

ANGLO SAXONICA

REVISTA **ANGLO SAXONICA** SER. III N. 7 2014

ANGLO



University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies
Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa

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SER. III N.7 2014

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DESIGN, PAGINAÇÃO E ARTE FINAL Inês Mateus

IMPRESSÃO E ACABAMENTO

Europress - Indústria Gráfica

TIRAGEM 150 exemplares

ISSN 0873-0628

DEPÓSITO LEGAL 86 102/95

PUBLICAÇÃO APOIADA PELA

FUNDAÇÃO PARA A CIÊNCIA E A TECNOLOGIA

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AND IDENTITIES ON SCREEN**

Guest Editors LUCY FISCHER, CECILIA BEECHER MARTINS *and* JOSÉ DUARTE

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E IDENTIDADES NO GRANDE ECRÃ**

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The Times they are A-Changin': An Approach to Contemporary Filmmaking

Interview With João Mário Grilo

Interviewer: Hermínia Sol

Translation by Rui Vitorino Azevedo

Periods of economic recession are normally considered as being propitious for artistic creation since they stimulate the critical/interventional side of art. Can the same be said about cinema?

Cinema is particularly sensitive to economic contexts given that it is a very expensive art form. Therefore, as Gilles Deleuze used to say, it is very easy to prevent a filmmaker from working. For that reason, my answer to this question is somewhat ambiguous since it is not possible to address the question in such a general manner. However, some issues: the means at the film makers' disposal and the entities that holds sway over production media, are always of paramount importance. For that reason, before deciding which film to make, it is essential to understand how this project is located within the general economic context of the film industry. If economic recessions "do" anything, it is the way they highlight the importance of the aforementioned issues, as these are often forgotten or obliterated at other periods.

Going back to the current economic context, (contradicting the previous question a little), during times of extreme economic and social instability it is common for audiences to go to the cinema primarily for entertainment, as cinema may offer a "reality", that is different from their own. In this context do you consider cinema (as an artistic expression) capable of conciliating a critical-interventional role with a recreational one and at the same time avoid a doctrinal and/or condescending approach?

I don't know if we can talk about behaviors in such a direct manner, especially as the cinema ceased to be a "cheap" form of entertainment a long time ago. Also as Godard said many years ago, the difficult thing is

not taking people to the cinema, but rather encouraging them to leave their homes. I think that television today, especially with the programming schedules offered, fulfills the role of an alternative reality in a much more immediate way. I believe that this explains, at least partly, why, box office revenues are falling so dramatically in Portugal despite the increase in ticket prices. During World War II a myth was created and held for decades that at times of crisis people seek fiction particularly in cinema theatres, but I am not sure if this still holds today. Fifty years have passed since this period and in reality nothing that has happened in the world since can be compared to the brutality of that conjuncture.

Clearly, it is possible for cinema to conciliate (or, at least, articulate) the different elements mentioned, otherwise it wouldn't be an art of montage. However, I am not sure that we can demarcate those fields (recreation and criticism) in such a rigid way as for the majority of people (that is, the majority of spectators), the "recreational" is a condition of the "doctrinal" and vice-versa. One only has to consider the case of American cinema which is the most doctrinal (and colonizing) of the world to see evidence of this.

In your opinion, which filmmaker today best makes that bridge between the recreational and the interventional in a non-doctrinal way?

If I understood the question, I would answer giving the examples of Almodovar and Tarantino. Still, affinities of principle should not be inferred because these filmmakers are fairly irregular, perhaps as a result of the strength of those "bridges".

Cinema and literature have gone hand in hand for many years now. However, contrary to what happens in the USA, European cinema has mainly opted to explore original screenplays instead of adapting sources and literary works to cinematographic language. How do you explain this tendency in relation to European cinema, in general, and your own filmography?

There has always been a tradition of buying "literary property" in Hollywood, even before novels are published. There are cases where books take decades to become films because studios hold the rights but won't decide on how to produce the movie. In Europe, there has always been

a lot of adaptation but this occurs in a more "classical" mode because the literary market is more subtle in its relationship with cinema and boundaries are maintained. The American and European contexts offer very different environments since the American industry of entertainment generally covers cinema, books, and fiction. In Europe, and in my view, fortunately, that ecology does not exist and the relationship between literature and cinema is much more "critical" and less "functional". Because of this I believe European filmmakers have much better conditions than American filmmakers to assume a personal and "free" perspective about the literature they adapt.

If you were asked to make the film adaptation of a literary work, which work would you choose and why?

I'm currently adapting *A Revolução Paraíso*, by Paulo M. Morais, for two main reasons: it's an excellent novel about a period of recent Portuguese history that interests me greatly (the *Prec*, or Ongoing Revolutionary Process) and it is a contemporary work. I consider that cinema should pay attention to contemporary literature because this can encourage a "natural" and desirable solidarity between writers and filmmakers.

Still on the relationship, somewhat dichotomous, between American and European cinema, and entering an area of primary importance, do you share the opinion transmitted by the Executive Committee of the International Council of Dramatic, Literary and Audiovisual Creators, supported by the Portuguese Writers' Association that "cultural exception is not", in fact, "negotiable"?

I absolutely share that opinion, although Americans know quite well how to overcome the problem through their European agencies. In reality, I think that American films should pay as much tax in Europe as any other American product. That isn't, however, what happens since all American studios have European branches that register their films in Europe as if they were European. For that reason in Portugal there are practically no commercial screening opportunities for films that are not American and we can easily imagine that an assiduous movie-goer may have never seen any other type of film except those produced by the big American studios.

Over the last few years, indie/independent films have become more important compared with Hollywood cinema which seems to be going through a crisis of ideas. A similar case is that of Portuguese cinema which is increasingly gaining audience. In your opinion, what is the reason for this phenomenon?

I don't know if the situation can be generalized that way, but I think today heterogeneous and differentiated pockets of audiences exist in the cultural landscape that did not exist a decade or two ago, the success of festivals like Doc Lisboa or Indie Lisboa exemplify this. In Portugal today, there is actually an alternative culture offer sustained by consumption thus these interests are also represented in the media and in information outlets, in general. These channels may help to consolidate an audience that is more critical and better informed and maybe a bit tired of the American business which is built up differently, and has other presuppositions being increasingly geared towards other sectors (children and adolescents).

Finally, do you consider new technologies, especially the Internet, to have a positive or negative effect on the diffusion and/or production of cinema?

Initially, I believe it has a positive effect, even if just for the creation of more extensive and solid critical opinion around cinema. Evidently, there are always "perverse" effects and we must recognize the fact that piracy frightens large businesses. But, it is undeniable that the Internet permits access today to a range of information that was unimaginable a few years ago. It has increased the access to cultural goods, in general and cinema in particular exponentially.