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# AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW



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## **Air Conditioner by Fradique (Feature, 2020)**

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Abstract:	The movie <i>Ar Condicionado</i> tells a story of dreams and of dreamers. The main dream of course, is that of the director, Fradique who pays homage to Luanda, his city of birth. In <i>Ar Condicionado</i> , the busy, loud and messy capital of Angola escapes its condition of derelict urban node crushed by poverty to become a place of contemplation, poetry and even of silence. Inventing his own version of magical realism, Fradique offers a powerful piece of documentary fiction that has already made its mark in the history of Angolan cinema.

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

The movie *Ar Condicionado*, by Angolan director Fradique tells a story of dreamers caught between revolt and resignation.

The main dreamer is the director paying homage to Luanda, his city of birth, that was so dramatically transformed in the 1980s and 1990s with 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 » (press kit by Geração 80).

The film was shot on location in a building that sits right in the middle of the city center. 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 that 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, meticulous soundscapes and impeccable photography all contribute to this sensitive dive in the everyday.

What is the most admirable though, is not the ability to capture 'the reality' but rather the cautious effort to avoid romanticism and unmake the brutality of a bare documentary gaze. The experimental jazzy soundtrack derails our contemplative attention. Silent sequences radically negate conventional expectations of documentary cinema by making visible 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 movie, creating a background of conspiracy theories and apocalyptic preaches. In *Ar Condicionado* the city has reached its limits and the loud noise of ACs crashing on 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 have a life on its own.

Kota Mino (David Caracol) is the only character who makes his dream come true. The repairman lives in a shop where dismantled ACs become the fuel of a fantastic machine that transports its users in a parallel world made of the memories of those who once owned the broken devices. The machine perfectly embodies the very act of filmmaking.

Zezinha (Filomena Manuel) works as a maid in the house of an authoritarian boss who is infuriated by the loss of his AC. Zezinha's unruffled deference contrasts with the coarse language of the boss, but the contemplative slowness she puts in stirring her tea suggests her subtle capacity of resistance. Zezinha uses daydreaming as a shield against aggressiveness, fear and domination. She embarks 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 a handyman who obliges to each and everyone who lives in the building. Skilful sequence shots show him taking groceries up the stairs, delivering heavy gas bottles, walking along dark corridors or bathing in the water falling from broken drainpipes. While Zezinha 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. It is as if his body slowly became one with the cement envelope. Although I'm not sure AbduMaliq Simone's idea of 'people as infrastructure' easily fits in 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 returning 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 press kit. In October 2021, after being selected in more than thirty international film festivals, *Ar Condicionado* won the award of best feature film in the 'Unitel Angola Move' festival, one of the first Angolan film festivals on this kind. Reacting to this victory, Ngoi Salucombo, Geração 80 Creative Director 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 fulfilled the expectations of those who, like Kota Mino, are keen to escape in the dreams and memories of others. But it is now time to find ways for Matacedo's hard work and Zezinha's determination to have a rippling 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.

Chloé Buire is a permanent researcher at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). She is currently based in Luanda, conducting research under the French Institute in South. Africa (IFAS-Research). [chloe.buire@cnrs.fr](mailto:chloe.buire@cnrs.fr)