

Post-Revolution Film Outside the Cities - Gender Representation in the Portuguese Cinema of the Late Seventies

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Abstract

This paper looks at a trend in the Portuguese cinema of the late 1970s of feature length ethnographic films shot in the countryside, in such provinces as Trás-os-Montes and the Alentejo. It will look at three major examples of this tendency: The Law of The Land (A Lei da Terra), from 1977, a militant documentary that records the agrarian revolution in the Alentejo during PREC (the ongoing revolutionary process), directed by Alberto Seixas Santos and Solveig Nordlund; Masks (Máscaras), from 1976, a documentary filmed by Noémia Delgado in Trás os Montes; and Trás-os-Montes, a 1976 documentary by António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro. The aim is twofold: to investigate how these films work vis-à-vis the revolutionary process, and to research how they operate in terms of gender representation. These films also have in common the facts that all three count women as directors and that all share between them the same camera person, Acácio de Almeida.

Keywords:

Revolution, Gender, Visual Anthropology, PREC, Militant Cinema

Revolution and the freedom to film

This paper looks at a trend in the Portuguese cinema of the late 1970s of feature length ethnographic films shot in the countryside, in such provinces as Trás-os-Montes and the Alentejo. It will look at three major examples of this tendency: *The Law of The Land (A Lei da Terra)*, from 1977, a militant documentary that records the agrarian revolution in the Alentejo during PREC (the ongoing revolutionary process), directed by Alberto Seixas Santos and Solveig Nordlund; *Masks (Máscaras)*, from 1976, a documentary filmed by Noémia Delgado in Trás os Montes; and *Trás-os-Montes*, a 1976 documentary by António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro. The aim is twofold: to investigate how these films work vis-à-vis the revolutionary process, and to research how they

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In the revolutionary passage from dictatorship to democracy, the mythical regions (the symbolic countryside) shifted from Minho to Trás-os-Montes, in the north, and from Ribatejo to the Alentejo, further south. This had a logic about it. Trás-os-Montes was, ostensibly, the most remote and inaccessible region of Portugal; a place filmmakers went to try to find a culture and specific traditions that predated the dictatorship—an ancient time also soon to be extinguished by a revolution centred around the absolute necessity of agrarian revolution and change towards egalitarianism. Where Minho had symbolised the folkloric clichés of the dictatorship, Trás-os-Montes represented now a passage to a world seemingly untouched and untainted by Salazar. The reasons for going to the Alentejo are also understandable, whilst in the north of Portugal many small farmers owned their modest plots of land, in the Alentejo this was chiefly in the hands of landowners, with the peasantry living largely under conditions of dependency and scarcity one generation after the other. It was also a region where, for several reasons and since the establishment of the Republic, the Catholic Church had lost some of its grip on the communities.

After almost five decades of dictatorship, the Portuguese Army's dissatisfaction with the ongoing colonial war had reached breaking point, and on the morning of 25 April 1974 the Portuguese revolution burst onto the scene, led by the captains and embraced by the population. From the outset, photographers and filmmakers felt the need to record the revolution unfolding before their eyes. For obvious reasons, the first major recordings of the events took place in the capital city of Lisbon: the coup and the handover

of power, the exuberant gatherings and demonstrations. Films like *As Armas e o Povo* (*The Guns and the People*) or *Os Caminhos da Revolução* (*The Paths of the Revolution*) were made by collectives of filmmakers in the city.

At a time when so much was changing inside urban areas, very promptly the socialist ideals of the revolution started to face the threat of a growing counter-revolutionary movement that was beginning to take hold of sections of Portuguese society. With revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements and directions clashing at the heart of Portuguese democracy, perhaps this was a reality at once too complex and too close to home for filmmakers to approach objectively. What was happening in the city centres was difficult to grasp, and a conclusion that can be contemplated, for the decision to take cameras to the country, may be that it had suddenly become arduous for factual filmmakers to act as mediators between the unfolding reality and the films they aspired to make, and could potentially have made, in the cities. On the other hand, there was perhaps a consciousness that, with the agrarian revolution, life in the country would change fast and dramatically, and the imprint of a certain 'time', still visible in some rural regions, would soon die out—it was imperative to act quickly, to capture a certain moment before profound transformation swept this 'ancien régime' of country life. Farming in the Alentejo was radically changing, with the ownership of large operations handed over to co-operatives of workers. And with landownership severed and the land seized, the workers had also started to take up literacy programmes. These were times of radical revolutionary change in the hinterlands. What shape the future would hold no one knew: goalposts were constantly moving, and how this revolutionary process should enter upon the rural landscape was one of a few big questions that gripped the intellectuals, the filmmakers and society at large.

Film, gender and revolution

In an interview with this author at the Portuguese Cinematheque on the 22nd of February 2016, the Portuguese-Swedish filmmaker Solveig Nordlund mentioned that, during her time as film director at the filmmakers co-operative Grupo Zero, her most

relevant directorship had been *A Lei da Terra* (*The Law of the Land*). This is a complex and a paradigmatic film, in terms of gender representation, amongst its post-revolutionary counterparts. The film was directed by both Solveig Nordlund and her then companion, the filmmaker and intellectual Alberto Seixas Santos. It is worthwhile noting that this phenomenon of couples filming together during the first few post-revolution years was very common. The sheltering of the couple seems to have been a means by which women could take their first steps as filmmakers. And yet, while this form of collaboration seems to have constituted a window allowing women filmmakers to work and find validation as authors, it also encompassed the peril of seeing one's work downgraded to secondary status, in the weighing of female and male contribution, akin to a second-class director. And whilst such status does not seem to have been bestowed upon Solveig Nordlund and the work she accomplished together with Alberto Seixas Santos, a very different fate was shaped out of the partnership between Margarida Cordeiro and António Reis, directors of the film *Trás-os-Montes: Margarida Cordeiro*' role has been downgraded on many occasions, with authorship and even genius often being granted solely to the figure of António Reis. Collaboration within a couple in post-revolutionary filmmaking seems to have been a double-edged sword for female authorship, often the ticket to directorship, but also commonly the *raison d'être* for authorial subordination.

Examining the feature *The Law of the Land*, we soon observe that, whilst it boasts in its credits a balanced number of men and women professionals, in the film itself representation of gender is profoundly asymmetric. This asymmetry is doubled by the discrepancy between the voiceover and the images. In an unprecedented formal construction, the narration is shared between a female and a male voice. We can listen, all the way through the film, to these two voiceovers, one male and one female, sharing a similar proportion of the cinematic time (sometimes even juxtaposed), in an egalitarian manner: directing and interpreting the narrative, filling out the aural space of the film—we need to remember that one of the great ambitions of the

revolution was the establishment of legislative parity between men and women. What takes shape in the soundtrack of *The Law of the Land* is the mirroring of this revolutionary ambition and the momentary realisation of gender parity.

And yet, gender representation within the visual component of the film becomes very different; as, throughout, and from beginning to end, the frontline protagonists, those who have something to say and are able to voice it, those who carry an opinion about the political situation, describe their experiences and enunciate their thoughts, are mainly men, with women more often than not placed in the background, silent, still or just simply nodding.

The gender bias in *The Law of The Land* often gets to extremes, as when a couple describes the vicissitudes of poverty and the lack of resources during childbirth, and it is the husband who is telling us about all the hardship of giving birth to children under such conditions, while the wife simply nods her head. In this shot, the husband is facing the camera while the wife remains in profile, reinforcing (perhaps unconsciously) the notion that women cannot make themselves be seen clearly, or be made into showing themselves frontally, that women are an enigma, that they always carry a dark and obscure side or charge. What this scene brings forth is a repeated *cliché* of female representation, but also the candid exposure of how gender relations and roles are still subsumed under patriarchy. Knowing their record, we can easily assume that the directors were not purposefully being gender biased. However, and regardless, this scene is the result of their work, and the situation that was shot and edited is what remains, with not a word being uttered by the would-be mother about maternity and motherhood. All throughout the film, women are mainly bystanders.

There are a few instances in the film when women become vocal. One is a brief insignificant moment, another is when voice is given over to a woman who is shown to take a stance against the *ethos* of the film, a woman who, in her anti-revolutionary stance, wants to defend the livelihood of *rendeiros* like her husband. The *rendeiros* were counter-revolutionary characters,

as they had been ultraconservative before the revolution: the intermediaries between farmer and landowner, often earning up to three times more than the workers, as an incentive and a reward for implementing landowner rule and policy in their absence. The *rendeiro* was the guardian of the land on behalf of the owner and was always male— what this woman is voicing is her support for his actions against the co-operatives of workers. With the process of implementing the agrarian revolution, this group of foremen had seen their traditional livelihoods suddenly under threat, as the workers organising themselves into co-operatives had made their role obsolete. Therefore, the *rendeiros*, in return, set themselves up collectively in several actions to abort the agrarian revolution. It is intriguing that a film that is openly on the side of the revolution and the proletarian workers gives voice to a woman expressing the viewpoint of the counter-revolution.

Towards the end, we can witness how women were being silenced in the co-operatives, with male hegemony taking over, unequal conditions being pushed and men taking over the leadership roles. We watch how work conditions were being guaranteed for men but not for women, and how the benefits of the agrarian revolution were being allocated disproportionately for the benefit of some (men) more than others (women). Voiced by men in front of silent listening women, this is how the Orwellian adage of some more equal than others unfolded. And it is tangled in this mood that, as the end of the film approaches, we are faced with a scene of an old female farmer voicing her opinion on the injustices that fall systematically upon women workers, and on how female farm workers need to fight for and secure the same rights as their male counterparts, since they do the same hard jobs. Strong and vocal, this old woman faces us frontally while eating, in what appears to be a break from a hard day of work in the fields. And it is in this shot that we suddenly bear witness to a role reversal, with this older woman finally expressing a position for equality, the product of decades of work in the fields. And all along, as the woman speaks, a younger male co-worker observes, apparently both respectful and uncomfortable with her truths and the strength of her opinion. The woman proceeds to

unashamedly declare that women not only do the same work as men, but also have to bear the extra burden of having to do all the work at home. After this, no other female farmer speaks, as all that is relevant has been expressed. The film ends with a shot of mainly women workers raising a fist, despite the adversity, still fiercely defending the revolution. However, for the most part, this is a film where only the aural space brings true parity.

The aural space of the film is, hence, the representation of the ideal of gender equality in the aftermath of the revolution. However, it is also the space for what is yet not visible, while the visual side is the unfortunate clear reflection of the counter-utopian reality that was taking place. The voiceover and the image therefore work as two different realities, taking almost opposite paths: one revolutionary and idealistic, a product of the left-wing, revolutionary minds of the authors; the other, the reality outside of their control (as the revolutionary process mostly was). *The Law of The Land* thus becomes a complex object of militant cinema, in the dissonance between the ideals expressed in the gender parity of the voiceover and the pro-revolutionary comments, and the candour of the footage depicting gender bias and the progressive grip the counter-revolutionary forces were taking over the revolutionary process. Intentionally or not, it becomes an idiosyncratic object, featuring an ongoing battle between the voiceover and its protagonists, between the revolution and gender bias, and the counter-revolution and gender parity.

In the same context of gender, *Masks (Máscaras)*, a film by Noémia Delgado, also offers complex readings. The title of the film refers to the *Caretos* or traditional masks of Trás-os-Montes. The film depicts semi-paganistic traditions and celebrations associated with the winter cycle, the winter solstice and the rite-of-passage from boyhood to manhood. Beautifully shot and edited, this is a film that sits comfortably within the realm of visual anthropology. Whilst this is the very first feature film directed by a woman after the revolution, it is also a film set in a social landscape of old Portuguese traditions that categorically exclude women. The fact is that the

only woman-director who shot a feature straight after the revolution deliberately opted for a topic that excludes women as active protagonists. From this we can take two distant readings.

We can perhaps claim that this is a film by a woman who carried no burden of representation over her shoulders; one who felt no sense of obligation to address gender inequality in Portuguese society. Delgado had, in her earlier career, trained with Jean Rouch (along with Solveig Nordlund), and it is logical that she would have the ambition of making an ethnographic film. *Masks* is a beautifully attentive film, full of the details of the rituals played out by the masked boys, following the ancient traditions and rituals that span Christmas to the Carnival, across different villages. This is a remarkable film in the sense that Delgado captures moments seemingly full of ancestral meaning, recording a naturalistic sound, whilst at the same time pasting over a few scenes the soundtrack of classical music, imprinting a sense of timelessness to the action. It is also remarkable that amid a very conservative and patriarchal *milieu*, a woman managed to gain the trust of men, to film a long and complex set of male rituals.

However, if we look at the film through the scope of gender politics, a few problems arise. First and foremost, this is an ode to the exclusiveness of male traditions: all the women in the film are bystanders who mainly watch the men from a distance, serve them food, and show respect for the rituals they interpret. Men are the bearers of all the ancestral knowledge, they are in possession of the ancestral wisdom and are, therefore, those who hold the key to Totem and Taboo. We need to remember that, before Noémia Delgado, there had been only a single case of a woman directing a feature film. During a dictatorship that lasted almost fifty years, women were excluded from filmmaking and endured a very difficult task in achieving and sustaining positions as auteurs in most fields of artistic and cultural production. Under the deep patriarchy of Portuguese society, women were generally denied ownership of and a role in the production of knowledge; their work largely absent from the Portuguese museums and cinemas, their relevance dismissed as secondary to the authorial

prominence of men. And, paradigmatically, the first woman to direct a feature film after the revolution, authors one where the partisan rituals and ancestral knowledge of men are depicted and celebrated. We are left to wonder what Noémia Delgado could have taken from, and be willing to do with, the opportunities given by the revolution, if her leitmotif had been gender consciousness and the problematics of gender representation in Portuguese cinema (and artistic life at large). If she would have felt compelled to record the rituals, traditions and wisdom of the women in the remote regions of Portugal. By making the film she made, Delgado released herself from the shackles of representation, but by doing so the way she did, she perpetuated the patriarchal narrative of men as the bearers of knowledge and the leading protagonists of a narrative. In the film, there are scarce instances when we can glimpse, for a brief moment, women as potential active parts of the narrative. One such moment is when, for a few seconds, an old woman takes the arm of one of the *Caretos* for a dance. Another, when we briefly watch women wash wool in a river. Yet another, when we can see two women arriving back from the fields, backs arched by the weight of the heavy baskets full of crop, while a man carrying an empty basket follows them, languidly, smoking. And a final scene where the *Caretos* chase young girls. We are left to imagine the equally ancestral knowledge and the rituals the women could have shared with the filmmaker in this space and time, if only they had been included. And it is not solely a fair share of the representation of women that this film forgets. With the exception of a minor joke by one of the *Caretos*, this is a film that turns away from all the turmoil of the revolution, making it invisible, a film with its back to the revolution.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the voiceover throughout the film is of Delgado's husband, the bohemian poet Alexandre O'Neill, whose fame she would remain under until her recent passing away. This would also be Delgado's first and last feature film for cinema, after which she was confronted with an invisible wall that barred her from having any of her projects financed, something that was also a sad and frequent situation in the case of other women film directors of her generation. Delgado applied several times

for state money to direct feature films but was never granted funding again.

A contrasting example, in terms of gender representation, comes from *Trás-os-Montes*. A film where villagers are depicted doing a mix of things, from the real documentation of their everyday lives as they happen, to the re-enactment of their thoughts and daily activities, and to the representation of scenes that are completely fictional. However, in this film, the role of women is strong and at the forefront all through the narrative: we observe moments in women's lives and listen to the stories of grandmothers, mothers and daughters. Female rituals of weaving the wool, setting the fire or passing on the oral traditions within the family and to the younger generations. In *Trás-os-Montes* women are represented in all moments of their daily lives, with their thoughts, conversations and gestures leading the narrative.

The images of the film are set against a soundtrack that drifts from naturalistic sound to a silence empowering the visuals, and to classical music which (as in Noémia Delgado's *Masks*) tries to bring forth the feeling of the landscape and of a land that has in it and its inhabitants the keys to ancestral knowledge and traditions. But this is a film where the work of women is placed in the foreground, as in a scene where an old woman, experienced in art of the treadmill, weaves quickly and efficiently on an old wooden machine; the strong sound of her work passing from the scene where the action is taking place to the next, where we see a man riding in a wide shot, always with the overpowering sound of the woman's work over it. By concentrating its narrative on women's work, this feature documentary is not solely taking a different stance in terms of gender representation in film, but also bringing to the screen the relevance of women's work, otherwise so often condemned to invisibility. This is also a film that depicts female work outside, but also in the privacy of the home. We can see the narrative of women as those who carry and bring up the young, who go about the daily chores of domesticity, who look after family and home, in addition to the work they perform outside, in the fields or weaving.

Although also not addressing or mentioning the revolution in any way, *Trás-os-Montes* has several scenes that depict important social issues of the time, such as conversations about the forced migration and emigration to find work and a better life that the relatives of several villagers must undertake, and the experiences lived across generations. We are made aware that this migratory flux is directed both to the major cities and abroad. The levels of illiteracy amongst the peasant women are also exposed. In one scene, an elderly woman wanting to write a letter must entrust it to a young boy who does it for her. In another scene, a second woman cannot read a letter and it is again a young boy who reads it for her. The film lays bare the impoverishment women had suffered under the dictatorship, and how illiteracy was frequent amongst country women, even more so than among men.

In the case of António Reis' and Margarida Cardoso's film *Trás-os-Montes*, it is also worth remembering that, infused with revolutionary spirit, the filmmakers organised film sessions with the community which had been filmed, showing them the edited film. When confronted with the final cut, the community was highly critical of it, failing to review themselves in the picturesque and impoverished portrait made of them, believing that the film made them look poorer and more out-of-time than they felt to be. To this feeling probably contributed scenes as one, completely fictional, of a family starving to such a point that it resorts to eating snow. From viewing the film, it is easy to understand how the villagers became willing participants. But because the film is a *collage* of so many different moments with different groups and scenes, only when confronted with the final edit did those depicted manage to grasp the narrative, the assemblage of their actions as the final product for the spectator.

In a bizarre twist, the population's strong criticisms of the film led, subsequently, to the robust criticism of their feedback by intellectuals and film critics, with statements such that the locals had been unable to realise what a work of art the film was. It is without a doubt ironic that the villagers' opinions of the film and those of intellectuals were at such variance.

Revolutionary utopia and dystopia

A clash of significations could often be found in the many instances of the revolutionary process. Specifically, in the battle between what the intellectuals considered to be the cultural products suitable for the enjoyment of the people, and what the people wanted and aspired to consuming. The working-class ambitions and the revolutionary elite's ambitions would frequently be found on opposite sides of the same process, perhaps an instantiation of an ever-present class struggle.

Filmography

Masks (Máscaras). 1976. By Noémia Delgado
Trás-os-Montes. 1976. By António Reis e Margarida Cordeiro
The Law of The Land (A Lei da Terra). 1977. By Alberto Seixas Santos and Solveig Nordlund