



Meeting a myth: Wajnberg spent a month getting to know Niemeyer

The man who built Brazil

In his latest film, Belgian director Marc-Henri Wajnberg shows the legendary Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer in a revealing new light. **Ian Ramsey** reports

A UFO zooms across Brazilian skies before hovering to land on a rocky promontory in the harbour of Rio de Janeiro, where it morphs into an other-worldly building; this, to say the least, is a pretty original introduction to Oscar Niemeyer. It spryly conveys the wow-appeal of the work of the revolutionary Brazilian architect, whose astonishing buildings you can easily imagine on another (sexier, more curvaceous) planet.

Marc-Henri Wajnberg's latest documentary, *Oscar Niemeyer: un architecte engagé dans le siècle*, is filled with such bursts of oblique flair. Gilberto Gil "sings" Niemeyer's work, Fidel Castro hugs him and women's bodies melt into the Brazilian landscape to illustrate the influences on his architecture. "I wanted," the Bel-

gian director says, "to show him from a different angle."

Wajnberg's previous work includes the 1993 fiction feature *Just Friends* and *Clap*, the TV pre-news shorts broadcast around the world – and in which he starred. Niemeyer is the second subject of a series of films on figures who somehow symbolise the course of their country through the 20th century. The first, in 1997, was the late Evgueni Khaldei, the Soviet photographer whose famous

"I asked if he felt the Berlin Wall was very interesting as architecture"

images included that of the Red Army soldier waving the Soviet flag over a devastated Berlin in 1945. "He was an incredible man who led an incredible life," explains Wajnberg in a bar near his south Brussels offices. "His work traced the story of the USSR. As did his life – as a Jew, he was repeatedly in and out of favour with the Soviet regime.

"I was very moved by Khaldei, who never lost his faith in the socialist dream. I realised that today's society doesn't produce people of that strength and idealism. I wanted to make another film about an artist of the same calibre." A Brazilian producer suggested Niemeyer, the 93-year-old Le Corbusier disciple whose organic, anti-rational architecture helped carve a new identity for his homeland – most famously with the modernist capital of the country, Brasilia, whose famously curved buildings he designed in the 1950s – and who is a life-long communist.

"I'd seen the Niteroi Museum of Contemporary Art [the above-mentioned "UFO" building] when it opened in 1997," recalls Wajnberg. "Its elegance and rigour – its lyricism and sensuality – stuck in my mind. I was always impressed by Niemeyer's concern with social progress. I didn't know that he was still alive, so I leapt at the chance to make a documentary about him.

"The film isn't a judgement on his architecture. It's more about the immense path forged by this man across the century and his desire to build a modern Brazil – a Brazil whose intellectual, poetic and artistic force was independent of the US and Europe." After many months of research with co-writer Rogier van Eck, Wajnberg filmed Niemeyer for a month last year in his native Rio. A "strong friendship" developed between the men.

"Apparently, Niemeyer won't speak or will just repeat what he said in previous interviews if he doesn't take to you," says Wajnberg. "Thankfully, he was frank and open with us – he could tell we were serious, having come all the way from Belgium. He's actually a very humble man."

Niemeyer comes over as a sharp, sprightly figure. Still working hard, he likes to drink and smoke; his eyes pant after passing women. But he also seems melancholic, full of nostalgia for his

Arts

youth. "He feels that death is approaching," says Wajnberg. "He discussed it during some very private moments off-camera. I think he works so much so as not to think about it." As for Niemeyer's

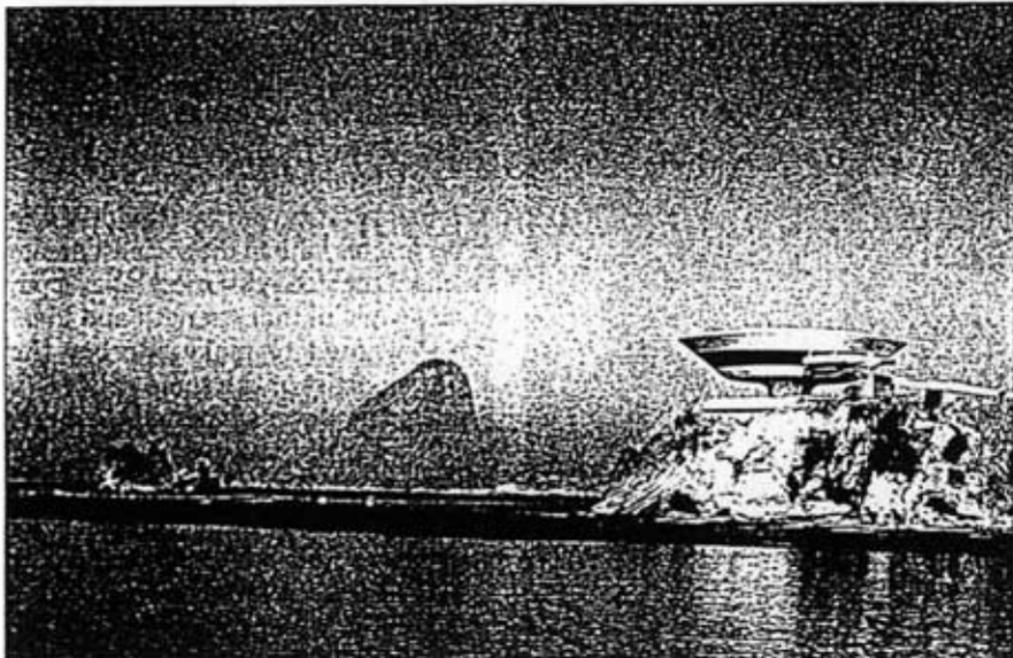
politics, Wajnberg describes them as "naive": "He's remained true to communism without asking whether its theory is flawed. He wasn't too keen to discuss what went wrong with the Soviet bloc.

He dodged the question when I asked him whether he thought the Berlin Wall was a very interesting architectural statement."

Still, Wajnberg admires Niemeyer's idealism and the fact that, during the military dictatorship that ran Brazil from 1964 to 1984, he hid fellow Party members who were persecuted by the regime – to which he proved a constant thorn in the side, attacking them in his work. Forced into exile in the 1970s, Niemeyer moved to France where he designed, among other buildings, the headquarters of the French Communist Party – Wajnberg is screening the French premiere of his documentary there.

He hopes that Oscar Niemeyer will attend. "He called me to say that he really likes the film," he says with delight. "With two reservations – that he looks too small and too old!"

Oscar Niemeyer will be broadcast on RTBF 2 on October 19 at 9 pm and RTBF 1 on October 22 at 10.30 pm and October 23 at 9.30 am.



R/VAN ECK

Out of this world: the Niteroi Museum of Contemporary Art in Rio de Janeiro