



The archive, gender roles and the deconstruction of Salazarism in Alberto Seixas Santos's Brandos Costumes

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THE EDGE OF ONE OF MANY CIRCLES

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**THE ARCHIVE, GENDER ROLES AND
THE DECONSTRUCTION OF SALAZARISM
IN ALBERTO SEIXAS SANTOS'S
BRANDOS COSTUMES**

Adriana Martins

Resumo: No quadro dos filmes que apareceram logo após a Revolução de 1974, *Brandos Costumes* de Alberto Seixas Santos é um caso singular. Ao assumir um caráter ensaístico, através do qual a vida quotidiana dos portugueses é analisada a partir de uma perspetiva doméstica, *Brandos Costumes* é um dos primeiros filmes a discutir abertamente os papéis sociais e de género durante o Salazarismo. Este ensaio examina como o uso de imagens de arquivo contribui, por um lado, para a discussão de papéis de género, e, por outro, da natureza ensaística experimental do filme, tendo por base a premissa de que as imagens de arquivo são utilizadas para desafiar a autoridade da verdade transmitida pelo regime de Salazar.

Palavras-chave: *Brandos Costumes*; cinema português; arquivo; género; não-inscrição.

Abstract: Among the films that appeared in the aftermath of the April 1974 Revolution, Alberto Seixas Santos's *Brandos Costumes* is a singular case. By assuming an essayistic character through

which the daily life of Portuguese people is analyzed from a domestic perspective, *Brandos Costumes* is one of the first films to openly discuss gender and social roles during Salazarism. This essay examines how the use of archival footage contributes, on the one hand, to the discussion of gender roles, and, on the other, to the experimental essayistic nature of *Brandos Costumes*. I base my argument on the premise that archival images are used to defy the authority of the truth conveyed by Salazar's regime.

Keywords: *Brandos Costumes*; Portuguese Film; archive; gender roles; non-inscription.

Talking of essay film, I would rather refer to the attitude of he who attempts “*essai-essay*”, but also attempts to debate a problem by using all the means that the cinema affords, all the registers and all the expedients.

Edgar Morin¹

In the history of Portuguese film, Alberto Seixas Santos's *Brandos Costumes* constitutes, for various reasons, a unique case. Firstly, although released in 1975, the film was shot before the April 1974 Revolution, but the end of the dictatorship allowed the critical incorporation of archival material which would never have been permitted by the regime's censorship a few years before.² Despite

¹ 'See Edgar Morin (*qtd.* in Rascaroli 39). Rascaroli quotes Morin from Giovanni Maderna (see Rascaroli's footnote #87).'

² See Eduardo Gêda, to whom “a few months before the fascist regime was overthrown films as different as *Brandos Costumes*, *Sofia e a Educação Sexual*, *O Mal Amado e Índia* were forbidden or prevented from being shown”/ “a poucos

the date of the film's premiere, *Brandos Costumes* cannot be placed within the framework of the movies Leonor Areal (2011) considers as belonging to "April's cinema" (*cinema de Abril*), since it does not result from what she terms "the urgency of the real" (*urgência do real*). Unlike many filmmakers who addressed the April Revolution, including Alberto Seixas Santos himself, the truth is that in *Brandos Costumes* the filmmaker did not go out into the streets to give voice to the oppressed people.³ *Brandos Costumes* is a film that portrays the Portuguese in the intimacy of their domestic lives.⁴

Secondly, Alberto Seixas Santos's film poses problems in terms of genre classification, since it can neither be considered a documentary *per se* nor simply a fictional film. Nonetheless, *Brandos Costumes* fulfills the criteria devised by Laura Rascaroli (2008) to characterize essay films, despite the difficulties in defining this concept. According to Rascaroli, the essay film constitutes a modality of filmic text that is characterized, among others, by two markers: reflexivity and subjectivity. The essay film also establishes a special relationship with the spectator, since the latter is directly questioned and encouraged to enter into a dialogue with the enunciator/film, something made possible by the rhetorical structure that informs it. As Rascaroli aptly claims, "[t]he essay film is an open field of experimentation, sited at the crossroads of fiction, nonfiction, and experimental film" (43).⁵

meses da queda do regime fascista, se encontram proibidos ou impedidos de estrear filmes tão díspares como *Brandos Costumes*, *Sofia e a Educação Sexual*, *O Mal Amado e Índia*". (93-94) Throughout the essay all translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

³ Seixas Santos was one of the filmmakers who participated in the collective movie *As Armas e o Povo* (1975), covering street scenes in the period between April 25 and May 1, 1974.

⁴ See the comments of Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Alberto Seixas Santos on enclosed spaces and on the importance given to doors in *Brandos Costumes* in *O Lugar dos Ricos e dos Pobres no Cinema e na Arquitectura em Portugal*.

⁵ Consider Rascaroli's description of the essay film (35): "The essay film constructs such spectatorial position by adopting a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions it raises, and delivering a complete, 'closed' argu-

Thirdly, *Brandos Costumes* is one of the first films released in the immediate aftermath of the April Revolution to openly discuss gender and societal roles and in particular the subaltern role played by women from different generations during Salazarism. This is possible due to the filmmaker's perspective, since he depicts the private lives of women and their interaction with other women within the framework of the family, here understood as a microcosm of Portugal's patriarchal society during Salazar's dictatorship. This perspective allows Seixas Santos to unveil the characters' thoughts and anxieties, on the one hand giving women the chance to express themselves, and on the other to denounce their repression by social rules and conventions.

It is my contention that the conjugation of these three factors, and above all the skillful use of, and reflection on, archival footage, transforms Seixas Santos's film into one of the first cinematic exposés of Salazar's regime and its effects on Portuguese society. Moreover, Seixas Santos's film epitomizes how the concerns of Portugal's New Cinema filmmakers were being aesthetically refined since the appearance of films such as *Os Verdes Anos* (Paulo Rocha 1963) and *Belarmino* (Fernando Lopes 1964) which gave an impetus to the critical portrayal of Portuguese society. In this essay, I will try to demonstrate how the use of archival footage contributes both to the discussion of gender roles and to the experimental essayistic nature of *Brandos Costumes*. I shall base my analysis on the premise that archival images are used to defy the authority of the truth conveyed by Salazar's regime.

ment, the essay's rhetoric is such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through the emotional and intellectual response, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about; this structure accounts for the 'openness' of the essay film."

The experimental character of Seixas Santos's film rests on an ingenious fusion of fiction and nonfiction. This results from a succession of shots depicting the daily life of a bourgeois family, their values, frustrations and aspirations, a depiction which is disrupted by elaborate "pictures", exercises of theatrical *mise-en-scène*, through which the spectator becomes aware of the characters' concerns. These pictures evoke the Brechtian belief that it was necessary to confront the audience with the artificiality of a representation, thus encouraging a critical perspective and promoting political engagement with the world. Therefore, characters unveil their inner thoughts and the more intimate facets of their selves which were repressed or silenced by the political regime and by social constraints. The audience's expectations are also disrupted, since this process of revelation is somehow "haunted" by a series of excerpts evoking some of the key moments of Portugal's 20th-century history, such as Gomes da Costa's military *coup* in 1926 and the consolidation of the New State (*Estado Novo*). The references to these moments function as a kind of chorus that makes the regime's voice reverberate, a voice that castrates the characters who seem unable to get rid of it, a suggestive indication of the ways in which the voice of the State overlapped with the voice of the individual. These excerpts stem from two main sources: in some cases, from archival footage dating from the period before the beginning of the *Jornal Português de Atualidades Filmadas*,⁶ and in others taken from this source. Other sources used by Seixas Santos in *Brandos Costumes* were fictional films either supported or given awards by Salazar's regime, such

⁶ The *Jornal Português*, a series of newsreels, was directed between 1938 and 1951 by António Lopes Ribeiro, and was promoted and financed by the National Propaganda Secretariat (SPN). According to Maria do Carmo Piçarra (16), "o aproveitamento do potencial propagandista das actualidades foi uma prática generalizada internacionalmente, sustentada por modelos mais ou menos informativos" / "the use of the propagandistic potential of the newsreels was a practice internationally adopted and supported by models that were more or less informative."

as *A Revolução de Maio* (1937, António Lopes Ribeiro) or *Chaimite* (1953, Jorge Brum do Canto, which received the Great Award of the National Secretariat for Information [*Grande Prémio do SNI*] and the award for best actor given to Emílio Correia).

The essayistic character of *Brandos Costumes* is to a great extent anticipated by the reference to Kafka's *Letter to his Father* in the narrative frame through the monologue of the youngest daughter in the family, who directly addresses the camera/the audience. Her age and rebelliousness epitomize the hope that Portuguese society might change after the death of Salazar and, in symbolic terms, of her own father. By incorporating Kafka's text in the monologue, Seixas Santos uses the latter as an epigraph which both prefaces the main issues of the film and constitutes a tribute to Kafka's work and ideas. The film maker's "borrowing" of *Letter to his Father* acquires a singular meaning when we think about the labyrinthine and bureaucratic universe of Kafka's texts, about the prominence of violence and abuses of power in his work, and about the specific topic of the text (the reflections of a son on the difficult relationship with the figure of an authoritarian and repressive father). In formal terms, the hypothesis of interpreting the youngest daughter's monologue as an epigraph is reinforced by the fact that the film begins with the news of Salazar's death through a voice-over against a black screen, followed by the national anthem, and only then by the screening of the title of the film. In semantic terms, the remediation of Kafka's letter briefly introduces the following aspects: (i) the perpetuation of an absence after death; (ii) an education system focused on the ideas of discipline and punishment, responsible for the daughter's character and her obedience to the paternal figure; (iii) the ambiguous position of the daughter *vis-à-vis* the death of the father, and her occasional identification with a prisoner who had always wanted to escape but simultaneously wishes to make changes in the prison-house. In short, this epigraph is essential to

an understanding of the film's critical discussion about gender roles and the so-called "gentle/mild manners" (*brandos costumes*) of the Portuguese people.

It is my contention that Seixas Santos's film already announces, and to some extent discusses, the philosophical reflection the Portuguese philosopher José Gil (2004) would make about what he called the phenomenon of "non-inscription" (*não inscrição*). In brief terms, the non-inscription is a characteristic of the Portuguese people which is evidenced by their inability to act and assert themselves, since it suspends desire and thus leads to the repression of the events which could not be inscribed. According to the philosopher, whenever the non-inscription operates it is as if the events never took place, and, consequently, no one can be held accountable for them. José Gil associates the attitude of Portuguese people's immobilism to the culture existing during the New State, whose impact transformed what could be considered a drive for change into an attitude of passivity and submission.⁷ By addressing the daily life of a Portuguese family centered on the father figure (even if the portrayed father did not admire Salazar, which is made explicit in the scene when, together with his youngest daughter, he discusses with friends the several possible ways to kill Salazar), Seixas Santos projects onto one of Salazar's central cells in his ideological machine – the family – the impact and efficacy of the regime's oppressive power and longevity, since four generations (grandmother, parents, eldest and youngest daughters, and the maid), different genders (the male authority in the family and the subaltern women's role the youngest daughter challenges), and diverse social

⁷ Other film critics have analyzed the phenomenon of non-inscription in Portuguese contemporary film. See, among others, Carolina Ferreira on Susana Sousa Dias's work (2014) and Daniel Ribas (2014) on João Canijo in the volume organized by Ferreira (2014).

classes (the bourgeoisie and the working class) are here portrayed and discussed.

Seixas Santos discusses what José Gil would come to call the non-inscription through the confrontation between the public (that which coincides with the regime's official voice) and the private (the daily life of the depicted family and the frustrations of its members), something which is marked from the beginning by the official announcement of the dictator's death, immediately followed by a shot of the interior of a house and the thoughts of a housewife who feels frustrated by her lack of freedom, by the sameness of her daily life, and by her dependence on her husband. It is curious that the public sphere somehow ceases to exist as a collectivity, merged with Salazar's voice and the basic tenets of his regime, whereas the daily life of a particular family corresponds to the experience of any family formed and shaped during the New State, even if the family – as the one in the film – did not support Salazar. The fact is that domestic life gravitated towards the father in the same way the life of the nation gravitated towards Salazar.

The filmmaker's strategy of making the collective succumb to Salazar's will and of transforming the experience of the individual, of all that is experienced within the framework of the family, into something collective, becomes evident when Seixas Santos uses a daring shot that lasts around one minute in which Salazar is portrayed dead in his coffin, and a voice-over is heard recalling the main principles of the regime and some of the key moments of Salazar's rise as a politician and the consolidation of his power in 1936. This is followed by sound footage showing how Salazar was a leader acclaimed by the people. This, however, should not be understood as a drive towards transformation, but mainly as a symptom of non-inscription and of the passivity Seixas Santos's film denounces. What could be considered as the collective support of the leadership of a politician fashioned as the protector of the nation is

subtly deconstructed when the camera returns to the context of the family, this time to the space of the eldest daughter's bedroom, to depict the confrontation between daughters belonging to different generations whose rigorous education has changed because of their age difference. The scene depicts the eldest daughter reading a letter sent by a soldier fighting in the Colonial War, a conflict which would be crucial to the fall of Salazar's regime and would contribute to demystify his aura as the protective father of the nation.

The combination of archival footage and the depiction of the family's domesticity illustrates what Jaimie Baron called *archive effect* and *archive affect*, which are experienced as a result of what Baron calls *appropriation films*, that is, the use of sound and visual material from previous sources to create a "temporal disparity" (and also an "intentional disparity") through which Salazar's regime is analyzed from a critical perspective. In other words, by ingeniously appropriating archival footage that gave support to the regime and using it in a different context of enunciation, Seixas Santos reveals its efficacy and impact on the quotidian life of several generations of Portuguese people, as he deconstructs the fallacy of what Eduardo Geda called the "amiable rhetoric of the regime" (*retórica amável do regime*). This rhetoric is clearly rejected by the youngest daughter, whose reading of *The Communist Manifesto* as if she was learning how to read signifies her discovery of a new understanding of history which may bring about the possibility of making it anew (Trindade). The youngest daughter's subversive attitude - reading a text forbidden by the authoritarian regime in a loud voice - recalls and to a certain extent duplicates the filmmaker's initial strategy of remediation used in the epigraph when Kafka's *Letter to his Father* is appropriated to suggest a reflection on Salazar's regime and its impact on the life of Portuguese people. This time, however, the quotation of this programmatic text is used to herald in the April Revolution, that is, the end, at least in political terms, of the oppressive power of the

“father of the nation.” The film does not show any image of the army in the streets, but the sound of soldiers marching is the element that disrupts the paralysis of family life. The only person who is not affected by the sound is the youngest daughter, who continues to read *The Communist Manifesto*, stressing that “the history of any society has always been the history of class struggle” (*a história de qualquer sociedade foi, desde sempre, a história da luta de classes*). This final quotation works as a kind of moral that is complemented by other archival footage of Salazar’s funeral ceremonies and of his dead body as he lies in state.

Seixas Santos’s reappropriation of archival footage is crucial to the questioning of the truth of the regime and its values, since it draws attention to the epistemological gaps of official newsreels.⁸ This is possible because, as Daniela Agostinho (2) aptly points out, the archive should not be understood as a mere source of information, but mainly as a site of knowledge production which brings to the fore not only the archive’s discursive and epistemological implications, but also its performative dimension. As Agostinho claims, “the archive does not transmit pre-given meanings, rather it brings forth meanings that come into being through its multiple usages.” (3) This epistemological and performative dimensions of archival material are particularly relevant to the questioning of Salazarism, and it is curious to think about the impact caused by the long shot of Salazar’s dead body lying in his coffin, an image that is still not easily found in books or on the internet at the beginning of the 21st century, which suggests the difficulties the Portuguese still face in dealing with Salazar’s death and the need to reform Portuguese society.

⁸ I am borrowing the expression “epistemological gaps” from Daniela Agostinho who reflects on the appropriation of archival footage in Yael Hersonski’s, *A Film Unfinished* (1).

Through the appropriation of archival footage, Seixas Santos demonstrates how the archive can be, in line with John Tagg's contention (qtd. Agostinho 7), a product and an agent of disciplinary power, since, as Agostinho demonstrates in terms of the Nazi disciplinary apparatus, the archive can be "a mechanism to implement an idealized social order, to produce subjectivities, to manage life and death, and ultimately to yield authority." In her discussion, Agostinho draws attention to the etymological reflection made by Derrida in *The Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995). As the philosopher suggests that the archive houses authority, Agostinho claims that the archive arrests knowledge and imprisons meaning and interpretation, which explains the archival violence Derrida talks about. In *Brandos Costumes*, Seixas Santos's appropriation of archival footage serves, on the one hand, to reveal the archival violence of the New State and its authoritative nature; on the other hand, it opens the semantic possibilities of the archive by showing how lacunar it can be, a process that is set into high relief by the remediation of Kafka's *Letter*, the reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, the artificiality of the aforementioned "pictures," and the discussion of women's condition.

To conclude, *Brandos Costumes* is undeniably a revolutionary film for a wide range of reasons. Having started the shooting of the film during the dictatorship, Seixas Santos still had the courage to question the impact of Salazarism on domestic life and, in particular, on women's lives, thus deconstructing the family as one of the pillars of the regime. Moreover, the filmmaker knew how to make the most of the images which the New State propaganda was using to subvert its authoritarian ideological message. Above all, Seixas Santos, in that moment of transition towards democracy, was able, albeit unconsciously, to predict the consequences of a politics of non-inscription whose effects are still felt today. This prophecy is summarized in the epigraph to the film, with its reference to the

prisoner who, in an ambiguous and paradoxical way, despite wishing to escape, cannot help thinking about how to reform the prison-house. *Brandos Costumes* can, therefore, be considered one of the main films of the Portuguese New Cinema in that, as it has been pointed out by Eduardo Geadá, it reveals “an adult and modern cinematographic consciousness of the country” (*uma consciência cinematográfica adulta e moderna do país*), and presents itself as “a cinema of resistance to the cultural patterns of the regime, to the late academicism, and the technical incompetence of the old commercial cinema, to the prevailing clichés and demagoguery” (*cinema de resistência aos padrões culturais do regime, ao academismo serôdio e à incompetência técnica do velho cinema comercial, aos lugares-comuns e à demagogia reinantes*) (93), and is thus deserving of more critical attention by Portuguese film critics and audiences.

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