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Denise Zmekhol, *Skin of Glass*

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REFERENCES

Denise Zmekhol, *Skin of Glass*, United States / Brasil, 79' – 2023

- 1 Defined as a “totemic element,” “beautiful, impressive,” and characterized by a “crystal clear purity like a perfect glass prism, very transparent,” the 25-story building that Roger Zmekhol designed in São Paulo in 1968 is today “the great mirror of contemporary Brazil in which everyone must look at themselves.” This powerful and provocative phrase serves as the cornerstone for the documentary *Skin of Glass*, a 2023 work directed by Denise Zmekhol. The film moves between an intimate exploration and a social and cinematic analysis, placing social and economic inequality at the center of the narrative, filtered through the lens of architecture.
- 2 The entire work takes the form of an impossible letter, a voiceless dialogue between a daughter and a father who is no longer there. Once, he was a talented architect whose dream was to redesign the profile of a rapidly expanding city. That world, permeated with ideals of modernity and progress, has dissolved. It is from this space suspended between past and present that Denise Zmekhol’s journey begins, an immersion into the memory of her family and her father, and, in parallel, a sharp look at contemporary Brazil. The journey concludes in São Paulo, the final destination where the filmmaker confronts her own past, an architectural legacy that has left an indelible mark. This building, a tangible heritage, has remained as a silent testimony in the city, but instead of representing only success and innovation, it now reveals all the fragilities and contradictions of today’s Brazil.
- 3 The catalyst that initiates the documentary is at once personal and emblematic: Denise Zmekhol discovers that the famous modernist skyscraper designed by her father, once a symbol of the avant-garde in the heart of São Paulo, has been occupied by hundreds of homeless families. This starting point, which merges the intimate sphere with a mundane problem of global scale, becomes the catalyst for an in-depth investigation

into the profound contradictions that permeate Brazilian society. The building, conceived as an icon of progress and modernist ideals, has transformed into a “vertical favela,” dramatically reflecting the failure of those very ideals in the face of rampant and systemic inequality. This skyscraper, once an emblem of a bright future, has been transformed into a raw mirror of social injustices.

- 4 The film, while starting from a deeply personal premise, moves away from a merely anecdotal approach to embrace a broader and more critical perspective. During her research, Zmekhol gathers and intertwines the testimonies of a multitude of figures who gravitate around the building. The voices of the residents emerge, who, despite living in precarious conditions, maintain extraordinary dignity and resilience. To these are added those of the occupation leaders, who powerfully articulate the reasons for their struggle for the right to housing and human dignity, and of public officials, who often see the building only as a danger to safety and a symbol of illegality. The documentary also includes contributions from academics and architectural historians who discuss its artistic and historical value, placing it within a broader context of urban development and architectural ideals. This plurality of viewpoints offers a complex and multifaceted representation of the situation, highlighting how an architectural work is never a static entity, but a dynamic object, a living entity that embodies and reflects the social and economic tensions of a nation.
- 5 In *Skin of Glass*, architecture is no longer a mere backdrop, but an active narrative element. The skyscraper is not simply a structure of concrete and glass, but a palimpsest on which are inscribed the stories, hopes, and frustrations of those who inhabit it. The documentary invites us to consider architecture in its social function and its ability to act as a critical mirror of the society that produced it. The glass facade, which was originally meant to symbolize transparency and modernity, becomes a fragile and reflective surface, behind which a reality of extreme poverty and a daily struggle for survival is hidden. The building itself transforms into a character, a silent witness to a story that goes far beyond its aesthetics.
- 6 The main narrative voice, that of the filmmaker herself, clarifies the author’s intent to confront, through the film, a global crisis of which the building is both a victim and a symbol. In a context where squatting is a phenomenon affecting one-sixth of the world’s population and where “cities of the future” often turn out to be the inevitable result of policies of inequity, the film’s perspective is projected onto a universal dimension. The father’s architectural legacy, which at first was a personal search, transforms into an opportunity to reflect on the great questions of our time, such as social exclusion, housing shortages, and the often abyssal gap between urban ideals and their concrete realization.
- 7 The relevance and impact of the film have been recognized internationally. The film was presented at major film festivals starting in 2023, including the São Paulo International Film Festival, the Mill Valley Film Festival, and the BARQ (International Architecture Film Festival in Barcelona). A significant recognition came at the Milano Design Film Festival, where it won the Architecture Film Award (AFA) in 2024. This positive reception demonstrates that its message, while specific to the Brazilian context, strikes universal chords and invites critical and urgent reflection on the relationship between space, power, and social justice. The film succeeds in this endeavor without ever sacrificing its subjective and uniquely human character,

offering a profound and moving look at how a single building can encapsulate the history and contradictions of an entire nation.

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