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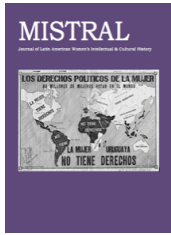
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Vacancies of Curiosity in the Reception of *Êxtase*

Karen Sztajnberg,
Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, The Netherlands



• BUSCA VIDA production
Ê X T A S E
a film by MOARA R PASSONI

BUSCA VIDA presents "ÊXTASE" ALICE WILKINS, GUSTO HIGALINO, VICTORIA MARIANO, DANA ANTUNES, GUSTANA PIZZ, HELENA ALBERGARIA with ORICE THOMAS, MARCO DE ANDRADE, SHEILA AREAS and WALTER CASAGRANDE JR. casting by PATRICIA FARIA director of photography JAMES SWALE R. costume design ANDRÉA REBERG production design TASSO MARINHO hair and makeup AMANDA MENDES credits and poster design JOÃO MARCOS DE ALMEIDA blue dot art FERNANDO CUNHA, ARIARDO sound design and music CECILE CHAGRAUD visual design and mix TOSCA SOTCI music by DAVID LYNN & LYNN I.I. original score by ISMAEL PINHEIRO executive producers CAROLINA DE SOUSA, DANIELA CAPELATO, GUSTAVO GRANDI, MARIANA OLIVA artistic associate producer MARK ELY executive collaborators ARAUJO HERNANDEZ, FABIO FERRETTI, HELENA PASSONI, SARA COSSO, PABLO BICO, SOTIRIOSKY, MARCO PEREIRA, MARITZA REIS, MARCELO AYR, co-screenplay DANIELA CAPELATO, HENRIQUE P. KAVIER editor collaborators TABELLE KATHIST editor and screenplay collaborator DAVID BARKER editor and writer FERNANDO SPETER executive producers LÉDA SERRAZELLI, PAULA PRIMO, EMILIA SAMCO consulting producer MARCO SAMO independent SARA TOSIA, TIAGO PAVÃO producer by PETRA COSTA directed, written and produced by MOARA R. PASSONI



Fig.1 Film poster for *Êxtase* © Moara Passoni (Rights conceded by the artist)

Women in distress, self-harming and unravelling, have long been present on our screens, canvasses, and in songs, inviting the questions of whether this unravelling is a performative gesture, and what this gesture wants recognized. This review will engage with Brazilian filmmaker Moara Passoni's hybrid documentary feature *Êxtase* (2020) featuring a young woman's battle with anorexia, to cast some light on how this feminine predicament gets framed and by whom. In turn, its problematic reception expands the debate on recognition and spectatorship.

Eating disorders are presented in this film as a battleground of control, a passion for self-domination and a devotion to rigors that claim the body. Departing from the filmmaker's personal experience as a teenager coming of age in São Paulo, the film extends the literary praxis of auto-fiction into filmic terrain. Passoni's work approaches eating disorders, an issue that only affects 10-25% of the male population (Stroher, Lemberg, Stanford, Turberville 2012, 346-55), yet somehow ended up being mostly reviewed by men, who tend to comprise 65% of all film reviewers (Montpellier, Rachel, 2020). Ignoring this gender imbalance in the reception of Moara Passoni's

Êxtase, would be shortsighted. I will explore how this film's reviews situate women and their health issues, quantifying a few instances of vacancies of deeper investiture in the reading of the intricacies of this Brazilian auto-fictional hybrid film.

If the filmmaker seems committed to the subjective perspective, what is the role of the reviewer? To contextualize the film in order to widen our understanding of it? Or to offer an equally subjective counter position? How these male reviewers situate such a hard to categorize film, seems less interesting than the level of legitimacy we are willing to invest in their reviews. This investiture indicates a good measure of how equity's battleground must include the scene of reception, and not just cultural production. Lest we forget that the distribution market is gaging the budding film's viability by its critical responses, and eventually, streamers will use reviews to float this film's algorithmic prestige up or down. The stakes that reviews play have risen with the latitude gained by streaming viewership.

In his writings on literary receptions, Adam Phillips (2019) frequently posits the question: what do we want this narrative to do for us? By way of response, let us examine what Passoni's aesthetic and modus operandi roused in the reviewers. *Êxtase* picks up on the literary trend of auto-fiction by using the device of an alter ego of the director, Clara, who experiences the eponymous anorexia-induced ecstasy. The kaleidoscopic structure of the editing provides a non-linear temporality where the girl and the adult woman collide and expand, elliptically returning to the physicality of the eating disorder and its intricate procedurals. Without any blatant blaming or victimization, without flaunting feminine mystique (no small feat), the tone remains acutely observant. The relationship with the protagonist's mother, a potential witness to her child's process, is rendered in oblique interactions where the sentient body is always joining the conversation: their shapes are blurred and sharpened, their chromatic saturation watered down and surfaced. Sharp longitudinal angles and corporeal fragmentation makes us inhabit the labyrinthine psychological landscape of the protagonist, strongly rendered by cinematographer Janice D'Ávila.

To the extent that this is a film about women's awareness of their bodies and their contours, I evoke John Berger (2008)'s differentiation between the nude and the naked: the latter is merely being free of clothes, while the former includes an awareness of being seen, scrutinized while naked. Clara is consumed by self-inspection, and arguably so are most of us cinephiles, forever dissecting filmic narratives, and what they say about ourselves. This overinvested effort to examine thoroughly, to exhaust every aspect, inhabits spectatorship as much as any other obsessive endeavor. So, the critics come to our aid in this process, but not without bringing their subjective filters.

Screen Daily's Jonathan Romney mentions the "turbulent recent history of Brazil" (2020) and Passoni's background as the "daughter of a congresswoman who takes up her official position in capital city Brasilia – a situation established after a montage of still photos and archive footage shows popular protest and unrest, and brutal response by the Brazilian police." (2020) The fact that the filmmaker keeps these events as a backdrop shouldn't necessarily exempt Romney from trying to contextualize how its echoes fall upon the plight of the protagonist. Is it an oversized expectation to want the reviewer to anchor his or her (but mostly his, as we saw above) reading in the meta-textual blanks? As a fellow Brazilian of Passoni's generation, I problematize this vacancy of curiosity into the geo-political conflicts that necessitated a swiftly built Brasilia, and what international interests might have motivated or turned a blind eye to police brutality in Brazil. Granted, this is not a political science journal but *Screen Daily*. Yet, not even putting a temporal

frame around “recent” just speaks of a slack in journalistic protocol that perpetuates peripheric histories at the margins of a knowledge-worthy center.

Pat Mullen from *Point of View Magazine* (2020) chimes in with this failure of regional curiosity by titling his review “A Fragmented Tango of Ideas and Desires,” because the fastest way to a Brazilian heart is to be carelessly roped in with an Argentine musical legacy. He states: “Passoni recalls the experience of struggling with an eating disorder in voiceover” (2020). The filmmaker does indeed mention pathology without getting lost in its throes. Surely, the knowledge that eating disorders are disruptive pre-exists in our minds, but the merit of the film resides precisely in how it renders it with images of calculated ethereality, evoking a psychic space of unanchored suspension. *Ton-sur-ton* chromatism, foggy, soft contours, create ghostly presences, instructing us about an unspoken desire for disappearance, only phrased as weightlessness, never as self-effacement, which carries a negative connotation—an annulment of a subject. We are instead invited to ponder what a weightless body would look like as it moves in our gravitational world, a far richer form of ludic play. Hence Mullen’s comment seems overly didactic where no instruction is necessary. He proceeds with the statement below:

While *Êxtase* ambitiously creates a cinematic language to articulate complex and conflicting feelings, it never quite gels overall. There are simply too many tangents, asides, fragments, and shards. One drowns in the flood of images that dilute the core dilemma of the young woman’s pain. The sensory overload nevertheless affords some insight into Clara’s headspace, which provides a troubling experience, to say the least.

(Mullen, 2020)

Although the author acknowledges the filmmaker’s unique language, isn’t he also deeming incompetence on her part to properly explain Clara? I return to the most fundamental question of receptive analysis: What do we want this film to do for us? It seems Mullen was hoping to come out of the screening with a conclusive understanding of a fictional character. Clara, as I established earlier, is an amalgama of the director and her will to elaborate on the feminine experience not only of eating disorders, but also of grappling with the adult world. Not a single one of these reviews referred to the coming-of-age genre, the focus on pathology effectively overshadowed the adolescent experience of tentatively setting foot into adulthood. Which, in a roundabout way, answers my question; we want the text to disambiguate what seems disambiguatable, but the filmic experience of *Êxtase* proves to be but a choreography of interrogations, a stage where our readership too has a role to play. The pertinent question here becomes: do women filmmakers get the same allowances as their male counterparts when it comes to open narratives or are they more easily discounted as incoherent? When Mullen uses the expression “some insight” not followed by a qualification or pointing to which insight, this perhaps renders evident the reviewer’s own inability to fully invest himself in the analysis Passoni’s work. His unwillingness to venture into this filmmaker’s headspace, instead dismissing her efforts as insufficient, attests to a weak engagement whether favorable or unfavorable. Films will necessarily interest or alienate certain viewers, what I am arguing for here, is that the shallowness of the engagement with a film’s form and content, says more about the reviewers than anything else, and that such shallowness happens more easily with filmmakers at the margins.

Let us turn to the film's formal strategies, to examine how reviewers addressed that layer of *Êxtase*. On a formal level, a graphic device used by Passoni catches Romney's eye: "Also recurrent is a superimposed image of a blue dot, relating to Clara's anorexia and her search for bodily and mental control" (2020). Indeed, the growing blue dot is a strategy employed by Clara to deflect hunger, but shouldn't this chromatic choice invite deeper probing? While it might be impossible to form unequivocal answers for that color choice without interviewing Passoni, I can risk my own reading of how blue is the color that defines baby boys in maternity wards. It is featured in the film as the device that beats hunger into submission by occupying increasingly larger portions of the protagonist's field of vision. Blue might be read as coded dominance here, not a casual choice. There are many other speculative readings into this narrative device, surely, yet his failure to create a more substantial hermeneutic around the blue dot constitutes another instance of weak intellectual investment.

Writing for *Film Threat*, Ray Lobo (2021) describes: "While on the ground, her eyes remain open, staring blankly, as if she is outside of her body, possibly caught in a runner's high that makes her lose touch with the world around her. Perhaps the woman is experiencing an ecstatic moment." (2021) The non-committal attitude inherent in the word "perhaps" seems conspicuous given the movie's title, briskly co-opting the filmmaker's assertion as his own insight. Beyond that, Lobo fails to mention how this shot beckons an awareness of our implication. As spectators, we don't get a chance to avert the gaze of an ecstatic, pale, fading woman. Returning to Berger's distinction between the naked and the nude might serve us in processing Passoni's film. While Berger emphasizes the awareness of being seen while naked, that is to say, an acknowledgement of the gaze, in the discussed shot in *Êxtase*—which is significant to the point of being featured in the film's poster (See Fig. 1)—the protagonist's stance places our gaze as impotent witnesses to a deeply personal process, and this is very discomfiting. But perhaps this is the only way to safeguard the autonomy of the subject and the author behind her. Is the need to emit signification the only way to interact with an aesthetic object? One of the most original merits of the film, in my view, is that the severity which plays out in an eating disorder, rests squarely on the subject's shoulders. Thus, the filmmaker avoids a head on, demagogic approach to the topic of patriarchally enforced ideals of feminine beauty. She also skillfully approaches the specificity of the maternal bond without condemning the parent's inability to have full access to the child's psyche. In brief, reminding us how subjective processes are infinitely plastic, and molded out of contextual clay, but not necessarily determined exclusively by it. The social fabric transmits values, but cognitive dissonance undergirds our absorption of such values and narratives.

The case I am trying to make here is that it is to the filmmaker's credit that she does not settle for either end of the individual-society continuum, instead framing her protagonist as a woman traversed by both vectors: she's a singular individual and, simultaneously, a product of the body-politic surrounding her. "For Passoni," Ray Lobo suggests, "the anorexia of her youth was an interrelated experience tying her physical body to the abstract body politic" (2021). This is a perceptive formulation, which would also apply to the episode of Clara getting kicked out of school for kissing a girl, albeit accidentally. It is the nuns who problematize the accidental kiss, not the participants. Further, Lobo returns to inferred male presence in this film, by rightfully acknowledging the evocative nature of Passoni's aesthetics, which never shies away from implicating us viewers of whatever gender:

Ecstasy brought to mind one of Matteo Garrone's early works, *First Love (Primo Amore)*. In that film, the lead character transfers his obsessive psychopathology onto his girlfriend and makes her lose a lot of weight. This experimental cinematic undertaking may be an even more frightening depiction of anorexia because the anorexia is not exacted from some figure on the outside. It is imposed from the inside as a refusal against outside demands that demand conformity. That makes the anorexia depicted here all the more problematic and all the more tragic.

(Lobo, 2021)

I concur with Lobo that Passoni's formulation of a refusal to conform, as it is presented in the film, problematizes our experience of this text, but I stop short of naming it tragic. If we accept as universal that every human being struggles with the need to exercise control, to experience power and to self-determine, how is Garrone's plight any less tragic than Passoni's as Lobo proposes? Manipulation by a man over a woman, in his argument, features as a "transfer" of a pathological obsession. The mildness of his choice of words to describe an unfolding which essentially bears the consequence of one's pathology on another is telling and makes the girlfriend character collateral to his need to exercise obsessive control. I emphasize, I do not condemn Garrone's plot, I do hold Lobo accountable for his choice of words modulating the impact that the actions and words of a man can bear on his partner. The enemy within can be far more merciless and resilient, yet at no point does Lobo stop to recognize that the self-contained turmoil Clara lives with is ethical towards others, no one gets violated by her distortions but herself. A more generous and responsible reading of *Êxtase* might lead us to conclude that at a crucially disorienting moment—the entrance into an adulthood that is riddled with booby traps, the extreme exercise of self-control is a burdensome, yet viable coping mechanism, as good as any, that deserves more engagement than quick discounting.

One last oversight I'd like to touch on is how all the reviews mention menstrual blood and cycle disruptions caused by anorexia, but none of the reviewers make reference to how that passage into womanhood, also renders women an object of male interest and quantification. None of these reviewers mention the self-demeaning comment Clara makes regarding her growing breasts: a bump, an obtrusive, visible presence. Unlike less visible periods, breasts broadcast that body as womanly, plummeting it into the category of ready-for-male-consumption. This heightened visibility of their consumable bodies will also wane when, through force of aging or maternity, women return to the invisibility the protagonist claims to aspire to, that promise of boundless freedom, as tenuous as her facial skin against the jagged asphalt of the poster image. As *Êxtase* and its reception prove, women fall and rise from a terrain laid not by them.

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