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Making films under Salazar's gaze Cinematic representation of Lisbon in two popular comedies of the 1940s

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The debate around the films produced during the *Estado Novo* (*New State*)¹ has not been very frequent and deep in the Portuguese academy. In fact, that debate seems to have come to a halt since the publication of *O Cinema Sob o Olhar de Salazar* (*Film Under Salazar's Gaze*) coordinated by Reis Torgal (Torgal, 2001). The contributions to this volume are very important in general, and provide a great deal of information, analysis and interpretation which is fundamental for all those who wish to study Portuguese films produced between 1933 and 1974. However, I think that there is the need to reflect upon some of the conclusions drawn about the way ideology is present in those films, especially in the popular comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. That is the purpose of my paper: to re-launch the debate about the films produced under the dictatorship, focusing on the representation of Lisbon in those popular comedies.

Why this theme? In my opinion, the cinematic representation of Lisbon in general and of urban spaces in particular is an example of the limits of the interpretation proposed by Paulo Granja and other authors², which has been accepted, and has been reproduced as if it were the canonical interpretation for those films.

According to Granja (2001: 206-207), the cinematographic representation of Lisbon in popular comedies has hardly any relation to the sociological and urban realities of the Portuguese capital. The action in these films develops either in a small number of closed spaces located in the same neighbourhood (*The Tyrant Father* among other films), or in a single closed space, like the traditional Lisbon *pátios* (courtyards) (*The Courtyard of the Ballads*). The neighbourhood and the courtyard play the role of miniature villages, where everybody knows each other, which contradicts life in a big

¹ The *Estado Novo* was a dictatorial regime which was established in 1933, after seven years of military rule, and lasted to 1974. The main figure of the regime was its ideological father, and prime minister for thirty six years, António de Oliveira Salazar.

² See Tiago Baptista (2005:175) and (2010: 7) who essentially corroborates Paulo Granja's interpretation.

city where thousands of people live and do not know, and even do not want to know each other: “City folks in ‘Lisbon comedies’ live, work, and love just like the peasants in Invicta Film’s silent features” (Baptista, 2010: 7)³. In those films, the streets are rarely represented, but when they are their image is negative: a place for assault and robbery (*The Courtyard of the Ballads*), where fights take place (*The Tyrant Father*), or where the repressive presence of the police is felt.

My contention is that Lisbon was not always represented as an ideal(ized) closed space, in many ways similar to rural communities, but that it was the stage for the performance of acts that contradicted the official ideology through the use of metaphors, that the spaces produced in those films are unstable, and open to subversion. For that purpose, I will base my analysis on two of the most emblematic popular comedies, both produced in 1941: *O Pai Tirano (The Tyrant Father)*, by António Lopes Ribeiro, and *O Pátio das Cantigas (The Courtyard of the Ballads)*, by Francisco Ribeiro.

1. Context

Like other dictatorships of the time, the *Estado Novo* promoted film as a medium for propaganda and the ideological reproduction. However, and according to the assertion made by Salazar about the *originality* of the Portuguese regime, propaganda was said to fulfil a role of information and political education of the people, different from what was done in other countries, such as Italy and Germany. Propaganda was a way to consolidate the “faith of the believers” and to “convert the unbelievers” (Torgal, 2001: 66).

That is why Salazar invited António Ferro, a man connected with the irruption of Modernism in Portugal, an intellectual who was interested in the phenomenon of film, to be director of the *Secretariado da Propaganda Nacional (Bureau for National Propaganda)* in 1933. Although the Bureau had since 1935 a Film Section, film production was not directly controlled by the state. Before 1948, this section produced newsreels, documentaries and only one long feature, *A Revolução de Maio (The May Revolution)*, in 1937, an example of nationalist propaganda and of the presence of direct

³ Invicta Film was a company that produced films in the 1920’s. In those features, there was “a systematic absence of the city, or its representation in extremely detrimental terms. Almost like a ‘moral *hors cadre*’, the city is less a geographical space than a diffuse idea to which all evil and vice adhered. If nothing more, the city’s main purpose was to put the moral virtues of the countryside to the test, always asserting their superiority by the end of the film” (Baptista, 2010: 6).

ideology in a film produced during the *Estado Novo*. Only after 1948, did the state create the *Fundo do Cinema Nacional* (*National Film Fund*) to support the production of films that would express the official ideology and Ferro's *Politics of the Spirit*.

António Ferro's ideas were all for more literary adaptations and historical films, while he considered the popular comedies of the 1930s and 1940s as the "cancer of national cinema", in general being "rude, cheap and vulgar" (Ferro, 1950: 61-78). This aesthetic and ideological option clashed with audience preferences: most people enjoyed those comedies, which had very simple plots, good and famous actors, and appealed to the common women and men because the characters in the films were themselves common women and men facing problems that would be solved in anyway, in the end all would be well and harmony would be restored.

Although these films were not produced by any state agency, it does not follow that they would not convey the regime's ideology. These are examples of indirect or contextual ideology which can be found in their themes, in the social environment where the action takes place, and in the social moral they present (Torgal, 2001: 71). In the comedies produced during the 1930s and the 1940s, we can find the apology of social harmony, happiness in poverty, family, order, and a condemnation of those who wish to ascend socially at any cost (Granja, 2001: 200-205).

2. The cinematic representation of Lisbon

As I have mentioned before, some authors also consider that in these comedies the representation of urban spaces, and especially of a big city like Lisbon, reflects the opposition urban-rural that was already present in the silent movies period (Baptista, 2005: 175). The popular comedies produced under Salazar's regime would be nothing more than a medium to express an ideology that was suspicious of urban sociability and that wanted to use films to make the apology of the rural way of life.

I think this is a very limited and restrictive interpretation of films in general and of Portuguese popular comedies in particular. If we took for granted what those authors defend, it would seem that film directors, writers and producers had no ideas of their own, were totally subservient to the state, and that the control over Portuguese film production would have been complete. We know it was not so either in Portugal, or even in totalitarian states like Nazi Germany where the grip of the state over every

aspect of cultural production was stronger than in Salazar's dictatorship⁴. There is always the possibility to escape the official ideology, consciously or not, if not in an entire film, at least in some scenes or in the way a particular theme is treated. Besides, it is wrong to think that the power operates in the predictable manner implied in some readings of Foucault's work (Gregson, 2000: 442). I believe this is the case in two of the most emblematic popular comedies of the 1940s: *The Courtyard of the Ballads* and *The Tyrant Father*.

2.1 *The Courtyard of the Ballads*

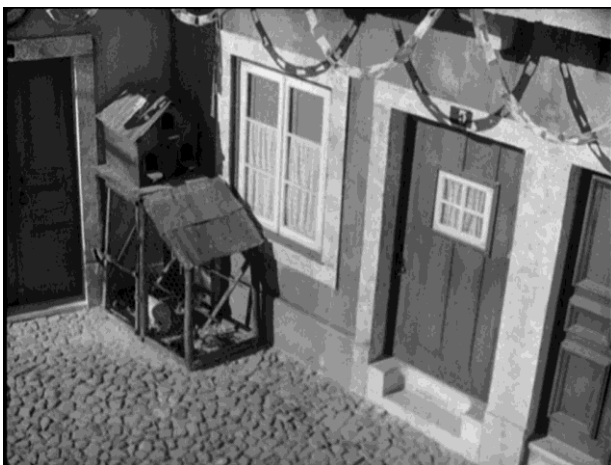
This film, directed by Francisco Ribeiro⁵, deals with the dreams, the passions, jealousy, the difficult and joyful moments of the inhabitants of a Lisbon *pátio* (courtyard)⁶: Alfredo, a good boy, whose brother, Carlos Bonito, dates the *fado* singer Amália, but is loved by her hard-working sister, Susana; Narciso, almost always drunk and guitar *virtuoso*, is the father of Rufino, his guardian and partner in a milk shop; Rosa, a widow and flower seller whose hand is disputed by Narciso and Evaristo, the owner of a small drugstore (Matos-Cruz, 2001: 382).

Everything in the film seems to confirm the dominant interpretation about the representation of Lisbon in this kind of comedies: the closed space, the restricted social network where affections dominate, just like in a small village (Granja, 2001: 207).

⁴ See, for instance, the difference between German films produced between 1933-1934, such as *SA Mann Brand*, *Hans Westmar* or Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*; and 1934-1945, "in which propaganda was toned down" (Tinker, 2003); and the aesthetical continuity between German expressionism and German films produced under the Nazi regime, that can be found, for instance in Riefenstahl's *Olympia* and *Heimat* (1938) starring Zarah Leander.

⁵ Francisco Ribeiro (1911-1984). Theatre actor since he was seventeen years old, and stage director since 1935, made some incursions in cinema, either as an actor, or as director. Professionally, he only directed *O Pátio das Cantigas* (*The Courtyard of the Ballads*) in 1941 and the documentary *As Rodas de Lisboa* (*The Wheels of Lisbon*) ten years later.

⁶ The *pátios* are small neighbourhoods where the houses, usually two or three storeys high, are built around a courtyard, which creates a private and almost closed space where you can enter or exit only through one gate or arch.



Evaristo's courtyard

However, there are some elements in *The Courtyard of the Ballads* that contradict this interpretation, and make us see that there can be slippages in the way an ideology is reproduced in a work of art.

The cinematic city is always a construction of the urban space. The director shows what he wants and how he wants. In this sense, there is a representation that can be at the service of a given ideological position about the city. It is clear that in *The Courtyard of the Ballads*, Francisco Ribeiro chose to represent a certain Lisbon, a popular Lisbon where traditional values persisted, evoking an almost pre-modern image of the city. Also the concentration of the action in only three places close to each other (the courtyard, Evaristo's drugstore, and Rufino's milk shop) reinforces the idea that the courtyard and its inhabitants are somehow cut away from the rest of the city. We know that Susana and her grandfather work somewhere in Lisbon, but we are never told exactly where or if they have to take any kind of transportation.



The drugstore and the milk shop

So, in *The Courtyard of the Ballads* the presence of Lisbon is almost limited to the courtyard itself and the neighbouring streets. These streets are silent, almost deserted spaces, where no one walks apart from the characters. The street is the supreme symbol of life in a metropolis (Name, 2003), but in this film it has a secondary role comparing to the centrality of the courtyard and the domestic spaces. It is here that most part of the action takes place, except for the scenes in the drugstore and the milk shop, and for one moment that introduces a dramatic stance in this comedy.



The street (1)

After collecting a huge sum of money (fifteen thousand *escudos*⁷), Mr. Heitor, Susana and Amália's grandfather who works in a bank, is robbed in a street in downtown Lisbon. The audience has no visual contact with this event, and everything we know is from Mr. Heitor's description. Later on the same day, Carlos becomes the

⁷ The *escudo* was the Portuguese currency from 1911 until 2001, when it was replaced by the euro.

main suspect of the crime, since he suddenly got enough money to make his project of going to Brazil with Amália come true.

Although we do not see the robbery, this incident is important as a sign of the dangers that are connected with life in a big city. This is a space where we can find pleasure and charm, but also real and immediate danger. The city is full of dangers that come from the modern means of transportation, from a hostile crowd, or from the chaotic day-to-day (Name, 2003). By introducing this robbery in the film, the director shows the negative side of the city but, at the same time, that Mr. Heitor is not alone because he can count on his family and his neighbours solidarity. It is possible to see here a criticism of urban environment as responsible for the nurturing of wrong values, which could be contradicted by upholding traditional values as a true alternative. These would be the values of friendship, brotherly love, union, simple life, popular culture and tradition which are the cement that keeps together the people who live in the courtyard.



Solidarity with Mr. Heitor

Tradition and popular culture are also present in the final scene of the film. When all the problems are solved, and the romantic couples are finally set (Amália-Alfredo, Susana-Carlos, Rosa-Narciso), the micro cosmos that the courtyard represents has reached a new harmony. Now it is time to celebrate St. John the Baptist's holiday. Significantly, it seems that the separation between the courtyard and the rest of the city is gone. With the triumph of love and friendship, happiness is all around and the courtyard becomes full of people who must have come from other places in Lisbon. This crowd leaves the space in a festive mood, singing and dancing, and takes to the streets in an orderly way. Through this performance, streets are redeemed as they become a place for joy and celebration, and no longer of danger. This double meaning

of the streets confirms the complex and uncertain character of performed spaces. These *stages* are only mapped out through performances, and that is how they come to exist as meaningful spaces. The streets are not ideologically charged until they are performed, but they are “performative of power relations” (Gregson, 2000: 441-442). So, when the crowd in *The Courtyard of the Ballads* sings and dances in the streets, it is taking over the space, making a statement about the meaning of the city streets as a *stage* for the expression of popular culture and of the people’s feelings.



The street (2)

It is thus hard to agree with the assertion that this film merely gives shape to an urban-rural dichotomy, or that its characters are similar to the peasants pictured in the silent movies of the 1920s. I think the film presents a conservative view of modern society, but without the nostalgia for the rural past that we can find, for instance in the American “romantic dis-urbanism” (Clapp, 2007: 603), or a strong criticism of urban

life such as it is possible to see in William Wyler's *Dead End* (1937)⁸. There are even some signs of modernity in the film, such as the presence of the radio, a reference to film, or the sound of a factory whistle. *The Courtyard of the Ballads* is, in fact, a film where the contextual ideology is present, but also where it is possible to find a different approach to the city from the one in the silent movies of the previous decades. The representation of Lisbon may be almost limited to the courtyard but, as I sought to demonstrate, it cannot be reduced to a "small village" reflecting the social order of the rural world.

2.2. *The Tyrant Father*

The Tyrant Father is a completely different film from *The Courtyard of the Ballads* in its setting, characters and story, making it even harder to accept the dominant interpretation of the popular comedies produced during the *Estado Novo*.

The film was directed by António Lopes Ribeiro, one of the most prolific and interesting directors and producers of the period⁹. The plot centres on the amateur theatre troupe *Grandelinhas*, whose members are clerks at the big department store *Grandela*. On the eve of the *première* of a new play entitled *O Pai Tirano* (*The Tyrant Father*), the group is called to help one of its actors, *Chico*, whose sentimental life is in a mess. Sociologically, the film is set around the lives and small dramas of *petit bourgeois* men and women, whose solidarity towards each other is underlined since they all are, in a sense or another, alone in this big city of Lisbon.

In a nut shell, *The Tyrant Father* tells the story of Francisco Mega (Chico), a theatre buff and a clerk in the shoe department of *Grandela*, who has a crush on Tatão, a

⁸ For the concept of "romantic dis-urbanism" I follow Clapp's definition: "a nostalgia for a pastoral, agrarian, small-town past that was not all that distant, particularly at the time the motion picture came into being. But before that there had long been a prevailing notion that the nonurban, natural environment was salutary and restorative of the true values and spirit of the country. Much of the literature of the nineteenth century, recounted stories of erstwhile farm girls and boys who had encountered the city, experiencing moral struggles and unfortunate circumstances that required a return to the roots of the rural environment for salvation" (Clapp, 2007: 603).

⁹ António Lopes Ribeiro (1908-1995). Francisco Ribeiro's older brother, António was a journalist since 1925, and founded the magazines *Imagem* (Image) in 1928, *Kino* in 1930, and *Animatógrafo* (*Animatograph*) in 1934. In 1929, he visited the most important European studios in Paris and Berlin, and went to Moscow where he met Eisenstein and Tziga Vertov. Lopes Ribeiro directed eight major films, produced six films between 1941 and 1946 with his company *Produção Contínua*, and directed the newsreels *Jornal Português* (1938-1951) and *Imagens de Portugal* (1953- 1958). Since 1957, he hosted a weekly television program, *Museu do Cinema* (*Cinema's Museum*), where he showed and talked about the classic silent movies.

cinema buff and a clerk at a perfume shop, who does not like him because they belong to the same social level. Chico has a rival in Artur de Castro, an apparently rich and gallant man, much more interesting to Tatão. In order to stay close to Tatão, Chico moves to her godmother's boarding house, and it is here that the plot thickens: while "master" Santana, the troupe's director, and Chico are rehearsing a scene from the play in his room, Tatão and her godmother, Emília, return from a film session and overhear what they believe is a dialogue between Francisco Mega and his father. They then come to think that Francisco is a nobleman who was thrown out of the family's home because of his passion for Tatão. Representing the type of the social climber, Tatão becomes much friendlier to Chico in the morning after, which he enjoys even though he eventually comes to know the reason for her different attitude. However, with the help of his colleagues in the troupe, Francisco Mega proves that Tatão really likes him. There was just one small problem to solve: she does not know he is a theatre actor. Although Artur makes everything to take Tatão from Francisco, the film naturally has a happy ending.

Considered by some "the most perfect Portuguese comedy" (Matos-Cruz, 2008: 53), *The Tyrant Father* is interesting, for once, due to this play-within-the-film structure. It contributes to the quality of the plot and underlines one of the questions in the film: theatre vs. film.

This question comes up once and again in the film, either because of the differences between Tatão and Chico, or when some of the characters express their views on it. For instance, "master" Santana grieves for the young people's growing interest on film and Clark Gable, and defines film as "the sham of the 'silver screen'". Tatão's godmother states she prefers the theatre, and that "the movies harm one's vision". Miss Emília and especially "Master" Santana represent those who had a biased opinion towards films, refusing to accept them as art. On the contrary, Tatão hates the theatre because there "it's all make believe...", while in film things were real. The illusion created by the analogical character of the image made Tatão, like many other people then, think that films were, not closer to reality, but reality itself. Her preference for film is based upon an extreme point of view which, probably, would find some echo in the audience of the popular comedies of the time.



Film vs. theatre

Besides this debate around the artistic value of theatre and film, there is a scene where the interior of a cinema is represented, showing Tatão and her godmother chatting while waiting for the session to start. This is a rare image in the Portuguese films of the time, underlining the urban habit of going to the movies, and the seductiveness of the new art.



At the cinema

Films had become an important part in many people's lives, especially of young women like Tatão who had the habit of buying magazines dedicated to the *stars*, and of telling her co-workers the plot of the last film she saw. It is through one of these conversations, in which she tells the story of *Kitty Foyle*, that we can understand Tatão's moral values, and ambitions¹⁰.

Talking about Kitty's choices, she criticises her for marrying Doctor Mark Eisen in the end, instead of keeping the socialite Wynn Strafford VI. She also likes best Dennis Morgan, the actor playing Wynn, which is not a surprise to one of her colleagues: "For you, that's enough that he's a millionaire", and Tatão answers back in irony she is saving herself for a poor man. This dialogue, as well as other scenes where Tatão confesses her wishes to get married and have a car, fur coats and jewels, show us that Tatão is a girl who wants to rise above her social condition, and that she values money more than feelings. That is why she at first prefers Artur to Francisco.

¹⁰ Even though the film's title is not mentioned in the dialogue, through the details Tatão gives in this conversation it is easy to understand she must be talking about *Kitty Foyle* (1940), directed by Sam Wood, starring Ginger Rogers, Dennis Morgan and James Craig. It is no wonder that Tatão only knew Ginger Rogers, since the other two main actors were not really *stars*. On the other side, when asked by a co-worker if Charles Boyer played the part of the millionaire, Tatão shows her knowledge about films by answering in a very firm tone: "That's a laugh! Charles Boyer doesn't even make movies with Ginger".



Tatão

Money is a leveller in society because it strips things out of their content and, therefore, of their unique value. If everything is evaluated according only to money regardless of their qualities, than everything in people's lives must be decided only according to quantitative factors. This power of money is characteristic of modernity, and that is why Georg Simmel wrote that it made people evaluate and calculate everything in quantitative terms, and reduce qualitative values into quantitative values. People become cynic and the intellect dominates passions, because money is now an end in itself and not a mere means anymore. For Simmel, if money was the "earthly god of modernity" then modernity naturally would be characterised by a lost of meaning (Simmel, 2004).

Tatão, although redeemed in the end, is an example of the loss of moral values motivated by the supreme value of money. She is, in fact, an urban and modern character that contributes to this representation of Lisbon. Characters and spaces constantly negotiate an associative relation made of disjunctions and conjunctions

(Gardies, 2008: 84). In this case, Tatão belongs to a Lisbon that is modern in the sense money was becoming a “god” for some people, but she is at odds with the traditional values that *The Tyrant Father* fostered.

This Lisbon is also very far from the “small village” theory I have been referring. Even the streets are now more present in this film than in *The Courtyard of the Ballads*. Once again the street has a negative sense, because it is there that Francisco and Artur start a fight over Tatão, but there is more to it in the film. It is wrong to reduce the presence of the street in *The Tyrant Father* to this scene like it has been done (Granja, 2001: 206-207).



The street (3)

The streets are also the setting for a marching band, for the hide and seek games of Francisco following Tatão to her job, for some of their dialogues, almost always showing an orderly and calm environment, but obviously an urban one at the level of what Lisbon was in the 1940s. The street is used as well as the place where the importance of film is once again shown through an interesting *mise en scène*: the film titles that we can see in the posters on the wall underline what Tatão and Francisco are saying about love and being modern¹¹.

¹¹ In this dialogue, Tatão makes a quite revealing definition of the modern man: he should enjoy going to the movies and to the beach, and he should not wear a hat.



The street (4)

Like in *The Courtyard of Ballads*, the film ends with a crowd in the street: due to a misunderstanding, the police and the firemen are called to the theatre where the *Grandelinhas* are performing. Since it was a false alarm and no one wanted to take the blame, the actors are taken to the police station and everyone, including the audience, goes down the street in a joyful mood: love had triumphed once again and life could go on in harmony.



The street (5)

To conclude, it is possible to have a different perspective about the popular comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. In this paper the main goal was to present a new way of reading and interpreting those films, through the example of two of the most significant films of the genre. It was not my intention to create a whole new theory. Besides, I do not think we should create theoretical frameworks where the interpretations of films have to fit in at any cost. Especially so when the films under interpretation are so different, as I hope I was able to show. Naturally you can find some similarities: the dominant social morality always triumphs in the end, virtue is rewarded and immorality is punished, you have to accept your place in society, and so on. However it is not the same Lisbon you can see represented in those two films. Beyond their differences I think it is possible to grasp a subverted presence of Lisbon, in the sense that in both films you can find some elements that escape the ideological frame imposed by the state. Either in *The Courtyard of the Ballads* or in *The Tyrant Father*,

Lisbon is not represented as a space where the rural social order is dominant, and the characters do not live, work and love like peasants, but they live, work and love like urban people in a country whose economy was not as developed as in other European countries of the time.

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