

Memories of the Change: the Post-Revolutionary Period and Portuguese Cinema

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Abstract

Almost four decades after the 1974 revolution, it seems increasingly imperious to carry out a critical analysis of the mainstream discourses on the transformations that occurred in the Portuguese cultural field. Following from recent researches regarding the arts of that period, this paper aims to revisit the continuities and changes in the national cinema produced since then. Simultaneously, it is intended to question the broader relation between political revolution and artistic/intellectual production in the post-revolutionary Portugal.

In a first moment, a contextualisation concerning the diverging views of the role of the artists/intellectuals in the Portuguese public sphere after the 1974 revolution will be made. Then, those perspectives will be confronted with recent studies on post-25th-of-April Portuguese cinema, in order to analyse the relations between political change and cinema in the period under consideration.

Keywords: revolution; change; arts; post-25th-of-April period; Portuguese cinema

1. *Between mourning and transition*

“Passagem ou a Meio Caminho”, a 1985 film by Jorge de Silva Melo that gives voice to a certain atmosphere of mourning, as well as to a political and cultural deception that greatly characterised the immediate post-74 period in Portugal, poses the following question: “We employed a lot the word urgency. When did we relinquish that?” This excerpt seems particularly emblematic of that context, and constitutes the starting point to re-visit and re-think the positioning of artists and intellectuals in the cultural transitions of the post-25th-of-April. After all, did Portuguese artists really abandon or did they embrace the highly acclaimed and utopian “cultural revolution” –

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and when, how and why? What were the actual contributions of the different areas and their protagonists to an effective renovation and opening up of the field?

The above-mentioned film portrays a perplexity, a somewhat sullen one, about the immediate post-revolutionary period. Providing a mythologized look, enveloped in a nostalgic “aura” regarding the most combative period of the revolution, this film is part of a set of cinematographic productions³ that express this ambience of mourning and deception that was going on in the artistic and intellectual milieu from the end of the PREC until the mid-eighties. Yet, such a phenomenon is not exclusive to cinema and pervades the majority of Portuguese artistic and intellectual production from this period. Literature’s case is particularly paradigmatic⁴, Eduarda Dionísio being in this context a pivotal figure and one of the more radical spokeswomen of that deception⁵, as is well expressed in this assertion, from a study she produced on the post-25th-of-April Portuguese culture: “The idea of culture as countervailing power has disappeared completely. It seems to have never actually existed. It will hardly come back” (Dionísio, 1993: 196).

Recent studies and an effective analysis of the artistic practices of this period allow, however, the perception of a great diversity of aesthetic experiences and answers to the ongoing transition occurring in different artistic areas. Broadly speaking, three tendencies can be identified: the expression of mourning and disenchantment, which is reflected in certain literary⁶ and cinematographic works; the re-invention and renovation of aesthetic languages, especially in the visual arts, music, dance and performance art⁷; and the continuing and developing of practices and techniques that

³ Amongst them: *Cerromaior* (Luís Filipe Rocha, 1980), *Manhã Submersa* (Lauro António, 1980), *Verde por Fora, Vermelho por Dentro* (Ricardo Costa, 1980), *A Culpa* (António V. Almeida, 1981), and *Ninguém Duas Vezes* (Jorge Silva Melo, 1984).

⁴ The bibliography on this matter is vast. For an introduction, see the following studies: Kaufman and Klobucka, 1997; Lourenço, 1984; Melo e Castro, 1976.

⁵ Especially the fictions: *Retrato de Um Amigo Enquanto Falo* (1979), *Pouco Tempo Depois (As Tentações)* (1984) e *Alguns Lugares Muito Comuns (Diário de Uns Quantos Dias que Não Abalaram o Mundo)* (1987).

⁶ Apart from Eduarda Dionísio, works by the following authors are also particularly relevant: António Lobo Antunes, Lídia Jorge, Olga Gonçalves, Nuno Bragança, Almeida Faria, Vergílio Ferreira and, in poetry, by Alexandre O’Neill, Eugénio de Andrade, José Gomes Ferreira, and Joaquim Manuel Magalhães.

⁷ See, for instance, the following studies: Candeias, 2009; Pinharanda, 2008; Carlos, 2008; Barroso *et al.*, 2006; Almeida, 1997; Gonçalves, 1987.

have been underway since the 1960s, as is the case of experimental and visual poetry⁸ and cinema, as will be seen. Simultaneously, an up-to-date, distanced analysis of the debate concerning political revolution and culture allows the perception of divergent visions about the role of the artists/intellectuals in the public sphere after 1974. Discussion on this matter remains open, and necessitates further critical and comparative analysis. If, on the one hand, an accommodation of these intellectuals to the concept of the “end of utopias” (Ribeiro, 1993; 1986; Magalhães, 1989; Ferreira, 1976) can be observed and justified, on the other hand, such a position is either explained as the repudiation of a Stalinist cultural model (Silva, 2009), or criticised as a defensive attitude arising from an incapacity to respond to the new challenges of the cultural field. According to Eduardo Lourenço, this lack of response resulted in an “almost inexplicable absence” (Lourenço, 1985: 30-R) of the artists and intellectuals. This ambiguity of positioning and action is also read as a festive opening to the new, post-modern times and a “claim of the artistic” (Baía *et al.*, 2012: 19), these artists being dubbed the “generation of transition”, finally open to “other artistic meditations and critical sense” (Nogueira, 2007: 177).

Thus, it seems pertinent to question this controversy and ambivalence from the specific perspective of artistic practices, paying special attention to the thoughts manifested and the actions carried out by the protagonists of the cultural field. To discuss memories and mythologized representations of that period is our goal. The present paper does not intend to provide a complete answer, but rather to add to the problematisation of this discussion with a critical review of certain aspects of that cultural change, which ought to be understood today as having had many tones, tendencies and rhythms.

2. The revolution anticipated: the case of Portuguese cinema

The particular case of Portuguese cinema provides relevant and revealing clues that allow the re-thinking of this change and the relation between political revolution and cultural change. In order to do so, we will have to go back and forth in time, for the cinema in the post-revolutionary period cannot be fully understood without

⁸ For a systematic study of the field, refer to: Sousa and Ribeiro, 2004.

background. Indeed, the circumstance of Portuguese cinema in the years before, during and after the revolution has been read through many lenses, i.e. there have been different interpretations, sometimes more or less ideologically compromised, of the facts and the putative intentions of the protagonists. The most common assumption, based on the immediate cinematographic documentation after the *coup d'état*, has been the understanding that this happened as a clear manifestation of the high degree of political and revolutionary engagement of the filmmakers.⁹ Furthermore, the writing of the history has disseminated the disputable idea that the revolution propelled a cultural “reboot”, as if the artists and the *intelligentsia* had emerged from exile (either in the literal and figural sense) with their censored works to finally carry forward the long-awaited re-shaping of the country’s cultural identity from square one. In cinema’s case, the facts seem to show a different version, and somehow resist this categorisation. This is even more evident when considering the state of affairs of Portuguese cinema before the 25th of April. Moreover, can one explain the multiplicity of roads taken in parallel, and interpret the scarcity of fiction films where the topic of the change and the representation of the past four decades according to a revolutionary vision would feature prominently?

According to Leonor Areal, after 1974 “the history of Portuguese cinema ceases to resemble a tenuous and chronological line (constituted of a handful of films per year), in that there is a quantitative explosion that displays multiple aesthetic directions, and experimental derivations” (Areal, 2011: 19). João Bénard da Costa seems to have the explanation for this, asserting that “like all other Portuguese, the cinematographers were divided between several different factions and parties, and the apparent unity of the ‘new cinema’ was broken” (Costa, 1991: 155-156). Thus, the division was not only ideological in the strict political sense, but also with regard to aesthetic options. Areal goes even further and believes that films of this period may be seen merely as testimonies and remnants of a “complex game of interests and convictions [...] The social actors circulated between opposed ideologies as in a game of convenience and social survival” (Areal, 2011: 23).

⁹ According to Jacques Lemièrre, who wrote extensively on the subject, in 1999, there were 171 films (both national and international) more or less related to the 25th of April (Lemièrre, 2013: 42). However, his criteria and methodology to ascertain this figure is unknown.

It is undeniable that there were some directors who imprinted and stated their political sympathies towards the MFA and the left wing in their films. Yet, it also holds true that, according to the tradition of the predominant faction of the Portuguese new cinema, many other filmmakers rebelled against any political agenda, preferring to remain in their authorial spaces, distanced from the reality of the country. In Paulo Filipe Monteiro's words: "Even before the 25th of April, the so-called new cinema was able to control all or almost all of the places of the institution of 'cinema', having had in its hands the power to produce, teach and criticise, despite its political alignment with the left wing" (Monteiro, 2001: 327). In effect, according to Fausto Cruchinho, it was "those directors of the new cinema who were the recipients" of funds to produce cinema during the Marcellist Spring (Cruchinho, 2001: 344). As the director Fernando Lopes clearly states: "In cinema, we were, indeed, the true power. The previous generation was dead. It was not surprising that, when the 25th of April came, we realised that our problems had been resolved long before" (*apud* Monteiro, 2001: 329). In line with this fact, Bénard da Costa assumes that:

[...] biased opinions do not help here. This history of the Portuguese 'fascism' was much more complicated than can be described here. In the history of the cinema this is an almost ever-present example. [...] Life in those times was made up of these contradictions... (Costa, 1991:125-126).

A notorious achievement for the Portuguese new cinema filmmakers, and a true example of the power mentioned above by Fernando Lopes, is the 7/71 law. This bill represented both an update of the model of state protection concerning the cinematographic arts, and the overture of the government to the demands of the directors. It was the culmination of a long process of negotiations between the dynamic new generation of filmmakers, the opposition in the parliament, and Marcello Caetano's office, known to have introduced policies which were more open than Salazar's. Modelled on the solution proposed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 1968 in response to the vocal requests for financial and technical aids by the Portuguese new cinema group, the 7/71 law founded the Portuguese Cinema Institute (inspired by the previous Portuguese Cinema Centre, as well as by other cinematographic institutions and guilds all over Europe) with the intent of providing the means to guarantee the quality of cinematographic productions, and the development of the remaining industrial film sectors. Moreover, this law was

predicated on the “stimulation and development of art and experimental cinema”. Although the 7/71 law centralised and put cinema under the total aegis of the state, it met a great part of the goals and expectations of Portuguese filmmakers. Its remarkable durability attests to its popularity in the cinematographic milieu: it was in force from 1971 until 1993, when EU policies pressed the elaboration of new statuses.

At this point it should be highlighted that Portuguese new cinema was modelled after Italian neo-realism and, especially, French new wave (Reia-Baptista and Moeda, 2013: 29). Therefore, it was heavily influenced by the concept of cinema as a higher form of art and by the premise of the *auteur*. By the end of the 60s, a schism is clear within the group of new filmmakers: “a line of authorial cinema, of Bazinian inspiration, and influenced by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*”; and a “realist cinema, in which the social or political component determines the themes and the forms” (Monteiro, 2001: 326). However, according to Filipe Monteiro, “It was the first of these factions that dominated the process of the taking of the citadel of Portuguese cinema. For instance, it was this faction which was called to direct the first college of cinema in the country” (*ibidem*: 327). The same author carries on, stating that this paradox can only be explained by the fact that “unlike the cine-clubist and neo-realist movements, Portuguese new cinema developed more aesthetic concerns than political” (*ibidem*: 329). This was not seen by the group as a

[...] limitation, but as a virtue. [...] Ultimately, they tried to overcome a neo-realist sort of activism with another kind of resistance that was possible to develop during the Salazarist-Marcellist regime, and even be cherished by it: a resistance, if we want, to the idea of resistance itself, in the neo-realist political sense (*ibidem*: 331).

Making a clear distinction between social progressivism and aesthetic progressivism, the conclusion of this reasoning is that the political forces before the 25th of April gave power to these filmmakers in the knowledge that they did not have enough influence to mobilise great audiences, and that even if they did, such mobilisation would not revolve around political themes (*ibidem*: 338).

3. *Apolitical(ism)*

Eduardo Geda clarifies a certain apathy towards the revolution manifested by some filmmakers: “[They] had seen the acknowledgement of their author status

before the 25th of April, and were not willing to forgo, at least in an uncontrolled manner, the autonomy they had attained” (*apud* Monteiro, 1995: 691). However, filmmakers with such a position did not pass unscathed, for in 1975, Vasco Gonçalves’ government, seeing defiance from the authors, supported populist filmmakers that even the old regime had left behind, such as the veteran Arthur Duarte, Constantino Esteves and Teixeira da Fonseca (*ibidem*). It should be noted that these directors came from an old school that regarded cinema as a craftwork and not as an authorial expression. Thus, they seemed obvious choices for a revolutionary committee concerned with the spreading of ideals.

Only saving Manoel de Oliveira, Fernando Lopes and Fernando de Matos Silva, the 1975 Portuguese Cinema Institute Plan was much more controversial than that of 1974. As Bénard da Costa mentions with regard to this matter “It was exclusively directed to the communists or *compagnons de route*” (Costa, 1991: 159). Consequently, this situation originated turmoil amongst the filmmakers and led to accusations that the government was being despotic and favouring partisanship. As the director of the Cinemateque from 1991 to 2009 writes: “The Minister replied that he wanted to make his Ministry a preference tribunal, and at the same time accusing the opponents of being ‘pseudo-revolutionary intellectuals, disconnected from the real interests of the people’” (*ibid*: 159-160). In their turn, the directors organised the I Meeting of the Portuguese Cinematographers, in order to organise themselves during this period of friction that would only end after the 25th of November, with the dismissal of the men responsible for the so-called Portuguese “Jdanovism” (*ibid*). What seems important to keep from this episode is that it is the historical proof that a politically neutral stance in the arts during this period was a reality: the government was the first to recognise the disconnection between the artists’ aesthetic intentions and the revolutionary agenda. Both the old and the new regimes acknowledged that a large part of the preminent filmmakers were not putting their work at the service of any specific group or political party. The main distinction was that while this circumstance was a relief for Caetano’s office, it represented a problem for the left-wing programme.

According to Reia-Baptista, “Actually, April’s revolution and the ensuing post-revolutionary period, as odd as it may seem, eventually compromised the conclusion

and the exhibition of many films” (Reia-Baptista and Moeda, 2013: 32). This, along with the reasoning developed above, reveals that, although the Portuguese cinema milieu would never be the same after the revolution, the directors who thrived on their independence had to wait for the reflux in order to continue working in terms similar of those before the 25th of April.

Even though one can find more or less sound echoes of the *zeitgeist* of those years (c. 1974-82) in many of the cinematographic works, there is, also, and above all, an upsurge of experimentation and unprecedented inter-artistic dialogues. Curiously enough, some films that attempt to reflect on the past do not tackle the revolutionary ideals (or they do this in a rather heterodox way) (Areal, 2011: 20-27). This is the case with “Lerpar” (Luís Couto, 1975) and “Dina e Django” (Solveig Nordlung, 1982), that portray the pre-revolutionary period in a complex, multi-faceted manner, open to many interpretations (*ibidem*: 52-57). In the first case, the film directed by Luís Couto (paradoxically, a member of the communist party by then) is a depiction of the final moments of the Estado Novo regime, in which the main protagonist denies the militant example of his late father, a left-wing worker and activist who was killed by the political police, and prioritises other circumstances in his life. Yet, this is not presented as a critique of an alienated youth. In the words of Areal: “There is in this depiction an apolitical sincerity, or anti-political, or an escape from the political.” (*ibidem*: 57) The reason that might better explain the fact that this film, along with many others, is overlooked and usually ignored (and rightly so, given that it did not provoked a real cultural impact) by historians and sociologists studying the role of the arts in this period is that it was never commercially distributed. Nevertheless, as artistic gesture, it is a testimony of the will to work and think outside of the “revolutionary” box.

Similarly, as for “Dina e Django”, a film portraying the lively and eventful experiences of a couple with hints of “Bonnie and Clyde” living in times before the revolution, we feel compelled to agree with Areal that “It is particularly interesting in this movie (...) the preference for the development of a story that reverses or recants all assumptions of social and political substance from the period of the revolution to highlight, instead, a totally imaginary and unreal world” (*ibidem*: 58). Indeed, many

Portuguese films were more focused on the concretisation of artistic experimentation than anything else.

Ultimately, following the argument we have presented, the *filmic* interest of a great part of the filmmakers in left wing, revolutionary ideals either starts to fade away rapidly due to great deception or is dubious and questionable. An alternative explanation is that projects that genuinely wished to portray revolutionary ideals did not obtain funding, as Areal mentions (Areal, 2011: 23). However, as of yet, there is no proof that a lack of financial support was the actual reason. Thus, to conclude, we hope to have provided some insight and opened the debate around this case, which clearly necessitates further revision and analysis.

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