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PAULO ROCHA *OS VERDES ANOS* (1962) AND THE NEW PORTUGUESE CINEMA

Following the European new waves, an aesthetic rupture occurred in Portugal in the early 60's giving birth to what would come to be known as the New Portuguese Cinema. Despite its blatant commercial failure, the critics and directors who defended it would manage to occupy all the strategic places from which they would promote, produce and direct, to the present day, a high art cinema to which contemporary Portuguese cinema is still very much in debt (Bénard da Costa 119; Ramos 12). In doing so, they would institutionalize, regardless of national audiences, a heavily State subsidized cinema that has already been called the Portuguese Cinema School – a distinctive cinema internationally known by the work of film directors such as Manoel de Oliveira, Paulo Rocha, João César Monteiro or Pedro Costa, among many others. In fact, while claiming to be authentically national, Portuguese art cinema continues to embrace, just as the Cinema Novo did, an international high art stance—brought forward by the international film festivals circuit and the different European State funding policies—that discards popular audience's expectations. Although the history of the institutionalization of this art cinema has barely begun to be written, there has been a recurrent debate over the last forty years over which film should mark the beginning of the New Portuguese Cinema (Monteiro 656-664). At stake are the origins of the contemporary Portuguese art cinema establishment, the validation of its tastes and preferences and thus the justification of its normative authority and its legitimacy to dismiss or even suppress a number of possible alternative film practices. In other words, the issue at stake is the definition of the Portuguese film canon.

In this paper, I will argue, following most of the existing histories of Portuguese cinema, that Paulo Rocha's directorial debut *Os Verdes Anos*/*The Green Years* (1963), is the founding mark of the so-called New Portuguese Cinema. However, as will become apparent, it is not my purpose to reinforce the consensus regarding the dominant canon. I will rather try to bring to this canon's aesthetic roots one of the contemporary Portuguese art cinema's main problem, namely the Portuguese audiences disaffection towards their own cinema, making Portugal one of the European countries with national cinema's lowest attendances (Vasconcelos 9), even as it claims to be authentically «Portuguese» and therefore a legitimate representative of Portuguese culture.

Paulo Rocha directed *Os Verdes Anos* after attending l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC), in Paris, where he studied film direction,

between 1959 and 1961, and met António Cunha Telles, the future producer of his first films. Following graduation, he assisted Jean Renoir on *Le Caporal Épinglé/The Elusive Corporal* (1961), and, returning to Portugal, he assisted Manoel de Oliveira on *Acto da Primavera/The Spring Play* (1962) (Ramos 339). As it is acknowledged by so many Portuguese film directors of the time, and by Paulo Rocha himself (Rocha 36), the expansion of international film culture and the renewal in European and international cinema between the late 50's and the early 60's would have a great influence in the New Portuguese Cinema's generation. Many of them had scholarships granted by the Portuguese Television, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the National Cinema Fund to study abroad, while some others like Paulo Rocha would go at their own expenses (Monteiro 649). Living abroad, they could see films programmed at Film Archives and Cinémathèques' retrospectives or at international film festivals that otherwise they would not have the chance to see (Cunha 131-132). Naturally, the films they valued belonged to the new emerging art cinema: a cinema characterised by David Bordwell (1979) and Steve Neale (1981) as being characterized by a stress on visual style, an overt directorial presence and a certain kind of realism created by psychologically complex characters lacking well-defined goals and by the loosening of cause-effect relations in the narrative, all adding up to a heightened sense of ambiguity. Above all, a cinema marked by the assumption that a film ought to be the expression of an individual's personal vision of the world. The New Portuguese Cinema would fundamentally share all these characteristics, defining itself both as *cinéma d'auteur* and national cinema, and therefore against all commercial cinema (including the previous national one) for its purported lack of personal and national authenticity.

Portuguese cinema had long favoured, it is true, the representation of a set of national motifs such as landscapes, monuments and locations, people's lifestyles, customs or traditions, among other elements that could be well described as «national cultural icons». Indeed, the concern with the representation of national identity in Portuguese cinema was nearly as old as the existence of cinema in Portugal (Tiago Baptista). In the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, films were financially supported by the regime in the hope that something like a popular cinema marked by its nationalist ideology would be produced. The National Cinema Fund legislation, promulgated in 1948 but still effective in the 60's, stated that the fund could only support films «representative of the Portuguese spirit», that is, films reflecting «the psychology, customs, traditions, history or collective soul of the people». But by the end of the 50's, many critics, even those closer to the regime, had already declared the films financed by the state to be artistically worthless (Cunha 34-41). Calling the attention to other national cinema's funding policies of the time, and appealing to the need to counter foreign cinema influence in Portuguese cultural identity, the new film directors would then start to demand another kind of state intervention. An intervention that should promote an authentically national cinema, closer to the values of art and culture as defined in international film festivals, press reviews and by those others' state funding policies (33-50).

In an apparent contradiction, the New Portuguese Cinema would also define itself against the cinema's renewal proposals presented by the left cultural opposition to the regime, dominated by the underground Portuguese Communist Party. This cultural opposition also defended a more serious,

meaningful and authentically national cinema, deeply rooted in the Portuguese social reality. Assuming that art should be universal and hoping to promote an emancipatory mass culture directed against the dictatorship, the cultural opposition to the regime defended a cinema that could be easily understood by the audiences regardless of their cultural or aesthetic competences by addressing the audiences' everyday life concerns. The New Portuguese Cinema however, as most of the new European cinemas that would embrace a high art stance, claimed to have a deeper relation with «reality» than the cause-effect narrative and naturalist cinema defended by the left intellectual circles in Portugal, and that if cinema was to be taken as a serious art, audiences shouldn't be that important.

Although directing their films in contemporary settings and depicting everyday life situations—just as those intellectuals defended—, the New Portuguese Cinema film directors would argue that they didn't aim at external reality but at a deeper truth, beneath the surface of things—the fleeing experience of life itself. Hence, their disapproval of filmmakers who privileged social and political events on the grounds that the transitory could not be made enduring and important. Drawing on the ideal of the autonomy and endurance of the work of art, the New Portuguese Cinema was led to reject social and political issues, while praising existential or spiritual ones. Its films would thus seek to transcend the immediate spatial and temporal interest in which they were directed, distinguishing themselves from those that were limited to the local and historical circumstances in which they were produced. Even at the risk of not being understood by those who didn't share the same cultural or aesthetic competences.

On the other hand, positing, in a typical romantic way, that each nation possesses a stable and determining cultural identity—a sort of spiritual essence—that necessarily shapes the identity of those belonging to it, the New Portuguese Cinema film directors assumed that to be authentic and personal, their films should embody the national character. This would be achieved not only through the representation of cultural-specific characteristics such as language and history, but most of all through the reference to more hard to define characteristics of nationhood, which, however elusive, would have to be interpreted and transcribed into film through the idiosyncratic lens of the film director.

Conflating art cinema, auteur cinema and national cinema, the New Portuguese Cinema would thus reinforce the distinction between «high» and «low» art.

Politically progressive, most New Portuguese Cinema directors would thus reveal themselves to be culturally conservative. Shortly after the release of *Os Verdes Anos*, on an inquiry on the social responsibility of the arts published in *O Tempo e o Modo* (147-149), Paulo Rocha would declare his belief that cinema had no more social responsibility than the other arts. Asked if cinema had any social or moral responsibilities due to its power to address a very vast and heterogeneous public, Rocha would answer that it didn't seem fair «to give such a great importance to the quantitative factor» (149). The artwork, he said, had, «even when not searched for [by the artist] or apparent, a moral and social plenitude that freed it from external limitations or responsibilities—becoming indisputable, autonomous and irradiating» (149). The only responsibility the arts had, if any, was to, consciously or unconsciously, express the view of their personal creators.

Still, in order to justify its national character, and later the state's financial support, the New Cinema had to turn to Portuguese culture. But that would not need to collide with the free expression of the director's worldview. Quite on the contrary, given the romantic belief, apparently shared by most New Portuguese Cinema directors, that nations have a spiritual essence, art film directors were somehow supposed, as we have seen, to reflect the national identity of the country to which they belonged.

Nevertheless, while claiming to be authentically national, the Portuguese art cinema would seem to systematically frustrate popular audience's expectations, apparently on behalf of the international elites—this from *Os Verdes Anos* to the present day. A fact that would not go unnoticed when the Portuguese art cinema would start to get more international credit in foreign film festivals and film reviews at the end of the 70's and the early 80's (Bénard da Costa, 157-169). This inclination for the international film market would be aptly summed by the words of a former Minister of Culture condemning the heavily state subsidized directors for making films not for national audiences (metaphorically the ones from Bragança — a remote small city in North Portugal) but for the international elite ones (i.e., the ones from Paris) (Costa, 169). Ironically, this condemnation would take place shortly before the «Portuguese Scholl» label would start to be used by film criticism to designate the Portuguese art cinema's «singularity» (167).

Truly disappointed by the public disaffection, the New Portuguese Cinema film directors would try to explain it with the audiences' prejudice against Portuguese cinema, due to the previous national production, as well as with the audiences' poor film culture, due to the censorship forbidding of European New Wave films or the overwhelming presence of american mainstream commercial cinema (Cunha 143). The New Portuguese Cinema film director Fernando Lopes, for instance, would later admit that they «all relied, a little bit excessively, on the existence of an "enlightened public", to use the wording of the time, a public formed by film societies, university students and others, but that in fact didn't show up» (Lopes 25). And Paulo Rocha would claim, by the same time, that if they had tried to «seduce» the audiences, these, on their side, «had not done what was expected from them, or were not allowed to do so by distribution, laws and other general conditions» (23).

One cannot deny that the film directors of the early New Portuguese Cinema seemed to believe that art films could be universally appealing, and thus also speak to national audiences. But the fact that most of those film directors (not their producers...) would keep on the same path after their first audiences failures, suggests that they probably were never willing to address public expectations.

After his first feature films, Paulo Rocha went on filming two short documentaries. The second one, *A Pousada das Chagas* (1972), a sort of avant-garde documentary/fiction on the Sacred Art Óbidos Museum, was suggested and entirely financed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, which had created the museum. As the critic Jorge Leitão Ramos would put it, «freed from any market conveniences», the film would comfortably look for «an exacerbation of the filmic materials, for a territory of formal research, for a fictional secrecy played between the conscience of cinema as representation and the (desired?) rupture of immediate communication with an (unknown?, improbable?, neglected?) spectator. I believe that the Portuguese cinema

solipsism finds its paroxysm point here. [...] as if someone had closed the Sacrament and thrown away the key» (310).

At times, Portuguese art cinema is therefore criticized for alienating the public, but what critics fail to see is that it is precisely the idea that cinema should address audience's expectations that was rejected by the New Portuguese Cinema (and nowadays is rejected by most contemporary Portuguese art cinema), and that this disregard for national audiences reveals a deeply rooted modernist aesthetic and its more or less conscious rejection of mass culture modernity.

In the remaining of this paper, I will try to show how this modernist aesthetic is patent in *Os Verdes Anos*, namely in the inscription of the high art and mass culture divide in a masculine/feminine dichotomy, in which the negative characteristics of modernity are ascribed to the main feminine character, while the male protagonist stands uncompromisingly alone against the modern world.

The film tells us the story of Júlio, a young man who comes to Lisbon from the countryside to try his chance in the big city as an apprentice shoemaker. He is staying with his uncle, Afonso, a miser and somewhat cynical construction worker, who lives in a poor house in the outer limits of the city. While saving money for a better life, Afonso despises his poor neighbours, who do not manage to make both ends meet, just as much as he despises the city middle classes for not knowing the cost of their own way of life. After arriving at the shoemaker's shop, Júlio accidentally meets a girl called Ilda. Although more sophisticated than he is, she also came from the countryside, and works as a maid to an upper-class family living in a nearby apartment building. Soon after, they will start dating. Afonso receives Júlio in a paternalistic way, but very quickly, he will start mocking him for his lack of initiative, telling him how to behave to make himself a living. In fact, Júlio does not seem to adapt to the city life or to his girlfriend's ambitions, fascinated as she is with the modern lifestyle of her employers. When she confronts him with her plans, he replies he only wants to be with her and proposes marriage. Surprised by his proposal and his lack of ambition she refuses. Apparently calm and resigned to the end of their relationship, Júlio asks to see her again, at her employer's apartment and unexpectedly kills her with his shoemaker's knife. Running out of the building, Júlio stops in the middle of the street, dazzled by the cars headlights.

In an interview given in 1964, Paulo Rocha would state that the film tried to counter audience's tendency to over evaluate the story over the *mise-en-scène* (António 3). What mattered most to him was the relation between the characters and the scenario, the treatment of the cinematographic materials. According to Rocha if one would pay more attention to the visual line forces than to the story, the tragic outcome would not seem so unexpected. But if even we adopt a strictly visual appreciation, the fact that the film is a narrative fiction remains and little in Júlio's character could have helped predicting that outcome or explaining it. Like in many other art films of the period, the psychological dramatic conflict is interiorized in Júlio and very few explicit clues are given to the spectator about what he is thinking or why he behaves as he does. As David Bordwell has noticed, such a narrative and character ambiguity foregrounds the narrational act and the authorial presence of the film director, begging the questions: why is the story being told this way? what

is the director trying to say? (98-99). The principle of intelligibility is transferred from story to the plot, its true, but far from being less important the characters and their action acquire a new meaning since they must necessarily be interpreted, as I will do next, with the film director's intentions in mind, the film being read as the expression of its subjective view of the world.

From the very beginning, Júlio is presented as a quiet and simple young man. When he arrives at the train station and finds no one is expecting him, he seems utterly lost. After finding his way to the shoemaker shop, he wanders in the nearby streets waiting for his uncle. Accidentally he gets trapped in the front lobby of a building where he entered to play with some birds perched on a decorative tree, and that's when he meets Ilda, coming down from her employers apartment. Their encounter is rather embarrassing for Júlio, since he is unable to open the door of the lobby, revealing his inadequacies to the modern city living. Ilda opens the door and laughs at him, as Júlio storms out the building.

Some days later, we find Júlio playing with a group of children near his uncle's house. Seating in the ground, he improvises a feminine like doll face from a potato and some straw stems, with his shoemaker knife, while looking at the building where Ilda lives, at the distance. The fact that Júlio feels more at ease among the nature, in the hills bordering the city is clear, as his innocent and somewhat childish behaviour becomes apparent. After he starts dating Ilda, it's in his promenade with her across the fields that he will almost confide his family problems. Nevertheless, he does not realize, as she does, that the men they bumped into are voyeurs, spying on young couples like them. And after Júlio's fight with his uncle, it will be in these same hills that Ilda will find him strolling around, shooting birds with a slingshot. Later on, it will be once more in a leisurely walk, followed by a picnic among a garden forest, that he will tell her the reasons of his disagreements with his uncle and, finally, propose to her.

The city life and the urban leisure's, on the other hand, do not seem to interest him too much. He always refuses his uncle's invitation to go watch soccer matches. At the dancing party after Ilda insisted he learned to dance rock n' roll, he leaves for a while with the pretext he has to buy a painkiller for a toothache. In the meantime, a young man forces Ilda against his body during a dance, and it is a common friend, apparently also attracted to Ilda, who has to intervene and defend her, starting a fight. Júlio returns the moment they are being forced out from the party, and although nothing is said, it is obvious that he blames Ilda as if he had suddenly been made aware of her power of seduction over men. Even so, the only moment when we see Júlio acting aggressively is in the fight with his uncle, and only in response to Afonso's aggression.

If Júlio's character is associated with nature and innocence, Ilda, on the contrary, is associated with urban life, modern technology and even commodities consumption. Not that she is to blame for anything, but she is clearly more ambitious and sophisticated than Júlio, even if they share the same background. Ilda reveals herself at ease in the city and quite willing to adopt her superior's bourgeois lifestyle: she tries her «madam's» clothes and shoes, dreaming of becoming a fashion designer, and she offers Júlio a cup of her boss's china tea while they are out for the week-end. Later, when Júlio's uncle invites them to lunch at a restaurant across the Tagus river, she seems as excited with the trip as if she was invited by her own employers. We see her

learning how to prepare cocktails and she even wants to teach Júlio how to dance Rock and Roll so he can become a «modern man». Furthermore, she seems to be more independent and sexually assertive than it would be expected, at those conservative times, from a girl of her social status. In fact she seems very self-confident among men—as we can see at the dance party where she stares at the Rock and Roll dancer, obviously attracted to him, or at the shoemaker's shop where she seems to go more often than necessary—and she will be the one to take the step forward in her relationship with Júlio.

As important as Ilda is Julio's uncle, Afonso. It is him, as the voice over narrator, who will prepare us in different moments of the film to what is going to happen next. The most important one, for my purpose here, is the one near the end, when Afonso claims that nobody could explain the tragic events of that night because nobody knew what had happened earlier that same afternoon. The only thing he knew was that Júlio and Ilda had gone for a walk and were apparently at peace with each other. The truth, however, is that if the film's spectator gets to know what happened that afternoon, he doesn't get closer to understand why Júlio killed his girlfriend. In fact, I believe that if we only look for a cause-effect explanation in the events preceding the extreme act of Júlio, we will end up just like Afonso, unable to understand his nephew's behaviour – and I suspect that was precisely the director's intention towards those who didn't know better.

I think the film can be better interpreted if we consider that it works as a metaphor for the New Portuguese Cinema, or at the very least for Paulo Rocha's rejection of the increasingly present and engulfing mass culture caused by the rapidly accelerating modernization of the Portuguese urban society in the early 60's. The rejection of modern material culture is visible in Júlio's rejection of his uncle's way of thinking, which seems to personify the petit-bourgeois conservatism, pragmatic utilitarianism and philistinism—in other words, the pretension to a superior knowledge of the world to hide the permanent preoccupation with social status and material values and the total lack of sensibility to aesthetic or spiritual ones.

But the rejection of mass culture seems particularly visible in the association of the lifestyle of modern cities and the products of mass culture—such as fashion clothes, pop music, TV shows or even common technological devices and domestic appliances—to Ilda, the feminine character, while Júlio distances himself from the trivialities and banalities of the everyday urban life. As many scholars have noticed, this gendering of mass culture as feminine, while authentic or high culture is maintained as the privilege of men, seems to go back at least to the 19th century, and reveals the projection of the modern artists' fear of loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the urban mass into women. As a result, the modern artist/film director identifies with the suffering romantic hero, who resists the seductive appeal of larger audiences, and who stands, as Júlio does, uncompromisingly alone in irreconcilable opposition to the modern world.

As David Bordwell pointed out, the character's lack of goals that seems to turn life meaningless in so many European art film, bringing to the front existential problems as «alienation», «lack of communication», etc., etc. , transform those films in severe judgements on «modern life» as a whole. I believe that it is precisely what *Os Verdes Anos* does, making it the first aesthetically and thematically Portuguese anti modern film, and thus the

foundation mark of the New Portuguese Cinema and of much of contemporary Portuguese art cinema.

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