars, and research on Ballard has proliferated in recent years.³ More generally, the study of infrastructure has become a respectable, and frequent humanities topic. It has been explored in terms of its capacity for 'fantasy', its 'poetics and politics' (Brian Larkin), discussed in terms of the language of care (Keller Easterling), or even recently its capacity to inspire 'love' (Helene Frichot et al), to pick three examples.⁴ Meanwhile the so-called 'mobilities turn' in cultural geography has now produced numerous accounts of specific roads. Peter Merriman's account of the M1 motorway

1 I use the term 'expressway' here in place of the British English 'motorway' as it corresponds better to the Portuguese term 'via expressa'. Also in the intellectual hinterland of the paper is Marshall Berman's essay 'The Expressway World' from *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*.

2 J. G. Ballard, *Concrete Island* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974)

3 J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), *Concrete Island* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974). For academic commentary see *Literary Geographies* 2, 1 (2016), special issue on *Concrete Island*.

4 Brian Larkin, "The Poetics and Politics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013), 327; Keller. Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso Books, 2014); Hélène Frichot, Adria Carbonell, Hannes Frykholm and Sepideh Karami, eds., *Infrastructural Love: Caring for our Architectural Support Systems* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2022), 15.

in England is a good example. Merriman treats the M1 as a space of culture rather than a mute object to be noticed only when it fails.⁵ When it comes to the study of infrastructure, culture is arguably in the ascendent.⁶

But back to Ballard for a moment. There is a background presence of Ballard here, partly because his work radically expands the ways we might think about the expressway, but also because his imagination was so cinematic. *Crash* had more than one cinematic adaptation, while Ballard himself wrote a screenplay for an unrealised film adaptation of *Concrete Island*. While never making its way into a film, the script is, if anything, more attentive to the expressway site than the book. It is a remarkably detailed set of observations, and imaginative projections, rather more attentive to the expressway as an object lived and experienced in the world than the work of its designers.⁷

The architect and theorist Katherine Shonfield wrote precisely about this attention in *Walls Have Feelings* (2000).⁸ 'I am struck', Shonfield wrote, 'by the way a film maker will commonly spend much longer determining how the artefacts of architects and other urban designers are to be filmed than was originally spent designing the artefacts in the first place.'⁹ One of Shonfield's key examples is Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film, *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* which repeatedly shows the Périphérique orbital expressway, then under construction at Saint Denis just outside Paris. Like the Minhocão when built, the Périphérique here is a strange, somewhat alien object. Its relationship with its surroundings is, Shonfield writes, 'one of absolute difference.'¹⁰ It 'sweeps through the city at high level, ignoring the vertical spatial hierarchy of the buildings it cuts through, isolating them and rendering them forlorn objects subordinated to the road's curvaceous power.'¹¹ It's a profoundly irrational object, in Shonfield account – but it is also one with which Godard's citizens somehow learn to live. And the key point is that it has, through the attention of film, thoroughly exceeded the functional objectives of its designers. It has become culture.

5 See Paul Merriman, *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England's M1 Motorway* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 4, 11. On the failure of infrastructure see Larkin, "The Poetics and Politics of Infrastructure", 336. See also J. Moran, *On Roads: A Hidden History* (London: Profile Books, 2009). For an earlier, US-oriented approach, see J. B. Jackson, 'Other-Directed Houses', *Landscape* 6, 2 (Winter 1956-7)

6 In the Anglophone world at least, it is hard to imagine now how the Buchanan Report – a highly technical report on projected traffic flows – became a bestseller. See Colin Buchanan, *Traffic in Towns: The Specially Shortened Edition of the Buchanan Report* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)

7 J. G. Ballard, *Concrete Island*, unpublished screenplay (20 September 1972), British Library manuscript 88938/3/9/2

8 Katherine Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City* (London: Routledge, 2000), 154.

9 Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings*, 165

10 Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings*, 115.

11 Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings*, 115.

The Minhocão

So it is with São Paulo's Minhocão. Literally the 'Big Worm', it is officially now the Elevado João Goulart, named after the leftist president deposed in Brazil's 1964 coup, and one of the more dramatic results of São Paulo's colossal restructuring in favour of the private car.¹² It lies just to the south of the historic centre of the city, and runs for 3.5 kilometres east-west along a short stretch of the Rua Amaral Gurgel, and a much longer stretch of the Avenida São João, once a smart European-style boulevard celebrated by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1930s.¹³ According to Paulo Maluf, mayor of São Paulo, and the project's chief advocate, it was 'the largest work in reinforced concrete in all of Latin America', a region that does not exactly lack for works in reinforced concrete.¹⁴ Built in a remarkable 14 months, it opened on 24 January 1971, timed to celebrate the city's annual Founder's Day. Opened first to pedestrians, and then in the afternoon to car traffic, it was almost immediately paralysed by a broken-down Volkswagen, as the newspapers mischievously reported: photographs of the day show immense tailbacks.¹⁵

Unlike contemporaneous highway developments elsewhere such as the Cross-Bronx Expressway in New York, the Minhocão wasn't an act of wholesale demolition.¹⁶ Still the effect of the Avenida São João and its environs has been catastrophic, and for many it remains a difficult object by virtue of its form alone. Its builders, Hidroservice, a private firm of engineers close to the government of the day, apparently did no studies of its impact on the surrounding area.¹⁷ As a result the highway runs close to the surrounding apartment buildings, just three metres in places, while shops and residences at ground level are left in permanent shadow. What was a popular entertainment district became a tunnel for cars. Even it was hard not to see as an attack on the existing city, even an erasure of it. In one of the many perspective drawings produced by Hidroservice, the existing city of São Paulo dissolved into abstraction, a thing simply to be traversed as quickly as possible; its characteristic forest of highrises reduced to a pale outline.

12 M. A. Lagonegro, "Metrópole sem metrô: transporte público, rodoviarismo e populismo em São Paulo (1955-1965)" (PhD diss., University of São Paulo, 2003)

13 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (London: Hutchinson, 1961)

14 Paulo Maluf, "Paulo Maluf anuncia construção do Minhocão", 1969, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j44cTnNDHps>

15 *Estado de São Paulo*, "Minhocão Aberto, Sem Repercussão Esperada," (26 January, 1971), 16.

16 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (London: Verso, 1983)

17 Luiz R. Florence, "Arquitetura e Autopia: Infraestrutura Rodoviária em São Paulo 1952-1972" (PhD thesis, University of São Paulo, 2020)

The Minhocão's difficulty has not only to do with its form; it was legible for many on the left of as an act of political violence too, widely understood as one of the key achievements of the military government that came to power in the 1964 coup. Not for nothing was it originally named after Artur da Costa e Silva, the president of the military government who died in office during its construction.¹⁸ When later described as a 'scar' on the city, the reasons were political as much as urban.¹⁹

Fobópole

There are good reasons therefore to think the Minhocão toxic, and on film it appears first a space of overbearing political authority, suffused with fear. It's tempting to think of the carceral in these films, to use the rather over-worn Foucauldian concept, the city made into a prison. Perhaps a more precise term, given the local context, might be *fobópole* (literally, 'fear city'), coined by Marcelo Lopes de Souza, a geographer, for a 2008 book.²⁰ For de Souza, *fobópole* is a condition of generalised fear endemic in Brazilian cities. The fear in the first instance might be that of crime, a problem far from unique to Brazil, although peculiarly exaggerated there (on the same topic see also Teresa Caldeira, an anthropologist, in her book *City of Walls*).²¹ *Fobópole* signified not only a social phenomenon, but a structural condition too, involving the militarisation of urban space in relation to crime. The physical traces of militarisation – walls, security cameras, guard posts and so on – he argues come to define the city.²² This militarisation can be traced back to Brazil's experience with dictatorship, which he argues, left its cities structured distinctively by fear.

Something like this can be seen in the work of Hector Babenco, a film-maker unusually alert to the structures of power, having left one dictatorship – his native Argentina – for another, Brazil, then in 1969 at its repressive peak. The Minhocão plays an important role in the creation of fear

18 Guilherme Wisnik, "Dentro do Nevoeiro: diálogos cruzadas entre arte e arquitetura contemporânea" (PhD thesis, University of São Paulo, 2012)

19 Francisco Vidal Luna and Manuelito Pereira Magalhães Júnior, 'Uma Cicatriz Urbana', in *Caminhos do Elevado: Memória e Projetos*, eds. Rosa Artigas, Joana Mello and Ana Claudia Castro (São Paulo: IMESP, 2008), 8.

20 Marcelo Lopes de Souza, *Fobópole: O Medo Generalizado e a Militarização da Questão Urbana* (Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2008)

21 Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

22 See also Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso Books, 1990)

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in Babenco's 1985 prison drama *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a good deal of which was filmed in an apartment overlooking it.²³ (Fig. 1.) The Minhocão appears, unidentified about three quarters of the way through; it occupies the whole screen, the camera located centrally somewhere in the central reservation pointing at the intense, fast-moving traffic. Huge apartment buildings loom on either side, defining a dense corridor stretching into the distance. It's dusk and the light is poor, the scene is grainy, and the details are indistinct. Its mood, you could say is anxious, depicting the metropolis as an object of indeterminate fear. A few minutes later, the film returns to the same location, but shows it from a different perspective. The film's protagonist Luis Molina, a gay man just out of prison on a trumped-up sexual offence charge, sits in his apartment looking out at the same highway. It is now late at night, and the highway has become a river of light, a real spectacle, but one from which he is evidently alienated. The camera cuts to a plainclothes policeman in a car, monitoring Molina's position from outside. He speaks mechanically into a radio telephone: 'surveillance reveals subject has not returned to work. He almost never leaves home. He spends his evenings staring out the window for no apparent reason.'

The camera cuts to Molina seen from outside the apartment, staring blankly into space. Nearly all of the action has taken place to this point in the intensely claustrophobic confines of the prison cell he shares with a political prisoner. His sudden release only goes to show that the carceral state extends far beyond the prison cell. The highway is a metaphor for it, an inhuman, mechanised space designed to keep its citizens under control. The city, here and elsewhere in the film, is itself a prison, the *fofópole*.

Significantly, this fearful vision is placeless, as if to say that it represents a ubiquitous modern condition. The dialogue is entirely in English and it's only the odd glimpse of Portuguese signage that suggest Brazil. Without clear place markers, its high rises are generic modern high rises, the metro a generic metro, the Minhocão a generic highway. For Natalia Pinazza, a film theorist, this São Paulo is precisely a 'non-place', referring to the anthropological concept popularised by Marc Augé. Pinazza finds cinematic São Paulo defined by such spaces; they explicitly lack 'self-evident local colour', she writes.²⁴ It is the non-place metropolis, a stand-in for the modern city everywhere.²⁵ 'Non-place' is apposite: Augé's book begins precisely on an urban expressway, which, like all of his non-place, he describes in carceral terms – a space in which one always has to prove one's identity, in which one is always surveilled, a de facto prison.²⁶

23 Athos Comolatti, interview with the author, 5 April 2022. The semi-official headquarters of the Associação Parque Minhocão can be found on the floor below.

24 Natalia Pinazza and Louis Bayman, eds., *World Film Locations: São Paulo* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013)

25 This concept of São Paulo as a placeless archetype had some appeal for the German artist Anselm Kiefer in a series of works made in the late 1980s. See Anselm Kiefer, *Grass Will Grow Over Your Cities* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel Verlag GmbH, 1999)

26 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 1.



[Fig. 1]
Still from Hector Babenco (dir.), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985)



[Fig. 2.]
Still from Walter Salles (dir.) Terra Estrangeira (1996)



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The fearful Minhocão shows up if anything more dramatically in 1995 in *Terra Estrangeira* (1995) ('Foreign Land') by Walter Salles.²⁷ (Fig. 2) Here São Paulo actually plays itself, and the terrifying historical moment at which incoming president Fernando Collor de Mello nationalised citizens' bank deposits, rendering savings worthless. The film's narrative centres on Paco, a young man who flees, against the odds, Brazil for Portugal. At the start of the film, he lives with his mother in an apartment overlooking the Minhocão. Again, it's photographed in the poor light of dusk or early morning, and is the location of a generalised sense of threat. Paco, like Babenco's protagonist Luis spends a lot of time staring at it from inside, with a mixture of alienation and fear. Images of it cut back and forth with the presidential announcement on TV, as if to say the Minhocão is the materialisation of state power.

The Minhocão is there again momentarily in another of Babenco's films, *Carandiru*, the prison riot film of 2003, in which it frames a rare scene outside of the São Paulo prison of the film's title, a scene of social breakdown.²⁸ As in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the central conceit of the film is the moral equivalence of carceral and free worlds, the one a representation of the other. In *Carandiru*, the undercroft of the Minhocão at its eastern end, frames a city in dissolution, defined by the homeless and prostitutes. Fires burn in the street, and human relations are defined by sexual violence – exactly reproducing on the outside the meltdown conditions of the Carandiru prison.

The fearful Minhocão as a space of fear reaches its apogee perhaps in Fernando Meirelles's *Blindness* 2008, in which, strewn with wrecked vehicles, it symbolises a nameless metropolis's descent into anarchy.²⁹ The Minhocão here and in the other films appears repeatedly on screen as the representation of a violent state, both in a condition of authority, and when that authority has dissolved – it embodies what many on Brazil's political left thought about it anyway, but it supplies a convincing metaphor for the carceral city. The Minhocão is a space of fear, both a representation of an authoritarian state, and a space that imperils its users. (I might add that the Minhocão was a uniquely dangerous space for drivers too. By the end of 1976, it was the site for as much as a fifth of São Paulo's traffic accidents, by far the city's most accident-prone road.)³⁰

27 Salles, Walter, director, *Terra Estrangeira*, Animatógrafo/VideoFilmes, 1996, 1hr., 50 min.

28 Babenco, Hector, director, *Carandiru*, Sony Pictures Classics/Globo Filmes, 2003, 2 hr., 27 min. See also Alex Bellos, "Hard Cells and Transvestite Weddings," *Guardian*, 2 November 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/nov/02/londonfilmfestival2003.features1>

29 Meirelles, Fernando, director, *Blindness*, Fox Film do Brasil/Alliance Films/GAGA USEN, (2008)

30 Folha de São Paulo, 'DSV fecha o elevado durante a madrugada' (30 December 1976), 14.

The Minhocão, domesticated

These cinematic representations of the Minhocão elaborate generalised urban fears consistent with *fobópole*. But the Minhocão did not remain constant: from 1977, it edged towards a more ambiguous existence, closing to nocturnal traffic that year after pressure from a group of sleep-deprived residents.³¹ By the early 2000s it was routinely closing at weekends too, and started to acquire some of its present-day, somewhat beach-like character.³² In 2006, the municipality of São Paulo held an architectural competition to find design solutions to ameliorate its worst effects, the Premio Prestes Maia, named after Francisco, a planner and former city mayor. Significantly, none of the winning entries recommended demolition, proposing instead adaptive reuse, some turning the carriageway into elevated parkland.³³

It was evidence, perhaps, of the Minhocão's domestication. There was something similar in film – while the Minhocão continued, intermittently, to play out as dystopian horror (for example, in *Blindness*) there was increasing evidence of a more humane approach, *All the Invisible Children* (2005) being one example. An Italian anthology film comprising seven shorts by global directors, it included one episode directed and scripted by Kátia Lund, whose previous film was the apocalyptic favela drama, *City of God* (co-directed with Meirelles, who shot *Blindness*). In Lund's short, *Bilú and João*, the environment around the Minhocão is hard, but essentially benign. The protagonists, children who make a living scavenging metal scraps for recycling, are plucky survivors, and their stories describe successful improvisations. The Minhocão is simply there, an integral part of the cityscape rather than an alien imposition; the tone is unjudgmental. Normalised, no longer uniquely toxic, the Minhocão is just one of the places the children make a living.

Altogether more complex evidence of the Minhocão's domestication is the documentary film *Elevado 3.5* (also 2005) directed by Maira Bühler, Paulo Pastorelo and João Sodr , two of whom (Sodr  and Pastorelo) had trained as architects.³⁴ (Fig. 3) *Elevado 3.5* has familiar elements of previous representations. It opens with a poetic, somewhat abstract scene photographed from the back seat of a car, looking upwards through the rear window. To the accompaniment of a pulsing techno soundtrack, the Minhocão gradually appears, dark and vast against the blue sky. As a structure, it's a constant throughout the film, as a frame, or background, and most often as a soundtrack – its rumbling traffic accompanies nearly all of the scenes.

31 *Folha de São Paulo*, 'DSV fecha o elevado'.

32 Nate Millington, "Public Space and Terrain Vague on São Paulo's Minhocão," in *Deconstructing the High Line*, eds. Christoph Lindner and Brian Rosa (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2017), 201–18.

33 Rosa Artigas, Joana Mello and Ana Claudia Castro, eds., *Caminhos do Elevado: Memória e Projetos* (São Paulo: IMESP, 2008)

34 Maira Bühler, Paulo Pastorelo and João Sodr , directors, *Elevado 3.5*. Primo Filmes/TV Cultura, 2005, 1 hr., 15 min. For an account of its screening on the Minhocão in 2010, see Luiz Ricardo Florence "Estr ia document rio 'Elevado 3.5,'" *Vitruvius* 032, no. 03 (June 2010) <https://vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/drops/10.032/3441>

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But mainly *Elevado 3.5* represents people, through a series of face-to-camera interviews with nineteen local inhabitants focused on the marginal and the eccentric, in a manner closely resembling the successful *Edifício Master* (Edouardo Coutinho, 2003), about the life of a run-down Copacabana apartment building.³⁵ The Minhocão's people are a colourful mix, from the glamorous to the destitute, to the merely ordinary – for example, a couple simply bemused at the way the Minhocão has become both a Sunday leisure attraction, and the subject of a film. And there are, predictably, a couple of hard cases for whom the Minhocão represents a descent from a better life. One of these, Alcyr Cristóforo is perhaps the saddest of the film's interviewees. There's not much to look at, he says to the interviewer in his portion of the film, gesturing at the three square metres of his room. He's elderly, broke and alone, at 'the end of the road' after years of spectacular excess. This is it: life reduced to a tiny box on the edge of the expressway, with only photographs for memories. The camera pulls away for a final shot in the sequence where Cristóforo flings open the shutters to provide some light in order to shave. His tiny room looks right out onto the Minhocão, here as elsewhere so close you feel you could touch the passing cars. Taken in isolation, it's a wretched scene, the Minhocão as prison.

In terms of the film's mood, however Cristóforo's case is an outlier. His plight is shared by Ananias Pereira dos Santos, an older man who lives in circumstances that are if anything even worse. Dos Santos inhabits if anything a tinier, and even more compromised room, and even that is a step up from the shack he once occupied on the pavement outside. However, he seems happy enough despite the interviewer's asking after his wellbeing. His ex-wife and children live in a big house some distance away, and he seems glad to be free of the hassles of family life. Here, looking out onto the buses coming and going ('my pastime'), he is free to be himself.

And that broadly accepting attitude to the Minhocão characterises the film as a whole, even in sections when the account draws attention to the loss of amenity the road has brought with it. In an early part of the film, three Italian sisters from the Ferrara family sit on an antique sofa against the light, as the Minhocão looms through the window. Their account of an idyllic, pre-Minhocão childhood is cut with home movie fragments in which the Avenida São João bustles with smartly dressed families and trams, a picture of vanished urban order and propriety. But there's no real nostalgia about that part of the film, nor (surprisingly) anywhere. A couple living close to the roadway note that it's hard to sleep on Sundays when the Minhocão is closed to traffic, as 'you get addicted to the noise.'

35 Coutinho, Edouardo, director, *Edifício Master*, VideoFilmes, 2003, 1 hr., 50 min.

See Silvana Olivieiri, *Quando o cinema vira urbanismo: o documentário como ferramenta de abordagem da cidade* (Salvador: SciELO Books, 2011) Kindle edition, location 1816. For an earlier precedent, see also *Rua São Bento: Prédio Martinelli* (dir. Ugo Giorgetti, 1976), a documentary account of the eccentric inhabitants of the eponymous São Paulo skyscraper.



Perhaps most counter-intuitive is a taxi driver (Wilson dos Santos) in a flat overlooking the Minhocão. It was always his 'dream' to live near it, he says, tending his luxuriant terrace. It's beautiful he says, and he 'applauds' its builders; the camera pans away from him and his garden towards the sound of the traffic, showing his flat to be one of the very closest to the structure, at the same level as the roadway. His attachment to the Minhocão far exceeds anything that could have been meant by its designers. A man sincerely in love with a road, he could have been a Ballardian invention.

Mostly however, *Elevado 3.5* is a film of tactical engagement with the Minhocão, of hedging and fudging, and ultimately learning to live with it. Its landscape is naturally messy and unresolved, the opposite of both the vision found in the perspective drawings of the original designers, and the more recent plans for a permanent park. That heterogeneity has been the subject of academic research, mapping the social complexity of the area around the Minhocão as part of an activist project of resisting gentrification.³⁶

³⁶ For a Brazilian example, this project mapping the cultural life of the area around the Minhocão: Mariana Da Silva Nito and Simone Scifoni, "O Patrimônio Contra a Gentrificação: a Experiência do Inventário Participativo de Referências Culturais do Minhocão", *Revista do Centro da Pesquisa e Formação 5* (2017), 82-94.

[Fig. 3.]

Still from Maíra Bühler, Paulo Pastorelo and João Sodrê (dirs.) *Elevado 3.5* (2006)

The Minhocão occupied

In image, the Minhocão is first a dystopian, carceral space. Then it's a partially domesticated one, a home for a diverse and eclectic population. Then it becomes something else: a space of apparently spontaneous, and somewhat hedonistic events. It is sometimes spoken of as an open-air art gallery – a municipal public art project, the Museu de Arte de Rua (Museum of Street Art) has funded the production of forty or so large-scale works of street art along the Minhocão since 2017.³⁷ The best word for this is perhaps 'occupation'. The Minhocão is neither art, nor is it a coherent political project. It can nevertheless look like both at weekends, and it has some of the same character as the socially engaged or participatory art projects that have proliferated since 2000, especially since the Occupy movement of 2011.³⁸

A good example from 2010 was not a film per se, but a screening of a film – *Elevado 3.5* to be precise, projected from a specially constructed stage on the Minhocão itself. Reporting on it for the Brazilian architecture journal *Vitruvius*, a local architect, Luiz Florence wrote that it was hard to get a decent view. A thousand people turned up to see it, some hanging off balconies. That event created a new kind of image, the Minhocão as a carnivalesque space.³⁹ It was a significant, arguably transformative moment; the documentary itself legitimised a more humane approach to the Minhocão even if its directors were sceptical about the possibility (Sodré thought it should simply be demolished).⁴⁰ The event turned the Minhocão into an occupation.

The aesthetics of occupation are present – although to possibly quite different ends – in the activities of the Associação Parque Minhocão (Minhocão Park Association), founded to coincide with the São Paulo architecture biennale in 2013, and which continues to agitate for the transformation of the highway into a permanent park in the style of New York's High Line. (The High Line is a conversion of a former freight rail line in lower Manhattan to a carefully landscaped elevated park, linking cultural attractions and the massive retail and office development of Hudson Yards, along with residential development along the route.)⁴¹ The Associação has been an important source of images of an imagined new Minhocão. It commissioned fantastic architectural capriccios from an architect, Ciro Miguel in 2013, and was behind a kitschy book

37 <https://www.capital.sp.gov.br/noticia/museu-de-arte-de-rua-tera-intervencoes-artisticas-em-todas-as-regioes-da-cidade>

38 A useful overview of the aesthetics of occupation is Yates McKee, 'Occupy and the End of Socially /engaged Art', *e-flux Journal*, 72 (April 2016), <https://www.eflux.com/journal/72/60504/occupy-and-the-end-of-socially-engaged-art/>

39 Florence, "Estréia documental 'Elevado 3.5'."

40 Conversation with João Sodré, São Paulo (April 2022)

41 On the High Line, see R. J. Williams, *The Culture Factory: Architecture and the Contemporary Art Museum* (London: Lund Humphries, 2021), pp. 107–114.

of illustrated poems in 2015, both of which represented the Minhocão as a space of pleasure.⁴² Miguel's sketches included a number of fantasy scenarios, including one in which the road surface had been turned into a literal beach, complete with sand and a waterfront. It was a literal enactment of the Situationist slogan 'sous les pavés, la plage' ('beneath the pavement, the beach'). Collaged figures in bathing costumes signalled the final displacement of the Minhocão's original use; leisure definitively replacing transport. Something of the spirit of Miguel's images came to life in a project by an artist Luana Geiger, who installed an Olympic-sized swimming pool on the Minhocão for a day in March 2024.⁴³ And the images find echoes in a series of perspectives produced in 2017 by Jaime Lerner Arquitetos Associados, a major Brazilian firm of architects. The images, pitched speculatively to the Municipality of São Paulo as a possible future development, depict the Minhocão as a space of play, aestheticised occupation having entirely displaced its original function.

In terms of film, the closest ideological equivalent to those images is a documentary made by the Italian artist Rosa Barba for the 2016 São Paulo Bienal. *Disseminate and Hold* fixates on the moment every evening at 8.30 pm when the Minhocão closes to traffic, and in a few minutes opens to pedestrians. Each time it does this, according to Barba, it re-enacts a popular resistance to political authoritarianism; it is for her a spectacular, albeit temporary, theatricalisation of democracy, a reclamation of space for public use, a spontaneous, daily occupation.⁴⁴ Cut through with historic footage of the Minhocão under construction, and in use as a highway now, *Disseminate and Hold* is nevertheless clear its sympathy lies with the occupation. It's a bundle of contradictions, as is the Minhocão in general. If it is an occupation, it's an officially sanctioned one, for it is the municipality of São Paulo that permits it, with the assistance of the police department. And as an occupation, it is curiously oblivious to the other, more permanent occupation of the Minhocão by the homeless underneath the carriageway underlines how far the perception of the Minhocão has shifted in that direction, and how film has been complicit in that shift.⁴⁵ Thanks to these events, and now the extraordinary proliferation of amateur films on social media platforms, it is this version of the Minhocão, the Minhocão as occupation, that predominates as image.

42 Felipe Morozini, interview with the author, 17 March 2022; Athos Comolatti, interview with the author, 5 April 2022. The book is Gil Veloso and Paulo von Poser, *Um Viaduto Chamado Minhocão* (São Paulo: Dedo de Prosa, 2015)

43 Ricardo Senra, 'Após proibição, prefeitura autoriza piscina olímpica no Minhocão', *Folha de São Paulo* (20 March 2014)

44 Jason Farago, 'Rosa Barba examines the everyday chaos of São Paulo's 'giant earthworm' highway,' *Guardian* (20 September 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/20/rosa-barba-sao-paulo-biennial-disseminate-and-hold-film>

45 The Minhocão-as-beach dominates its social media presence. See, for example, the social media page of the APM: <https://www.facebook.com/parqueminhocao>

Conclusion

The Minhocão is a curious site. Arguably its undoubted fascination for urbanists has to do with its fundamental lack of resolution. More or less exactly the same structure in 2023 as it was when completed in 1971, it is claimed by several distinct constituencies, without entirely belonging to any of them. It is still during the day a vital traffic artery, carrying some 55,000 cars; at night and weekends it is a park; whatever time of day it is, home to a sizeable population of street dwellers who occupy its undercroft throughout. It has also been the subject of innumerable architectural fantasises, most of which imagine it transformed from its workaday existence into a permanent park. Most of these fantasies present the Minhocão as a zone of pleasure for the well-off, excluding the many marginal populations who currently live in its environs. The Minhocão might not have changed as a physical object, but the way it is understood undoubtedly has; cinema offers a set of parallel texts on its evolution, separate from the discourse of its ostensible authors, the engineers and politicians. Cinema is the place where the Minhocão exceeds its design, firstly as a fearful space, a disciplinary space, the embodiment of the carceral state. In documentary it's then a place that provides shelter for a ragged and eccentric population. Finally, in more recent film, it is where a hedonistic future for the city is played out, in which the on aesthetics of occupation are arguably turned to developmental ends. Finally, along with all of these at times spectacular cinematic renderings, it is also more prosaically often just another place in the city, as it is in *Segundo Tempo* of 2019, a normalised signifier of São Paulo, unspectacular and unremarkable.⁴⁶ That is perhaps most indicative of the city of São Paulo's present attitude to the Minhocão as seen in film. It is now simply just there, the subject of enough care to continue to exist.

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⁴⁶ Another mainstream use of the Minhocão as a location, not discussed here: Rewald, Rubens, director, *Segundo Tempo*, Miração Filmes/Heartwake Films, 2019, 1hr., 47 min.

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