THE TRAPPED HEROINES: 
WOMEN IN THE PORTUGUESE CINEMA OF THE 1960s

Pery Machado

ABSTRACT
A new generation of filmmakers sought political and ideological change through metaphorically-charged stories depicting the broken “realities” of 1960s Portugal under the ‘Estado Novo’. The films depict a society stuck in the past, unmoving towards a prosperous future, presented through down-trodden and desperate characters struggling to survive. But their political challengers are embodied by male characters, while female characters are maintained, for the most part, in the traditional framework that had always been enclosed in.

KEY WORDS
Novo Cinema; Salazar; Portuguese cinema; Estado Novo.

The depiction of women in cinema has always been linked to their dependency on the closest male protagonist, whether he be a co-star or a supporting actor, from D.W. Griffith’s controversial but important The Birth of a Nation (1915) to the ensemble cast of The Avengers (Joss Whedon, 2012). This is especially true of countries with a strong religious background, highlighted by a deep moral conviction that every person has a specific role in their social status. Throughout history, as those in power have almost exclusively been men, the subservient role has fallen onto women. This is especially true in the Portuguese cinema since its earliest incarnation at the beginning of the 20th century. When a military dictatorship took over the country and enforced its right-wing, conservative policies in the early 1930s under the ‘Estado Novo’ (literally translated as, the New State), the female figure became relegated to a specific role of reinforcing the religious and patriarchal society, having certain rights revoked or expressly prohibited, such as owning property, freedom to divorce and necessitating a secondary education in order to vote. (Solsten, 1993)

In the 1960s, with the emergence of the Portuguese ‘Novo Cinema’1 (literally, New Cinema) movement that sought political and ideological change from a conservative, highly-constrained social hierarchy and class to a more liberal society, the depiction of the “people” and their social and economic conditions was the antithesis of what had been shown in the movie theatres up to that point. Beginning with ‘Dom Roberto’2 (Ernesto Souza, 1962), the characters’ situations were, for the most part, on the poverty-line, bordering between survival by any means necessary and starvation (both economically and literally). Characters began to steal, lie and confront social institutions that had been in place to maintain order and appearance, something that was unheard of and unseen in the Portuguese cinema (although many characters had gotten into trouble with the law—and many times had been

---

1 ‘Novo Cinema’ is the accepted term used to describe a New Wave-style of filmmaking prevalent in Portugal beginning in the 1960s, not to be confused with the Brazilian ‘Cinema Novo’ movement of the same time period. Therefore, when one refers to the Portuguese cinematic movement, ‘Novo Cinema’ is the used term.

2 The film is known in the English language as Dom Roberto, but where available, an English translation of the Portuguese title is given.
placed in jail—their crimes had been minor and had been dealt with quickly with the payment of a fine). One should therefore presume that such a revolutionary movement (although bound by the constrictions of censorship of the time) would have featured a much broader role for women, that they would have broken the bond of servitude and docility and would have become independent of men, socially, financially and emotionally. But this is not the case. The fact is that among the most important films of the ‘Novo Cinema’ movement, one sees an affirmation of the social values presented and reinforced by the dictatorial ‘Estado Novo’. This will be evident in the following films that will be examined in further depth: ‘Dom Roberto’, ‘Os Verdes Anos’ (*The Green Years*, Paulo Rocha, 1963), ‘O Cerco’ (António da Cunha Telles, 1969) and ‘Mudar de Vida’ (Paulo Rocha, 1966).

**Women in the Portuguese Cinema up to 1962.**

The role of women in the Portuguese cinema had been defined largely to the most common form of storytelling and the most popular genre of films made in Portugal at the time, a particular style of comedy known as the ‘comédia à portuguesa’, a term coined by Paulo Jorge Granja (translated as the ‘Comedy in the Portuguese Style’). This was a convention established with the immensely popular film ‘A Canção de Lisboa’ (*Lisbon Song*, Cottinelli Telmo, 1933) and then heavily reinforced through the successive years with variations of the same themes (such as the maintenance of one’s social position, the importance of family, and the lack of any political consciousness). The film tells the story of Vasco (Vasco Santana), a bohemian medical student who would rather drink and chase women than study, and his turbulent relationship with Alice (played by Beatriz Costa). After getting expelled from medical school, Vasco tries to hide this fact from his benefactresses, his rich spinster aunts who have been led to believe that he is a celebrated doctor (even going so far as to pretend that he has a medical practice with humorous consequences at a zoo), but upon discovery he is disinherited and forced to depend on himself. By the end of the film, not only has Vasco overcome his financial predicament through his popular Fado performances but he also manages to graduate with top marks from medical school and marries Alice. Alice’s role is a supporting one, her knowledge of Vasco’s infidelities are overcome with sweet and funny wordplays, and she supports him when he emerges from obscurity as a celebrated *fadista*. Her position is dependent on her father (Antonio Silva), a tailor who obliges her to enter a popular contest, and without whom she would not seem to survive independently. This formula, of the laid-back but naturally enchanting man who must use his quick wits to turn his life around, a woman dependent on a family-figure who only has a supporting role, and the miraculous properties of Fado music, became the archetypal story for the majority of films produced in Portugal up to the 1960s and beyond. Examples of these can be seen in such films as ‘O Costa do Castelo’ (*The Coast from the Castle*, Arthur Duarte, 1943) to ‘A Costureirinha da Sé’ (*My Little Seamstress*, Manuel Guimarães, 1959) and ‘A Canção da Saudade’ (*The Song of Homesickness*, Henrique Campos, 1964).

The comedies reflect on a social identity constructed by the ‘Estado Novo’, from marriage to dating to sexuality, projecting a conservative figure who is the moral foundation that

---

3 In ‘O Passarinho da Ribeira’ (Augusto Fraga, 1959) the mother, Micas, (played by Maria Cristina) is arrested for creating a commotion on a busy street, but is quickly released after her fine has been paid.
reigns in man’s playful (yet free) desires. The main characters come from a working and middle class background, small business owners and manual workers but who are not in the realms of poverty. The depiction of the extremely wealthy or the socially dominant classes is absent because the majority of spectators in the cinema were precisely from the working and middle classes, who saw the characters on the screen as the visual reflections of themselves. The ability to “see themselves” on-screen allowed the ‘Estado Novo’ to impose its ideological message to the audience through the actions and dialogue of the characters, projecting the desired views and attitudes through self-identification and conformity. Though not as explicit as the German cinema of the same era—particularly films like *The Eternal Jew* (Der Ewige Jude, Fritz Hippler, 1940)—nor as artistically as Soviet filmmakers (Eisenstein et al.), the simplicity and effectiveness of the projection of ideology cannot be undervalued. If it was not apparent in the first film, the near-constant repetition of the same stories cemented the message. (Granja, 2003)

The ‘Novo Cinema’.

*Dom Roberto*

The emancipation and domestication of the female character, therefore, is well-established by the time *Dom Roberto* premieres in 1962. The film tells the story of João Barbela (played by Raul Solnado), a down-on-his-luck puppeteer who, after being forced out of his apartment, lives in a condemned building, constructing a fantasy life with Maria (Glicínia Quartin), a dishonoured woman whom he saves from committing suicide. Metaphorically, it is a reflection on the state of Portugal and the social conditions the population faced, ranging from the inability to feed oneself (at the beginning of the film João steals a sausage from a deli and a wandering chicken from a vegetable patch) to the lack of employment and a potential future (Maria wanders around the city in a vainglorious attempt to find work). Grim, ambiguous and unapologetically tragic, it is a truly revolutionary film that breathed a sigh of freshness to a moribund industry.

Yet, despite its critical acclaim, its socialist undertones and unique political voice, the character of Maria maintains the social role established by the ‘Estado Novo’ as the subservient. João ‘saves’ her from committing suicide at the beginning, feeds her and pays a room for her to sleep in for a night in the hope that she will emotionally connect with him as he has with her. Before he is able to see her the next morning, she has disappeared without so much as a thank-you note. When he sees her again in the middle of his puppet act, she is framed behind metal bars, metaphorically presenting her as trapped, economically, emotionally and socially. Indeed, when she accepts his invitation to live with him in the abandoned building, she is initially reluctant, but when she sees that his fantastical effort to pretend that the building is the beginning of a new life, of a potential future (he goes as far as to say that it is a very important building, and points out where the ‘furniture’ is—although these are only outlines drawn on the walls) she eventually agrees and indulges him in his fantasy, correcting him on where the ‘refrigerator’ is in relation to the rest of the ‘furniture’. Her agreement to the living situation sees her undertake in traditionally female domestic chores: She cooks for him, cleans their rooms and helps repair the building. Maria falls into the ‘traditional’ female role of providing for the man while he goes into town in search of a
job to pay for food (that she ends up cooking), becoming just as dependent on him as the women in the films promoting the values of the ‘Estado Novo’. Moreover, her illiteracy impedes her from advancing in life alone, and his simple lessons to teach her how to read and write further demonstrate man’s dominance over women (even though he is no better off than her, economically). Her political voice is as muted as those in the cinema promoting the values of the ‘Estado Novo.’

**Os Verdes Anos**

The female role is expanded in ‘Os Verdes Anos’, the second film of the ‘Novo Cinema’ (sometimes labelled as the first, true film of the movement), but upon closer investigation one sees a continued reaffirmation of the subservient role of the female. The film tells the story of Julio (Rui Gomes), a young, naive man from the countryside who moves to Lisbon to work at a shoemaker’s shop, arranged by his uncle (Ruy Furtado). He meets Ilda (played by Isabel Ruth), a maid who works for an upper-middle class family in the outskirts of the city. Julio struggles to adapt himself to life in the big city, and this begins to strain on his relationships with his uncle (with whom he had been living) and with Ilda, whom he suspects of infidelity. Julio’s troubles become so severe and unmanageable that he coldly kills Ilda and tries to escape.

The film was lauded at foreign competitions, its bleakness and cinematic language echoed the neo-realism of post-war Italian cinema, and Julio’s social awkwardness and inability to adapt to the big city (and by metaphorical extension, modernity) presents a hopeless youth, unable to survive. Contrasting Julio’s meekness and seeming lack of enthusiasm, Ilda is not content with her job (though she takes it extremely serious, the mark of a hard worker) and hopes to work for herself sowing clothes and not have to depend on others. She encourages Julio to confront his boss for a decent wage and that he should not have to ‘stay in a corner working for others’. Her desire for social ascension is also reflected in a scene when she dresses herself in her employer’s clothing, rich and elegant while her normal clothing is plain and lacks variety.

Ilda’s desire to raise herself above her social position is a strong feminist and political statement in a traditionally conservative country where social boundaries are clearly defined and strictly enforced. One should see Ilda as the beacon of progression, her ambitions a juggernaut of women’s lib. Her role is thwarted by the audience’s initial identification with Júlio (his first appearance is at the train station where his uncle had forgotten to pick him up and is forced to find his way to his uncle’s apartment alone in a strange environment). By presenting Julio as the victim, the audience is forced to identify with him, and any subsequent act either done by him or to him is read as a reaction to his victimization. When Ilda dresses herself in her employer’s clothing, Julio sits on a child-sized chair and does not present any sort of reaction, positive or negative, to her obvious sexual teasing (she exposes her bare shoulders suggestively to him and shows off her legs and feet in a pair of short shorts). The very next scene we see them dancing in a music hall to a slow and romantic song, but when the music changes to rockabilly, Julio desists in dancing. Ilda is visibly excited when they watch a pair dance fluidly to the music (she plays with her pearl necklace and bears a large grin on her face). When Julio, complaining of a headache, goes to a nearby pharmacy, Ilda dances with the male partner of the rockabilly pair. Instead of celebrating her sexual freedom
to choose whichever partner she wants, the audience feels that she has betrayed Julio. His distrust becomes the audience’s distrust, and it forms the basis not only of their break-up but of the audience’s unconscious doubt towards her motives (and his reaction to the situation is his attempt to assert his masculine dominance over her). By the end of the film, when we see Julio’s behaviour becoming more erratic and crass, the audience begins to sympathise with Ilda but by that point it is too late. Julio pays no attention to her when she explains about her motivation to become self-employed a few scenes from the end, sublimely demonstrating his male dominance by dismissing her dreams (and by extension the audience’s dismissal, as they already identify with him). Julio’s final act of killing her can be seen as the male’s final attack at thwarting any chance of social expansion of the female—if it is not with the male, there will be no rising at all.

O Cerco

One of the few films made with an exclusively female protagonist, ‘O Cerco’ gives the female the most amount of screen-time than any film made during the 1960s. It tells the story of Marta (Maria Cabral), a young woman who leaves her husband to search for her true identity. The audience follows her as she works as a model for an advertising company looking to sell whiskey in Portugal, freely engages with different sexual partners and suffers physical abuse at the hands of men. On the surface the film would seem to have a strong feminist agenda, creating a world where women are treated as objects, men dominate the social and economic strata, and any sympathetic man who selflessly aids women is destroyed.

But while the female voice is presented as an objectified one, the director’s framing of Marta and her own actions do nothing to aid its political agenda. The film’s opening titles show stills of Marta being enclosed by lines, as if trapping her⁴, giving the premonition that she is the victim—indeed, she is viciously assaulted by her husband and slapped by a co-worker she had slept with. But upon gaining her ‘freedom’ after leaving her husband, she struggles throughout the film to earn money and becomes heavily dependent on the financial power of men. Her employment as a model, though not manual or traditionally domestic, is reliant upon her looks and physical attributes, not on her intellect, and we see the camera’s desire to capture her image, from the way she meticulously combs her hair to her constant application of make-up to her naked body when she tries on different clothing for a photo-shoot.

The objectification of Marta is not undermined or thwarted by any of her actions. Marta does not possess the same desire as Ilda to become independent of any masculine help nor is she as determined as Albertina (curiously, also played by Isabel Ruth) in ‘Mudar de Vida’ to escape—indeed, when Marta asks her American lover Bob (David Hudson) to take her to America with him, he dismisses her in the same way as one would a childish request and she refrains from asking again. Moreover, she is further objectified through her sexuality: at one point, Marta’s boss asks her to entertain a prospective client at a nightclub after another girl in the same group flirtatiously danced with him. All four of Marta’s sexual partners have contributed to her advancement (or at the very least, her survival) in one way or another: her husband and Bob provided her with a place to live, Rui the photographer (Oscar Cruz) helped

⁴ A direct reference to the film’s title, roughly translated as The Circle.
create her ‘image’ for the advertising campaign, and Vitor Lopes (Miguel Franco), a smuggler who sympathizes with her—and is the only character who seems to act selflessly towards her—offers to pay her bills, telling her that she need not worry about paying him back straight away. Even after becoming victim to the treatment by the majority of men in her life, the film ends with Marta being stuck in the same position as she had been, at risk of falling into debt again—only this time, because of her abandonment of Bob and the mysterious death of Carlos Lopes (highly suggested as being orchestrated by Marta’s boss, to whom she had mentioned Lopes’ profession and his ability to sell the same whiskey for a much cheaper price, effectively putting him at risk of losing his business) there will be no safety net for her to fall on.

The film’s lack of a political view in the same way as ‘Dom Roberto’ or ‘Os Verdes Anos’ (the struggle of the social classes, the decadence of the Portuguese state and the bleakness of the future presented through symbolism and metaphors) forces the audience to view this film as a character-driven drama without any metaphorical camouflage. Therefore, any potential characterological reading of the film is not clouded in ambiguity but is rather shown as a literal representation of political dialogue. Ilda’s death at the end of ‘Os Verdes Anos’ can be interpreted as the death of change at the hands of a socially antiquated system of conventions (represented by Julio), but whereas Marta’s experiences form a dialogue about the treatment of women in society, her lack of imagination or direction provides no solution to her (or women’s) predicament. Indeed, the film ends with her applying her make-up on after discovering her employer’s new address, suggesting that she is still reliant on her physique to try and survive.

**Mudar de Vida**

Paulo Rocha’s follow-up to ‘Os Verdes Anos’, ‘Mudar de Vida’ tells the story of Adelino (Geraldo del Rey) who after many years serving in Africa, returns home to the fishing village where he was born. There he finds that the woman he had loved, Julia (Maria Barroso), grew tired of waiting for him to return and married his brother. To relieve himself of the pain, Adelino occupies himself with whatever work he can find (usually gruelling manual labour for a struggling fishing company). He meets Albertina (Isabel Ruth) a morally ‘loose’ woman who yearns to escape from Portugal to change her life. With her help, Adelino finds the courage to escape from his meagre existence and change his own life.

The film’s focus on the fishing village (the subject of numerous films made during the ‘Estado Novo’, such as ‘Nazaré, Praia de Pescadores’ (Leitão de Barros, 1929), ‘Ala-Arriba!’ (Leitão de Barros, 1942) and ‘Nazaré’ (Manuel Guimarães, 1952), presented a much more critical view of Portugal at the time, rural and dependant on the traditional industries. Adelino’s involvement in Africa is one of the first references in the Salazarist cinema to the colonial war in Africa (unprecedented at the time) and the frank depiction of the arduous work done by the fishermen paints a picture of the status quo as a society stuck in the past fighting for a cause they don’t understand or care to change.

The two female characters of Julia and Albertina present the opposing views of Portuguese society, between those firmly established through decades (and indeed centuries)

---

5 Indeed, the title translates as *Change One’s Life*
of religious and social constraints and those who sought a rupture of the patriarchal bonds of subservient servitude. Through Julia we see the traditional: a married woman who dresses in typical peasant clothing, performs manual labour (such as collecting pine needles and preparing food for her family) while her husband works far away in the city. Her decision to marry Adelino’s brother stemmed from the social constraint of becoming a decent person and entering respectability, in other words, to fit into the pre-defined, established social order. She lives with two paternal figures (we do not know if they are family members), echoing the conventions established in the cinema of the 1930s.

Albertina represents modernity and escapism. From her clothes to her sexual behaviour, she is the antithesis of Julia. Albertina is forced to live by her own wits and is not afraid of fighting those who attack her (she even carries a knife and knows how to use it), and she longs to escape her life in Portugal, something almost impossible due to the fact that women were unable to obtain passports (Solsten, 1993). She works in a factory making clothes, which the fishing community sees as lazy in comparison to their demanding job, having to physically row their fishing boat out to sea. Albertina’s desire to escape at whatever cost leads to her commit acts that would have horrified the community, such as stealing money from the donation box in a deserted chapel (they giveth and she taketh away).

The film is divided into roughly two parts, signalling a change in Adelino’s life, from his shattered illusions of the past (demonstrated by his disappointment at Julia’s marriage) to the dangerous yet enticing future with Albertina. Julia’s illness and the fishing company’s bankruptcy at the end of the film cuts off any hope Adelino (or the audience) may have had for links to the past and pushes him to follow Albertina’s plan to escape (she even declares, much to his surprise, that she is leaving the following week and that the money she needs “will appear.”) Indeed, despite being the protagonist of the film, Adelino is torn between two paths, by two women, one firmly rooted in the past and the other destined to escape to the future (or die trying). This demonstrates the significant role, albeit framed as a secondary one, the women play. Julia’s portrayal is specifically designed to evoke the images audiences were used to seeing of women: domesticated, subservient and traditional (in attitude and in attire). Albertina’s dissatisfaction with her position (and by extension women’s position) in Portuguese society acts as the realization that the situation (economic, social and political) is hopeless and that the only way to escape is to emigrate.

Conclusions

As politically charged as these examples may be (by no means are they representative of all films by the ‘Novo Cinema’ movement, but of the 12 feature-length films made by the movement in the 1960s (Cunha, 2013), these four bear the most political ideology), their preoccupation stands firmly with political and social change through the framing and audience identification with male characters. For the most part, women are relegated to the traditional roles they have always inhabited, and those who attempt to break free fail.

The only film to show a successful female figure is ‘Mudar de Vida’. Its political power is embodied by Albertina, the marginalized heroine of the film—one could go so far to say that

---

A trait seen in a number of films of the Novo Cinema, many characters seek their future abroad, implying that Portugal has nothing to offer them.
she is the most powerful female figure of the ‘Novo Cinema’ movement. Her determination to emigrate and succeed is unchallenged by any social constraints (though the film ends ambiguously, uncertain if Adelino and Albertina manage to escape the country). This is not the case in the previous films mentioned, where the characters either are stopped by the patriarchal society (as in the case of Ilda), return to their previous position (as Marta does) or cannot see the situation for what it really is (like Maria in ‘Dom Roberto’). Albertina’s emphatic declaration of emigration is (almost) enough to convince Adelino to go with her, and though it is only after all connections with the past are lost that he decides to follow her, she is the instigator of change, something that none of the other female characters mentioned come close to achieving, always confined to a supporting role (even if they are the main character, like Marta).

One can argue and debate the reasoning for the exclusion of successful, modern female figures in the Portuguese cinema of the 1960s, but what stands true is that there is indeed a lack of them. The ‘Novo Cinema’ films, although artistically and politically different to the films supporting the ‘Estado Novo’, maintain the traces of the society in which they inhabited. While the films must certainly be praised for their counter-cultural depiction of life in Salazarist Portugal at a time when the regime wanted to show a strong country with firm moral and social groundings, the concerning lack of strong, modern female characters must certainly be remembered when discussing the social boundaries depicted in the ‘Novo Cinema’. It is most disturbing that the social, economic and political liberation sought by the directors are primarily for male characters, which highlights and reinforces the disparity between the genders. Such a revolutionary and socially-driven ideology shares more characteristics with the regime it sought to undermine than it may care to mention.

**Filmography**

*Canção da Saudade, A* (1964) Henrique Campos  
*Canção de Lisboa, A* (1933) Cottinelli Telmo  
*Cerco, O* (1970) António da Cunha Telles  
*Costa do Castelo, O* (1943) Arthur Duarte  
*Costureirinha da Sé, A* (1959), Manuel Guimarães  
*Dom Roberto* (1962) Ernesto Sousa  
*Mudar de Vida* (1966) Paulo Rocha  
*Nazaré* (1952) Manoel Guimarães  
*Nazaré, Praia de Pescadores* (1929) Leitão de Barros  
*Verdes Anos, Os* (1963), Paulo Rocha

**Bibliography**

Torgal, Luís Reis (ed.)(2011) *O Cinema Sob o Olhar de Salazar*. Temas e Debates, Círculo de Leitores  