

# An Identity Discourse João Canijo and José Gil

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## Abstract

The films of João Canijo are sociological portraits a Portuguese reality in the contemporary world. But in a conscious and deliberate position, Canijo looked at the intricacies of popular culture, locating his narratives in very specific places: the industrial village of Sines ("Black Shoes", 1998), a Portuguese community in the suburbs of Paris ("Get a Life", 2001), a hostess bar somewhere in deep Portugal ("In the Darkness of the Night", 2004), and finally a village in the countryside ("Misbegotten", 2007).

In these films, Canijo has sought to organize some of the possible signs of what is a national identity: the physical and psychological violence; tormented characters; disruptive families with power confrontations; the junction of the documentary elements in fiction; and the construction of a hyper-realistic cinematography. This poster aims, therefore, to classify Canijo's positions in these four films, trying to establish some points of contact with one of the most important philosophers that have written about national identity: José Gil.

## The concept of non-inscription

The theoretical relationship of João Canijo and José Gil is more evident since the release of *Portugal, Today: The Fear to Exist* (Gil, 2005). In an interview with the director, he explains: "When I was writing the note of intent for "Misbegotten" it was released the book of José Gil. What I was trying to write in that note was in that essay, told by someone who has spent more years thinking about things and expresses it better than I. (...) As José Gil says, worse than the absence of form is the arrogance of judging itself as form. It is this: a lack of secular education." (Câmara, 2010). The essential concept is therefore the idea of non-inscription which requires that "Nothing happens, I mean, nothing fits - in history or in individual life, social life (...)" (Gil, 2005, 15). Inscription on the other hand, "(...) implies action, assertion, decision with which the individual achieves autonomy and meaning to existence. Salazar has taught us the irresponsibility - reducing us to children, grand children, childish adults." (Gil, 2005, 17).

From this concept of non-inscription, however, Gil goes beyond a concept that seems to be too important in the films of João Canijo: *fear* (here reproduced as fear to exist). In Gil's words: "While device mutilating desire, predisposes to obedience. It softens bodies, sipping their energy, creating a void in the spirits that only the tasks, duties, obligations of submission are supposed to fill. Fear impeccably prepares the ground for law enforcement to practice." (Gil, 2005, 84).

Gil notes that the problem arises in Salazar, from his "familiarity": "(...) the legacy of fear that the dictatorship has left us not only covers the political level. Moreover, the difference with the past is that fear itself is in our bodies and spirits." (Gil, 2005, 40). This fear implies, in this sense, "(...) the reverence, the awe, the passivity (...)" (Gil, 2005, 40). According to Gil this fear is reflected in a lack of public space and a series of small, everyday events, such as complaining, resentment and envy.



Fig. 2 e 3 - *Black Shoes* (1998) and *In The Darkness of the Night* (2004)

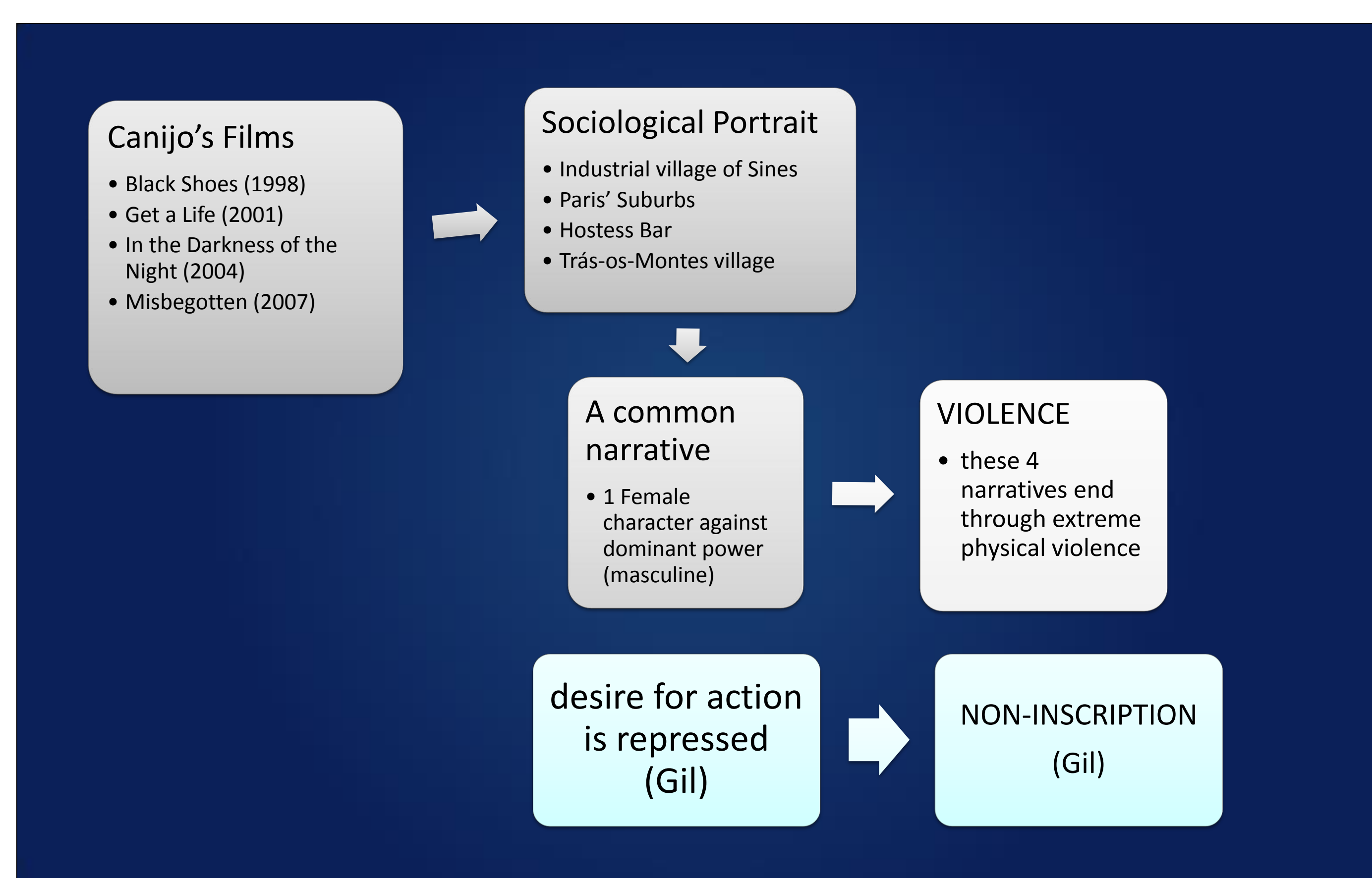


Fig.1 Sociological and narrative scheme for Canijo's films and their relation to José Gil

## A cartography of being portuguese

These films arise in very specific areas in Portugal, a kind of periphery, beyond the borders of the big cities. It can be noted how the choices of places serve to enhance the narrative and a certain sociological look, which appears specific to each place. Thus, each approach in each film, builds a specific space-time that creates specific pictures of certain Portuguese communities.

It is, however, at the narrative level, that Canijo reveals his positions on a certain Portuguese malaise. This stems from the particular circumstance of each character in the context of the narrative. And it is this way that deepens the observation that, in these four films, Canijo continues to do the same story. This macro scenario of narrative repetition is embodied in the following way: there is a normalized context at the beginning, which is transformed by the presence of a female character that, for various circumstances, decides to break with the initial normality. This initial normality is also synonym of a latent passivity of the characters, which continue to live their life in an absolutely traditional form, tied with the dominant power structures.

Returning to the narrative logic, the various female characters take the story and oblige themselves to act to change the course of things. This requirement for action is usually triggered by an external reason, but is embodied in a female character's decision to confront power. Typically, this power is represented by a male power (father or husband), which, however, also proves to be a fragile power, built on the logic of physical advantage.

## In conclusion: violence as resolution

This plotline – a character that tries to disrupt normality – gives support to the theoretical construction of José Gil. In the films and in Gil's theory we find the characters in the states of passivity, a life of day to day that do not inscribes, and can not leave marks. Canijo's world is a world of fear. A fear of a power that translates into a fear to exist.

The corollary of this feeling of powerlessness, in a world that castrates the characters, goes through the extreme physical and psychological violence that these films embody. It is there, above all, that is the decisive mark of the author: the strength of his realistic method calls, in these sequences, the sheer brutality of the human being. Thus, in every film, there are several moments where the characters get involved physically and as a consequence, one or more characters are dead. In addition, these deaths are exhibited through extreme and graphic violence: its hyperrealism exposes the dead bodies and the blood out of them. In several moments the viewer is confronted with the limits of human life and even its dignity.

This violence is a result of internal power struggles of the characters. In this sense, we can close the circle, because this violence is also the result of a repressed desire. Reading José Gil: "The inscription is the condition of production of desire (or its destruction). The non-inscription suspends the desire and will lead, sooner or later, to physical violence. Equals to a bad inscription." (Gil, 2005, 49) Almost transferring from statements also made by the director, José Gil exposes "the myth of the 'easy going' that reigns on the surface hiding a real underground violence." (Gil, 2005, 77).

In conclusion, Canijo is a great master in recording some of the imageries of contemporary Portugal, in a willingness to enter in specific contexts, building a plural overview of a sociology of Portugal. However, there is a narrative plotline that reduces the aesthetic and symbolic connotation of this overview. Therefore, in a sense, it seems that João Canijo reinforces a certain identity discourse that has been made do José Gil's theory), which is supported also in the way the director has presented publically these movies.

## bibliography:

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- Gil, José (2005). *Portugal, Hoje: O Medo de Existir*. Lisboa, Relógio d'Água.