The *Retomada* and Beyond: Female Narrative Agency in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema (1997-2006)

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Abstract

Since the inception of film production in Brazil, women have been involved in all capacities including directing, acting and a variety of other roles behind the camera. During the 1990s and into the new millennium (a period sometimes termed the *Retomada* or re-birth of Brazilian cinema), there has been a large increase in films which feature notable female characters in prominent narrative positions and in the number of women directors successfully making their feature-length debut. Despite this, critical attention to such characters and directors, beyond a merely descriptive or numerical focus, is lacking and the established class-oriented social tradition remains the dominant language in criticism. With a view to addressing this relative critical neglect, as well as inadequacies in still embryonic studies, this study suggests new critical approaches relevant to the specificity of women’s experience in Brazil and analyses the representation of female characters in five representative films of the *Retomada* period. The study further aligns its predominant focus on female characters with the socio-political critical orientation that has established certain films as important cultural markers in Brazil, for example *Deus e o Diabo na terra do sol* /Black God, White Devil and *Cidade de Deus/City of God*. For this purpose, it again departs from the traditional emphasis on class and brings, rather, the specificity of the women’s movement in Brazil to bear. In order to critically assess how these specific contextual developments are reflected in the films analysed, it further distances itself from mainstream gender criticism in film and advances the use of the construct of agency, bridging Paul Smith’s notion of subject discerning and Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration. It also opens perspectives for future work by briefly engaging with the subject of female directors.
## Contents

**Acknowledgements** 2

**Abstract** 3

**Chapter One** - The *Retomada* and the Critical Neglect of Women in Brazilian Cinema 5

**Chapter Two** - The Brazilian Woman: Political, Narrative and Professional Agency 23

**Chapter Three** - The Brazilian Women’s Movement and Political Agency 66

**Chapter Four** - *O que é isso companheiro?* The Removal of Narrative Agency from the Militant Woman 97

**Chapter Five** - Initiating a Critical History: *Cabra Cega, Zuzu Angel* and the Militant Woman as Successful Agent 132

**Chapter Six** - Suggestions for a Critical Discussion: *Olga*, Agency and the *Telenovela* 165

**Chapter Seven** - Another Critical Angle: *As três Marias* and The Revenge Genre as Compromising Agency 197

**Chapter Eight** - Conclusion - Women in Brazilian Cinema: Hope for the Future 235

**Glossary of Terms** 240

**Works Cited** 244

**List of Photographs/Stills**

- Figure One - Maria instructs the MR8 how to fire a gun 107
- Figure Two - Comer sua comida é prova verdadeira de coragem revolucionária 108
- Figure Three - Final still from *O que é isso companheiro?* 113
- Figure Four - ‘Exilados’ 114
Chapter One

The *Retomada* and the Critical Neglect of Women in Brazilian Cinema

Introduction

Despite Brazilian film making its definitive mark on both the national and international scenes during recent years (most commonly termed the ‘*Retomada*’ of Brazilian cinema), and the marked increase of women within this context (both in terms of remarkable female protagonists and female directors), the critical neglect of women in *Retomada* cinema is pervasive. The situation is exacerbated due to the model primarily used to analyse cinema in Brazil which has a mainly social, class-based focus particularly developed by the *Cinema Novo* filmmakers and their critics. This has established a tradition that appears to bypass discussions of women’s subjectivity.¹

Added to this, emphasis on the inherent connection between film and its socio-political context, reflected in the narrative choices made by Brazilian directors over the years is often teased out by critics. This is seen in the overtly political films of *Cinema Novo*, epitomised in *Deus e o Diabo na terra do sol* (Glauber Rocha, 1964) which generated a wealth of material,² and in aesthetically innovative and politically pertinent films of the *Retomada* such as *Cidade de Deus* (Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002), which caused a critical storm.³ Partly as a consequence of this critical emphasis, these

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¹ This is discussed in more detail in ‘The Political Voice of Rosa in Glauber Rocha’s *Deus e o Diabo na terra do sol*’ (Shaw, 2005b).
² Including Rocha’s own *Revisão crítica de cinema brasileira* (1963), and the eponymous *Deus e o Diabo na terra do sol* (1965), *Sertão mar: Glauber Rocha e a estética da fome* (Xavier, 1983), *Cinema Novo X5: Masters of Contemporary Brazilian Film* (Johnson, 1984) and more recently *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (Xavier, 1995), *Brazilian Cinema* (Johnson and Stam, 1995), *Cinema brasileiro três olhares* (Marcos da Silva Graça, Sérgio Botelho do Amaral and Sônia Goulart, 1997), and *A poética políptica de Glauber Rocha* (Ventura, 2000), as well as *The New Brazilian Cinema* (Nagib, 2003). This list is far from exhaustive.
films are now recognised as important examples of Brazilian cinema, in the form of cultural markers that can comment upon the country’s social and political mood. Prominent female characters within these films, or films themselves which feature female narratives, are also important cultural markers. However, because the critical focus does not concentrate on such narratives, or on specific terminology relating to women (something which will be analysed in more depth in the following chapters), women’s filmic contribution to Brazil’s cultural and social history, or how social and political history has shaped how women are presented in films, has been obscured. This fragmented approach seems to challenge the idea that critically acclaimed cinematic waves such as the *Retomada* are innovative, revolutionary or politically representative.

Therefore, taking on board the limited work that has already been done on women in Brazilian film, this study proposes that the marked presence of notable female characters in prominent narrative positions in *Retomada* film, and the increase in the visibility of female directors, has not been sufficiently addressed by critics. Through the theory of agency, it will analyse where criticism has ignored female narratives altogether, or where criticism is totally absent, suggest critical approaches to be adopted. This will reveal the fundamental contribution women have made to the *Retomada* with a view to increasing critical attention to women in Brazilian cinema in general. Keeping in mind the inherent connection between film and its socio-political context, the study will identify this link by looking at the representation of women in film within the context of the activities of the Brazilian women’s movement. A broad spectrum of filmic agencies will be discussed in order to bring female characters the attention they have been lacking over the years. Women directors will also be briefly discussed in this study in order to highlight how, despite making a fundamental
Contribution to the *Retomada*, their critical appraisal remains descriptive rather than analytical. This, it is hoped, may generate more detailed future studies on women directors in Brazil.

As well as addressing the relative critical neglect of women in general in Brazilian film, the originality of this study also lies in addressing the critical position of the militant woman. Despite revealing herself as a fundamental part of Brazil’s political and social history (addressed in other disciplines such as the Social Sciences), the militant woman has not had her representation in film sufficiently discussed. Another element of originality is found in the use of the critical idiom of agency to discuss women’s political contribution in Brazil. As will be revealed in the next chapter, my use of the term, based on Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration and Paul Smith’s idea of ‘dis-cerning the subject’, avoids the myriad problems associated with a ‘feminist’ discourse and allows room for a more culturally specific discussion of the socially and ideologically varied activity of women in Brazil. Furthermore, my conception of agency also resolves the problems associated with certain Anglo-American/European studies of agency, which are over-reliant on a theory-rich model that risks removing women from their socio-political realities.

Details of my critical approach lie in selecting characters that begin their narrative lives in central positions, and in order to illustrate degrees of agency, studying characters using in-depth character analyses, concentrating on dialogue, costume, facial expression and body movement. This approach reveals that, although there are many examples of female narrative agency in Brazilian films, female characters are discussed merely as symbols or as an Other to the main male protagonist, rather than subjects in their own right.
I further argue that this approach is also increasingly necessary within the current context of the Brazilian film industry in general, whose films are now reaching the world via international distribution deals and co-productions and which have an increasing presence at international film festivals. The advent of DVD technology, which offers subtitle options, as well as the availability of films on internet shopping sites has also enabled a much wider dissemination of Brazilian film in recent years. In Britain, the dawn of digital and cable TV channels which dedicate part of their schedules to independent/foreign films, such as BBC Four, More Four and Film Four, also signify greater access to Brazilian cinema. The rise in the popularity of Brazilian Studies, and indeed Film Studies, at British universities also means Brazilian film is often the focus of scholarship and a key component of course syllabuses. If the issue of women in Brazilian film continues to be ignored by the critical world, the viability of Brazilian cinema along with its recently consolidated international reputation as a subject of study, is compromised when compared with the European, US and British industries, since they have an established body of criticism which includes the intersection of the female gender with film.

**Literature**

There is limited socio-historical gender analysis linked to studies of female characters in Brazilian film, and sustained analysis of female characters/directors in *Retomada* cinema, and how they challenge or bolster their positions in society, is rare. Most studies still tend to be statistical, pointing out numbers of women involved rather than presenting any discussion of the potential implications of women and film.⁴ However, there are a few relevant studies of women in Brazilian cinema worthy of mention. The

⁴ Although worthy of note is Tatiana Heise’s ‘Women of Brazil: (Mis)Contested Female Identities in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema’ (2006), an unpublished web-based conference paper which attempts to tie the social situation of Brazilian women into their representation in film.
first is the foundational work of Elice Munerato and Maria Darcy de Oliveira in *As musas da matinê* (1982) which was the result of the first ever research conducted on feature-length films directed by women. This study engages with the representation of female characters in films from the 1920s until the late 1970s.⁵

There is also David William Foster’s *Gender and Society in Contemporary Brazilian film* (1999), of which ‘Constructions of Feminine and Feminists Identities’ is the most pertinent chapter. It focuses on some seminal films from female directors which present landmark female characters. For example, *A hora da estrela/The Hour of the Star* (Suzana Amaral, 1985), *Eternamente Pagu/Eternally Pagu* (Norma Bengell, 1987), *Que bom te ver viva/How Nice to See You Alive* (Lúcia Murat, 1989) and *Carmen Miranda: Bananas is My Business* (Helena Solberg, 1994).⁶ Although these two important works analyse films outside my time period of interest and broach the issue of authorship (study of which would broaden the scope of this study too far), they are nonetheless a valuable contribution to acknowledging the specificities of women’s work and representation within the Brazilian context.⁷

A wide variety of texts are available on Retomada Cinema. For example, *The New Brazilian Cinema* (2003) and *O cinema da Retomada: depoimentos de 90 cineastas dos anos 90* (2002), both ed. by Lúcia Nagib, as well as Pedro Butcher’s *Cinema*

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⁵ An edited version of this study appears in Johnson and Stam’s seminal *Brazilian Cinema* (1995) as ‘When Women Film’. Another version can also be found in *Le cinéma brésilien* as ‘Muses derrière la caméra’ and additionally looks at films from the 1980s (Paranaguá, 1987).

⁶ Another notable article which briefly broaches the issue of gender in 1980s films is B. Ruby Rich’s ‘An/Other view of New Latin American Cinema’ which suggests the new social order of the 1980s gave rise to a cinematic ‘evolution’ from ‘exteriority to interiority’ within which women directors and ‘feminist ideas regarding behaviour, gesture, and pacing’ had a significant part to play. She also analyses, amongst others, *A hora da estrela* and *Que bom te ver viva* (1997: 273-297).

⁷ There are also a variety of journal, magazine, and newspaper articles to be found that concentrate on female film-related output in Brazil over the years. All of these works however look at women’s production outside of the *Retomada* time-frame and, as mentioned, are mainly statistical or descriptive in their approach. These include: ‘El cine de América Latina: entre feminización y discontinuidad’ (Paranaguá, 1999-2000), ‘Pioneras: o cinema feito por mulheres na América Latina’ (Paranaguá, 1992). Also the short pamphlet *Quase Catálogo 1 - realizadoras de cinema no Brasil (1930/1988)* ed. by Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda, Ana Rita Mendonça and Ana Pessoa (1989) as well as ‘Mulheres do cinema: a presença feminina na produção brasileira’ (Sereno, 1988).

Published material to be found which broaches the subject of women in Retomada cinema is however, rare. Two important exceptions are Luciana Corrêa de Araújo’s article ‘Retrospecto em fragmentos’ in Daniel Caetano’s 2005 volume, and Susana Schild’s ‘Cinema feminino, um gênero em transição’ (1998). Both discuss the increase in the numbers of female film directors during the 1990s, mentioning the wide variety of subjects addressed by these directors. However, even these studies fail to discuss women’s representation or their status as directors as a specific issue or as a necessary point of isolated criticism not simply subsumable into more general analyses of cinema.

Corpus

This is a study of female characters in prominent narrative positions: either the main, or one of the main characters, where they have the potential to control the direction of the narrative. Therefore films such as Tata Amaral’s Um céu de estrelas/A Starry Sky (1996), Através da janela/Through the Window (2000), and more recently Cidade baixa/Lower City (Sérgio Machado, 2005) and O céu de Suely/Suely in the Sky (Karim Ainouz, 2006) are not included, because they show women in positions of alterity, for example as prostitutes, victims or ‘accessories’ in patriarchal narratives. As such, other films that show women as victims of physical/psychological violence and neglect, or

³ Worth an additional mention is Ismail Xavier’s much cited interview in Praga magazine ‘O cinema brasileiro dos anos 90’ (2000) and Eduardo Escorel’s ‘Os adivinhadores de água’ (2002).
as migrants or slum dwellers will not be included. Such films, which see women as an Other in a male story, risk the symbolic or allegorical analysis which has characterised Brazilian film criticism particularly since the time of Cinema Novo. As part of the originality of this study, I wanted to move away from this more familiar angle. Also, whilst such films are valuable sources of gender criticism, their number would justify another study.

Lúcia Murat’s fictional documentary *Que bom te ver viva* (1989), which observes how women tortured and imprisoned during the dictatorship have reconstructed their lives, merits special mention here. It is perhaps the only film wholly dedicated to representing the specific experience of being a woman militant during the dictatorship and provides the opportunity to bridge the critical gap between socio-political and filmic representations of women. As such it will be briefly looked at in chapter two. However, this film will not be included in the corpus of films chosen for in-depth study. As well as being out of the Retomada time frame and briefly studied (see David Foster’s and B. Ruby Rich’s chapters), it is impossible to fully analyse this film without going deeper into the issue of authorship. This is because the film is semi-autobiographical and partly based on the director’s own experiences of imprisonment and torture during the dictatorship. Again, this is beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, this film is a documentary and in order to keep this study focused and terminable it only deals with feature-length films designed for the commercial market. This also precluded other documentaries as well as short, medium and experimental films.

Works such as the 1995 hit *Carlota Joaquina - princesa do Brasil/Carlota Joaquina - Princess of Brazil* (Carla Camurati, 1995) or films that deal with the native Brazilian woman such as Murat’s *Brava gente brasileira/Brave New Land* (2000), would have
broadened the historical spectrum too far. In addition, films released after the finalisation of the corpus, for example Tata Amaral’s *Antonia* (which was released in Brazil in March 2007), are also not included.\(^9\) Within these parameters the most pertinent examples of female agency revealed themselves in films directed by men. Although this may seem paradoxical in fact it is irrelevant in a study that deals with critical neglect rather than authorship.

The films that make up the final corpus are: *O que é isso companheiro/Four Days in September* (Bruno Barreto, 1997), *As três Marias/The Three Marias* (Aluizio Abranches, 2002), *Olga* (Jayme Monjardim, 2004), *Cabra cega/Blind Man’s Bluff* (Toni Venturi, 2004) and *Zuzu Angel* (Sérgio Rezende, 2006).

As mentioned, all the films chosen are feature-length films designed for the commercial market and include notable female characters in prominent narrative positions. *O que é isso companheiro* was nominated for an Oscar in 1997 and is easily available to purchase, having been released on VHS and then DVD. *Cabra cega* was also on general release in DVD format. *Zuzu Angel* and *Olga* (which had its UK premiere at the Barbican Brazilian film festival in 2008) were both co-produced by media giant *Globofilmes*, which has facilitated availability. Released on DVD by Gala Films, its UK distributor, the film’s British coverage was also supported by the digital channel BBC Four, and was shown on the network in July 2006. *As três Marias* was shown in London at the film festival in 2002 and was also on release in the UK during 2004. The DVD is marketed in English and available to buy on the internet. It was also shown on BBC Four in 2006.

\(^9\) Apart from those mentioned above, there are many more films featuring notable women that may make for interesting analyses but did not make it into my corpus. For a comprehensive list of films of the *Retomada*, including those directed by women, see *Cinema brasileiro 1995-2005: ensaios sobre uma década* (Caetano 2005: 339-351).
To address further the issue of comparability, I studied four films connected by their concentration on militant women: three are set during the dictatorship of 1964-1985, (O que é isso companheiro, Zuzu Angel and Cabra cega), and one (Olga), during the attempted Communist coup of 1935, both key moments in Brazilian political history. It is important to reiterate here that analysis of militant women in film is crucial to this study in that it not only explores uncharted territory, but also serves to highlight the critical gap, earlier cited, between female political activity and its representation in film. By looking at what militant women have contributed to the Brazilian women’s movement, which will be later outlined, and to society in general, and by seeing how many varied forms of female agency exist in this context, we will see the extent to which the study of this topic has been sidelined.

Structure

The study will begin with a chapter explaining the theoretical and conceptual framework used to analyse the films of the corpus and will include an explanation of the key terms used. Some of this terminology will then be applied to the thoughts and activities of four prominent Retomada filmmakers in Brazil though an analysis of interviews conducted with them in 2007. In order to address the hypothesis that film analyses must be sufficiently contextualised, a socio-political contextualisation charting the development of the Brazilian women’s movement during the significant periods of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and beyond, will take up chapter three.

Chapter four analyses two female characters in Bruno Barreto’s O que é isso Companheiro? It will argue that presenting the two main female protagonists, Maria

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A glossary of key terms used throughout this study can be found at the end of the thesis.
and Renée, as split between two excluding binaries has negative repercussions which require further insight. Chapter five analyses two other films that also sit within the context of the recent dictatorship, *Cabra cega* and *Zuzu Angel*. These films can be contrasted with *O que é isso companheiro* representing as they do a positive articulation of narrative agency. More specifically, the women in these two films, and in particular Rosa of *Cabra cega*, represent how the militant woman can simultaneously hold a variety of different positions whilst remaining a unified character, rather than being fragmented or divided between two excluding binaries.

Chapter six will deal with the main character of the eponymous *Olga*, this time situated within the context of the Vargas Regime and the attempted Communist Revolution of 1935. This chapter will argue that Olga’s position as a viable narrative agent is again compromised due to a fragmentation of character. In this film it is the *telenovela* production techniques that serve to divide her between a sentimental mother/lover and a soldier devoid of human emotions.

Chapter seven takes a slightly different approach but nonetheless teases out the critical potential of a film which makes a study of four notable female characters in prominent narrative positions. *As três Marias* presents a more ambiguous representation of women and challenges the genre of the revenge tragedy as one that can emancipate women. It argues that although the women characters are perceived, and in fact intended, to be emancipatory by their director, a rigorous critical appraisal reveals an inherently (unintended) patriarchal agenda.
The *Retomada*

*Retomada* has become the word *par excellence* used to describe the upturn in the production and release of feature-length films designed for the commercial market in Brazil during the 1990s, following one of the most challenging periods of national production. Although the term has become over-used in recent years and some critics deny its relevance, it is useful in that it defines a specific cycle in Brazilian film history within a particular time period.\(^{11}\) For the purposes of this study I will provide an outline of the *Retomada*’s main characteristics and how these are relevant to my analysis.

First, the time frame ‘*Retomada* and Beyond’ perhaps needs further clarification. According to most critics and commentators the film that opened the *Retomada* was Carla Camurati’s *Carlota Joaquina - princesa do Brasil* (1995), and for some such as Nagib, writing in 2003, ‘contemporary cinema in Brazil cannot be called a ‘renaissance’ any longer, for it has established itself on a stable productive basis’. However, Nagib also acknowledges that ‘the rich experience of the 1990s […] will certainly bear fruit for many years to come’ (xxvi). Luiz Zanin Oricchio in his book *Cinema de novo*, also takes the starting point as *Carlota Joaquina*, which he states ‘funciona como espécie de marco zero da Retomada brasileira’ (2003: 26). He later describes the period as being closed by the box-office hit *Cidade de Deus* (156). Therefore his time-frame seems to cover a period from 1995-2002. Daniel Caetano describes a ‘decade of cinema’, spanning 1995-2005. Pedro Butcher is less clear about his time-frame, although his book spans 1992 until 2005. It seems logical, then, that my study, which spans 1997-2006, take the title ‘*Retomada* and Beyond’. Furthermore, as this study does not intend to end but to begin the wider discussion of women and

\(^{11}\) In fact, some struggle even to use *Retomada* as a valid term for Brazilian cinema during the period in question, simply seeing it as a decade of cinema impossible to define (Caetano and others 2005: 11).
Brazilian film, the idea of ‘beyond’, that is, beyond simply looking at women in *Retomada* cinema, is employed.

It was during the period of the Collor de Mello government, the first democratically elected government to follow the twenty-five year military dictatorship, when the Brazilian state film company *Embrafilme*, was shut down. State funding for films effectively ceased and national film production was to hit an all-time low. Although a complex combination of factors was involved in the film industry’s collapse, it was ultimately the measures of this government, that ceased all state funding for cultural production as part of its neo-liberal political campaign, which can be seen to be responsible for some of the worst years in the history of Brazilian film. As Randal Johnson explains:

In early 1990, shortly after taking office as Brazil’s first democratically elected president in 30 years, Fernando Collor de Mello terminated, in the name of a neo-liberal economic agenda, a federal cultural policy that had developed somewhat irregularly since the 1930s. The film industry was particularly hard hit, because it had become almost entirely dependent on the state for production financing […] Suddenly finding itself without support, production collapsed and Brazilian cinema virtually disappeared from the domestic film market (2005: 17-18).

The production ‘renaissance’ was bought about by a variety of factors. Most commonly cited are the combination *Rouanet* and *Lei Audiovisual* (1991 and 1993 respectively), and also a change in government (Itamar Franco 1992-1995, Henrique Cardoso 1995-2002). The approval by congress of the *Lei do Incentivo à Cultura* (*Lei Rouanet*) in 1991 allowed business tax credits to be used for investments in cultural projects, including those of an audiovisual nature. Next came the 1993 *Lei Audiovisual* that allowed public and private companies to invest a proportion of their income tax in audiovisual projects, running little risk and providing the potential to make a profit. It also allowed foreign film distributors ‘to invest up to 70% of their income taxes in
national film production’. These laws helped to fund, in part, most cinematic projects from 1993 onwards (Johnson 2005: 20). Meanwhile Franco, who took over Collor’s mandate after he was impeached for corruption in 1992, developed the Prêmio Resgate do Cinema Brasileiro in 1993, in a more short-term initiative. This constituted a series of prizes that redistributed what was left of Embrafilme’s funds via public competitions, helping to distribute thirteen million reais to ninety audiovisual projects, including short, medium and feature-length films (Butcher 2005: 20, Nagib 2003: xvi-xviii).

Although the Retomada had no unifying philosophy, mantra, or political commitment, unlike Cinema Novo for example, there are in fact some common characteristics to be identified during this time period. In terms of the need for further discussion of women in Retomada criticism, it is important to examine some of these. For example, in addition to the work of veteran directors from the time of Cinema Novo, such as Cacá Diegues, Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Ruy Guerra (who themselves departed from the old themes of Cinema Novo), the Retomada also signalled the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers making their debut in feature-length films. Between 1995 and 2005 over one hundred feature-length debuts were made (Butcher 2005: 39). Pertinently an increased number of these debuts were made by women.

As mentioned, the re-emergence of feature-length films in Brazil is marked by Carlota Joaquina - princesa do Brasil. Although considered a landmark film for various reasons, perhaps most significant to mention here is Camurati’s professional achievement as a female first time director. Not only did she research, write and direct the film herself, she also received no help from the incentive laws, which were still very much in their infancy. She did receive money from the Prêmio Resgate do
Cinema Brasileiro but the onus was on her to capture all the funds for her film which had to be made in sections due to constant cash-flow difficulties (Nagib 2002: 146). Camurati served as an inspiration, not only to women, but to all filmmakers who were struggling to make films in a time of economic and cultural austerity. Indeed the film reflects these difficulties: it is crudely produced in places but its creativity in telling so rich a story with so few resources is remarkable. That the film is a comedy also signified Camurati contributing to a rare phenomenon: women directing in the comedy genre. This was to become an important Retomada trend which Sandra Werneck, amongst others, continued, in her telling of urban middle-class relationships in Pequeno dicionário amoroso/Little Book of Love (1997) and Amores possíveis/Possible Loves (2001) (Araújo 2005: 159).

In fact, despite men going on to dominate the resurgence, women made up an impressive part of Retomada filmmakers. What is more, their presence in my time sphere of ‘beyond’, that is post-2003, is becoming increasingly clear. Susana Schild briefly broaches this significant female participation in her article on female presence in the industry during the early part of the period. She explains that, after 1993, fifty films had reached the commercial market, one fifth of which were made by women. Almost two thirds of these were by first-time, feature-length directors (1998:125). To confirm these statistics, Luciana Corrêa de Araújo describes that from when the first female-authored film was noted, up until 1985 only twenty-five feature-length films had been made by women. However, during the decade of 1990 alone thirty-six films had been produced.12 She describes this as a trend that continued: ‘Nos anos 2000 o ritmo se manteve, até mesmo com a pequena elevação em relação a década anterior,

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12 Araújo uses data produced by Elice Munerato and Maria Helena Darcy de Oliveira in ‘Muses derrière la caméra’ (1987), an article taken from their original book As muses de mâtine (1982). She points out that information about the number of films authored by women in the 1990s is taken from a comprehensive list of feature-length films which can be found in Cinema Brasileiro- anos 90: 9 questões (João Luiz Vieira, Eduardo Valiente and Ruy Gardiner, 2001).
variando entre 20% e 25% da produção anual que chega aos cinemas’ (2005: 157). On analysing one of the many lists of films found in most books on the *Retomada*, in this case Pedro Butcher’s *Cinema brasileiro hoje* (2005), the year 1996 seems a particularly good year for women filmmakers. For example, five out of the seventeen films of that year were made by women (this constitutes almost one-third), and of the two hundred and sixty-nine films listed (1993-2004), forty-three are directed by women. Additionally, five are co-directed, one of these featuring two women. Daniel Caetano’s list, beginning in 1995 and ending in October 2005, documents three hundred and fifty-seven films, fifty-nine directed by women, nine co-directed, one of these featuring two women (2005: 339-351).\(^{13}\) In his article *El cine de América Latina: entre feminización y discontinuidad* (1999-2000), which gives a more or less chronological picture of the increased female presence in the Latin American film industry, Paulo Antônio Paranaguá gives some interesting statistics, revealing that at least 10 female directors in Brazil made their first feature-length film during the 1990s (48).\(^{14}\) However interesting, this statistical analysis into the work of female directors in Brazil is lacking in substance. Although not the main subject of this thesis, my study highlights the need to look further into this issue.

As well as the marked presence of female directors during this time, other common themes can be identified. For example, as the word *retomar* indicates, this period also signalled to some extent, a continued dialogue with the past. This manifested itself in

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\(^{13}\) His list is somewhat misleading in that under the October 2005 heading there is some repetition (at least 5 films are mentioned under other years). This is not explained, but it could correspond to films that were re-released.

\(^{14}\) He describes that the problem of calculating female filmic participation in Brazil is that the feature-length film is considered the ‘holy grail’ of cinema. However, he argues, in order to get a real picture of the ‘feminization’ of the profession, we must take into account the short and medium-length films made by women, totalling four hundred and thirty-eight during the years 1970 to 1988, against the mere forty-one long and medium-length films combined, made in the previous seventy years (1999-2000: 48).
the re-emergence of certain key themes and issues previously explored in Brazilian film such as the common loci of the favela and the sertão. As Lúcia Nagib explains:

In this way, the promise of a new cinema gives way to a reverence for the cinema of the past. This gesture, incidentally, is typical of the Brazilian Cinema of the 90s, which is constantly paying homage to classics and veterans. As soon as the results of the Audio-visual law – the key factor in the recent cinematic ‘rebirth’ – started to appear in the mid 90s, there came a torrent of films about the north-eastern sertão (arid backlands) and the cangaço (the activity of the outlaws in the sertão), a combination which constitutes the most recurrent genre in Brazilian Cinema in all periods’ (2003: 158)

Another revisited theme was the search for national affirmation and identity, perhaps epitomised in Walter Salles’ 1998 classic Central do Brasil/Central Station. When talking about the concept of Retomada, with reference to literature, Simis and Pellegrini make an interesting point that they link to the cinematic tradition in Brazil:

Desde as suas origins, existe na literatura brasileira um retorno constante e cíclico ao impulso de buscar uma identidade, como forma de superar as raízes européias. Essa busca percorreu caminhos diversos, mas perseguiu sempre um objetivo bem definido: a familiaridade do conhecido, das raízes que assegurassem permanência e continuidade. Com efeito, essa constante “retomada” corresponderia a uma necessidade de descobrir uma forma de expressão que garantisse a ilusão da integridade de uma cultura verdadeiramente nacional, inclusive levando em conta a interação de elementos diversos e o número inesgotável de condicionantes históricos (1998: 6)

Such insecurities about a viable national culture also characterise the cinematic Retomada, and the need for national re-affirmation in a climate of international cultural domination is pertinent. Indeed with the emergence of new film languages, films influenced by Television and new digital media, came a polemical discussion about Brazilian cinema’s national responsibilities. The critic Ivana Bentes led this debate with her argument on the ‘cosmetics of hunger’, turning Glauber Rocha’s famous ‘aesthetics of hunger’ philosophy on its head in order to make a point about what she saw as the aestheticisation of poverty in new Brazilian films (Bentes 2003:
The recent hit film *Cidade de Deus* has been at the centre of this debate, acquiring as it did a new international relevance when it was taken on by Miramax and labelled under Anglophone marketing slogans such as ‘The Brazilian *Goodfellas*’ which led, in part, to a misreading of the film’s national and social relevance (Shaw, 2005a). The film epitomises the perennial problem of what constitutes a viable ‘national’ product.

Another key element of the *Retomada* came to be its production of internationally successful films. For example, *Central do Brasil* was nominated and won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1998 and Lúcia Nagib explains how the renaissance in Brazil was just part of a wider new trend of launching Latin American cinema to the world: ‘Apart from *Central do Brasil*, many other recent Brazilian films – such as *O que é isso, companheiro?* […] – were released worldwide, starting a new market trend set in a wider frame of Latin American film revivals in the 1990s, which includes Argentina and Mexico as well as Brazil’ (2003: xviii). Although not a main point of research here, it is noteworthy that in the case of *O que é isso, companheiro?*, as is suggested in chapter four, the film’s international production values may have led, in part, to the compromising of the representation of its (particularly female) characters.

It is revealing, if we look at the literal meaning of the word *retomar*, as defined by Pedro Butcher, that during this time period we see a return to, or rather a continuation of a concentration on issues of class, politics, economics, society and national identity without intersecting any of these with insightful discussions of women. *‘Retomada’* in this context, then, also means a failure to progress, and perhaps a desire to look to the past, not the future:

> É preciso entender a palavra “retomada” naquilo que ela diz em seu sentido literal: retomar algo que foi interrompido. O que é muito diferente de um

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15 For further insights into the ‘aesthetics of hunger’ and Rocha’s work see Bentes (2002).
renascimento, por exemplo. Não se retoma algo que morreu, mas sim algo que já tem uma história, ainda que inconstante e turbulenta (2005: 14-15).

To consolidate this view of the Retomada as betraying its rhetorical promise of hope and progression, it is worth returning to the opening chapter of Cinema brasileiro which defines the Retomada as simply a ‘decade of cinema’:

Nestes dez anos, como há muitos não víamos, o cinema brasileiro não construiu uma cinematografia sólida, embora tenha produzido muitos filmes. Não promoveu a circulação de obras, mas aumentou a variedade de formas. Revelou novos talentos, mas não teve qualquer objetivo agregador que oferecesse caminhos comuns a uma nova geração. Não delineou movimentos estéticos – ao menos não nos moldes que permitiriam uma condensação histórico-critica –, mas vestiu a máscara ideológica de “retomada”. Não haverá, portanto, um nome para este cinema. Tampouco um rosto. Sem nome e sem rosto, assim se passaram estes dez anos da história do cinema brasileiro (Caetano and others 2005: 11).

 Whilst explaining what did and did not occur cinematically during the period 1995 to 2005 in Brazil and how the ‘ideological mask’ know as the Retomada was inappropriate for such non-descript activity, the authors neglect to mention an additional ‘non occurrence’ that fits perfectly into this ‘indefinable’ period: the importance of women during this time. Therefore, by concentrating on the representation of female narrative agency in Retomada cinema, within the wider context of female agency in society, I hope to take the first step in making this issue more of a critical priority.
Chapter Two

The Brazilian Woman: Political, Narrative and Professional Agency

Introduction

Whilst the established class-oriented critical focus predominant in Brazilian film criticism was to be avoided in this study, I also wanted to avoid using the term ‘feminism’ in my analyses of women in Brazilian Retomada film. The problems associated with this term are in fact manifold. First, it is too general a term to describe the myriad activities of the Brazilian Women’s movement, where, as Sonia Alvarez describes ‘feminist groups are but one segment of a politically and socially heterogeneous Brazilian women’s movement’ (1990: 25). Second, it is a term grounded in academic discourse, where women’s activism is discursively addressed. Therefore, it is not relevant to the many women in Brazil who, despite supporting women’s political and social emancipation, prioritise action over a gender-specific discourse. In fact, as we shall see in the next chapter, much female political activity in Brazil, that of the poor and working-classes for example, is characterised by women acting in response to a quotidian reality, rather than in order to advocate ‘women’s rights’. Thirdly, for some, it is an anachronistic term which speaks of the activities of a former generation of women. Fourthly, it is perceived to be the preserve of white middle-class women. Finally, and linked to all of the above, is that, rightly or wrongly, feminism retains a strong association with Anglo-American and European (Western) manifestations of the word. In terms of this last point, as part of the originality of this study and to further address the critical impasse outlined in the introduction (which required me to look at women in Brazilian film within their particular socio-historical context), I wanted to avoid using the feminist theoretical canon of the European, US
and UK academies, which would transplant an historically inappropriate model to the Brazilian context.

As the study progressed the need to question the relevance of the term ‘feminism’ in terms of the lived realities of the Brazilian women I was looking at, both in film and as part of my socio-political contextualisation, became ever more pertinent. In March 2007, misgivings about the term were mostly confirmed when I conducted a series of interviews with Retomada filmmakers Helena Solberg, Lúcia Murat, Rita Buzar and Laís Bodansky. Amongst the many important contributions to come out of these interviews was the extent to which they questioned, in varying degrees, the term ‘feminism’ and the relevance of using such terminology in the twenty-first century, tending to associate the term with the radical and anachronistic roots of second-wave feminism from which they obviously felt far removed.16 Notwithstanding this reluctance, a commitment to championing women’s social and political emancipation was clear in their films and their approach to filmmaking.

In order to address the mainly practical rather than theoretical nature of female political activity in Brazil, this thesis adapts the idiom of agency for this purpose. This term, originally a staple of the Social Sciences, has been at the centre of a Humanist/Structuralist dialectic of late. In the foreword to Narratives of Agency (Self-Making in China, India, and Japan) Wimal Dissanayake explains:

The question of human agency has been framed on humanistic writings largely by two distinct theoretical discourses, namely those of liberal humanism, which stresses the autonomous agent, and structuralism, which disperses the agent in the play of textuality. According to the liberal humanist understanding, the agency is transhistorical, transdiscursive, sovereign, self-transparent, and self-identical, and is the originator of action and the locus of truth. In their desire to focus on a transcendent essence of the human, the liberal humanists ignore cultural differences and the role of social formations and ideological discourse in the constitution of agency. The structuralists (and post-structuralists, as well,  

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16 It is interesting to note that the term was most accepted by Helena Solberg who had lived and worked in the USA during the 1970s when Radical Feminists had made history with their groundbreaking claims and activism.
Despite their other differences) posit a decentred agency that is determined by the power of discourse and the interpellative force of ideology (1996: xii-xiii).

However, the work to emerge from the tackling of this dialectic has proved to be the most effective in discussing the political activity of women in Brazil. This thesis will therefore create, from Paul Smith’s notion of subject discerning and Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration, a model of agency which, whilst it clarifies the complexities associated with the term ‘feminism’ in Brazil, also addresses the Humanist/Structuralist dialectic and the removal of women subjects from their socio-political contexts.

This chapter begins by providing more evidence of how feminism, in both its Brazilian and Anglo-American/European manifestations, is inappropriate when studying the activities of women and Brazilian film.\(^{17}\) Supplementing this, the next section will document and analyse interviews with four prominent *Retomada* filmmakers. The operational concepts of narrative and political agency will then be discussed. The chapter then finally returns to the women directors and analyses their gendered roles within the perspective of a final concept, professional agency.

**Rejecting a Feminist Discourse**

Although an overview of feminism is beyond the scope of this study, some brief insights into its historical meanings will help to clarify part of its reception both in Brazil and more generally. Toril Moi cites Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as being the most widely acknowledged literary indicator of second-wave feminism in America, concentrating as it did on woman’s dissatisfaction with her position in post-war American society (Moi 2002: 21). This dissatisfaction stemmed from women’s experiences within the Civil Rights and New Left movements which,\(^{17}\) However, the term will be used throughout this study to describe some elements of female political activity in Brazil and the rest of the world.
whilst advocating democratic rights routinely ignored the rights of women and gave them limited political visibility. This is something which, as we shall see, was also one of the catalysts to much female mobilization in Brazil. This re-evaluation was also a consequence of women’s increased participation in liberal society, the result of the actions of first-wave feminists who had gained for women a new political visibility. An increase in women gaining access to higher education and employment was also a contributing factor to their increased politicization (Humm 1992: 3, 54). In America Maggie Humm cites the example of the criterion of gender being added to Title 7 of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 ‘which prohibited discrimination in employment, and the Act was enforced by an Equal Opportunity Commission’ (1992: 3). In Britain women similarly mobilised in reaction to the gender blindness of New Left organisations such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. The militant mobilisation of women workers in the Ford strike of 1968 was an ‘additional […] inspiration’ (Humm 1992: 5-6). By the end of the 1960s therefore women were beginning to create their own political organisations as a reaction to the limited scope of the existing civil rights movements. These women were, in Moi’s words, ‘politically committed activists who were not afraid to take a stand and fight for their views’. She continues, ‘the link between feminism and women’s struggle for civil rights and peace was not a new one, nor was it coincidental’ (2002: 21). Again, as we shall see, this was not confined to America and Great Britain. Brazil’s women were also to be instrumental in the struggle for civil rights, during the dictatorship in their own country.

The actions of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) as it became known in both America and Great Britain differed from first-wave feminism in its all-encompassing ideology but particularly in its concentration on reproductive rights and the ubiquity of
patriarchy, as posited by Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970). This idea of ‘reproduction’ was linked not only to women’s ‘biological fate’ but was later also developed by Socialist/Marxist feminists to mean ‘political and ideological work’.\(^{18}\)

However, second-wave feminism also shared first-wave feminism’s goals of ‘legal, educational and economic equal rights for women’ (Humm 1992: 4, 53-54). The WLM in America comprised such radical groups as the New York Redstockings, who campaigned for reproductive rights, and Betty Friedan’s own National Organisation of Women (NOW) who campaigned for a variety of radical social policies such as educational and legal reforms, later developing policies for abortion on demand, nurseries, and gay rights (Humm 1992: 4).

These new women’s organizations also rejected the hierarchical nature of men’s political groups and gave emphasis to ‘small anti-hierarchical consciousness-raising groups, organised and acting independently of men with a preference for direct action and alternative patterns’ (Humm 1992: 4). Indeed, Consciousness Raising (CR) was a major part of early second-wave feminism and is the subject of Messer-Davidow’s chapter on agency in Judith Gardiner’s volume:

The educational purpose of CR groups was to show women that their personal problems had social causes and therefore political solutions. The organizational purpose was to separate them from Left political movements and bourgeois male-centred households in order to integrate them as an independent women’s movement. Necessarily emphasizing women’s commonalities – the categorical oppression they suffered and their collective interest in opposing it – the CR process was supposed to bind them in “sisterhood,” thereby reconstituting those subjected to patriarchy as feminist agents who would oppose it (1995: 37).

However, the radical nature of these new women’s groups, which advocated women-only solutions to the collective problems of the female gender, presented problems for liberal society and had consequences in terms of the perception of women-centred

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\(^{18}\) This quotation, as cited by Humm (1992: 54) is from Barrett (1979: 74). Unfortunately Humm provides no further bibliographical details.
politics. It is perhaps a testament to how society deals with women’s overt politicization that it is almost universally accepted that bras were burnt at the 1968 Miss America demonstration when in reality they were, in Humm’s words ‘trashed’ (1992: 4). Indeed the apparent separatist tendency of these early women’s groups was controversial and seized upon by those who feared this militant articulation of women’s rights to be a threat to the moral order. Consequently these women were often labelled as mad, ‘butch’ man-haters (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004: 50). However, the activities of these radical women were largely misunderstood and perhaps ahead of their time. Unfortunately the active woman as *agent provocateur* remains for many as the enduring image of ‘feminism’. That this image endures however is not so much a reflection on the people who hold it, but is perhaps a consequence of a more universal, inherent fear of active women. Indeed, ‘trashing’ bras and advocating abortion in the late 1960s was almost impossible for American society then to accept, and the ideology of Radical Feminism, had its aims been fully implemented, presented a significant threat to liberal society. Despite feminism now encompassing the plural experiences of women, for many unfamiliar with academic discourse the term continues to be most associated with these women of the Cultural Revolution or at the very least, is seen as an anachronism, especially when many issues such as abortion, contraception and equal pay have, to some extent, been addressed.

During this earlier period the focus was clearly on the similarities rather than the differences between women and their shared experiences as a group under the weight of patriarchy. However, such groups were eventually to come under fire from those who objected to this generalisation regarding women’s experiences. Challenges came particularly from Black and ethnic minority feminists who took these women to task for failing to acknowledge that their arguments were based on a White middle-class
conception of ‘woman’. During the 1980s and 1990s, what is sometimes termed ‘third-wave feminism’ a focus on difference, particularly the wider inclusion of ethnic minority feminist discourses, has been the priority. Christina Hughes summarises:

Wollstonecraft argued that women shared a common humanity with men. This no-difference position was challenged by gynocentric second-wave feminism. This sought to reaffirm women’s difference from men. In so doing it was claimed that the goal of equality upon which the first difference was based was illusory and masked a phallocentric logic. Nevertheless, poststructuralist and identity politics have since highlighted the political biases and exclusions of such gynocentrism or woman-centred feminism. This has critiqued feminism as mainly concerned with White, middle-class, Western issues (2002: 57-58).

Whilst addressing the class/race blindness of early second-wave feminism, Difference Criticism, as it has become more widely known, is also an impossible discourse about which to generalise, and Hughes goes on to explain how these newer theories have in turn generated more debate within the wide-ranging school of feminism.

On the one hand, there are those who see this story as a narrative of progress away from essentialist and Universalist ideals and towards more sophisticated understandings. Woman is no longer understood as a unified whole but as a process, as fragmented, as in flux and as multiple. On the other hand, there are those who see this story as contributing to the demise of feminism as a movement. This is because the attention that has been paid to deconstructing womanhood has left feminism without a unifying identity. If ‘woman’ ceases to exist, who are we fighting for? (2002: 58). 19

Although third-wave feminism is relevant to the multifaceted nature of women’s political activity and arguably for this reason could be used to account for the wide range of women subjects found in countries such as Brazil (which suffers extreme class/race disparities), the danger of deconstructing the woman subject to the point where she becomes meaningless, is part of the reason that the term ‘feminism’ is not

19 In order to clarify the complexities of this debate Hughes reproduces in her volume both Evans’ (1995) and Barretts’ (1987) models explaining the various types of Difference Theory, which are extremely illuminating (2002: 59-60).
used in this thesis. The risks of over-theorising women subjects will be further addressed in the conceptual framework found later in this chapter. Again, in order to appreciate the extent to which the non-discursive, quotidian activities of the Brazilian woman constitute valid political activity, it will be revealed that agency is the most effective term.

The Reality of Brazilian Feminism

The notion that feminism is irrelevant to Brazilian women simply because for some it is perceived to come from ‘outside’ is characteristic of Eurocentric, paternalistic notions of what constitutes the Brazilian woman, who as Judith Still explains, may be seen either in a context of patriarchal repression, which makes feminism an impossibility, or as the image of carnival queen libidinal excess, where feminism is seen as hopeless. Some evidence of this misrepresentation is that ‘already by the mid 1970s (in other words, well ahead of the U.K.) more women than men attended University in Brazil’ (Still 1999: 2). The reality is that feminist debates have always been an important part of the Brazilian women’s movement and, as we shall see, the very real presence of feminist discourse in the Brazilian academy and in various social programmes tackling women’s inequality in Brazil, challenges the view that it is irrelevant. Indeed, even if Anglo-American feminist discourse has often been geographically limited and has failed to recognise the political mobilisation of women in Brazil (and other countries that are assumed to be ‘Third-World’), both feminisms perhaps have more in common than is initially assumed. This situation is partly evidenced in the co-operation between national and international feminist groups during Brazilian women’s time in exile and the more recent internationalization of Brazilian feminism which will be discussed in the next chapter.
Whilst Brazilian feminism is a concrete reality, its specificities are often disregarded and the tendency to simply transplant the models used to analyse women’s emancipation in the US, UK and Europe, under the general umbrella term feminism, must be avoided. Despite gains that mirrored and at times overtook those being made by women in the USA/Europe, the struggle for women’s rights in Brazil was more complex and women’s differences were, and continue to be, much more pronounced. Second-wave feminism did not begin with the same organised, separatist ideology as in America and Great Britain. The context which allowed these women to mobilise, for example the New Left, the Civil Rights Movement, and post-war American affluence, was in contrast to the more complex way in which cultural revolution manifested itself in Brazil. The rise in women’s liberation, and other manifestations of the Cultural Revolution was disrupted by the arrival of one of Latin America’s longest military dictatorships. This altered the nature of Brazil’s own cultural and intellectual movements which were beginning to blossom in the early 1960s and diverted women’s political attention away from separatist policies towards survival or left-wing militancy. Judith Still points out some of these differing priorities and consequently the different political and social networks that enabled women to survive and later agitate, particularly those from the poor and working classes. We will see more evidence of this in the next chapter:

The pressing political needs of that period led to particular alliances, for example with the liberal side of the Catholic Church. Whereas in Europe or North America, the Church has largely been viewed as a repressive force by feminists, and one particular focus of women’s liberation movements has been sexual liberation and, in particular, access to contraception and abortion where necessary, in much of Latin America these issues were often at least put on hold during the 1970s (1999: 3).

Despite some similarities and links to ‘First-World’ debates, and whilst recognising feminism in Brazil as a legitimate and nationally relevant discourse in its own right,
some aspects of the Brazilian women’s movement must be discussed using different terminology. Some have already attempted to clarify ideas regarding women’s political articulation in Latin America by rejecting terminology used in Europe and the USA. In her seminal study of women’s movements in Brazil during the dictatorship and beyond, Sonia Alvarez exchanges the term much used in Anglo/American feminist criticism, that of ‘women’s interests’, for Maxine Molyneux’s model of gender interests, to explain how it is primarily issues of class and race that characterise the rights for which women are fighting in Brazil. These can be, very broadly, separated into the two categories of strategic gender interests (SGI) and practical gender interests (PGI). Women supporting SGI would defend policies that are perhaps most associated with Anglo-American second-wave feminism, such as the destruction of the traditional division of labour and economic, social and political equality with men, as well as issues such as fertility, abortion and childbirth. PGI would see women defending their position within the traditional division of labour, lobbying against measures that would prevent them carrying out their duties as wives and mothers. Demands would include having access to adequate housing, food and healthcare for example.20 Alvarez uses this model but redefines SGIs as ‘feminist’ and PGIs as ‘feminine’ (1990: 23-25). She then goes on to explain the reasons for this specific terminology:

Whereas bourgeois women might be able to envision practical alternatives to existing power arrangements (e.g., for university-educated women in most contemporary Latin American societies, financial independence from a man is not inconceivable), for many poor and working class women such alternatives are limited not only by their gender but also by their class position in society. This is particularly true in Latin America, where class divisions are over determined by the international division of labor. And though this fact does not negate that women of the popular classes share some strategic gender interests with middle- and upper-class women, it does explain the reluctance of many poor and working-class women to accept some of the fundamental premises of

20 For further information see Molyneux (2001: 38-59).
feminism as it developed in the West. That reluctance is in part the result of the lack of survival alternatives outside the patriarchal family structure (1990: 26).21

Judith Still’s assertion that ‘the extreme class differences (and their inter-play with racial difference) make it even more difficult to legitimate a discourse of “we women” even on limited strategic fronts’, supports this view (1999: 2).22

Therefore, despite feminist discourse being a cultural and political reality in Brazil, as we shall soon see from the analysis of the women’s movement, it does not describe the full spectrum of female political activity in the country, for example that of poor/working-class women, particularly when it retains a link to a feminist discourse that is linked to Western manifestations of the term.

Retomada Directors and the Dismissal of the Term ‘Feminism’

The need for a term other than feminism to describe female political activity in Brazil is most obviously manifested in the answers given by the majority of the female film directors interviewed for this study, who although embrace and support women’s emancipation either directly in their films or in their conceptions of these films, reject the terminology.

For example, when asked whether the subject ‘woman’ was one of her main motivations as a filmmaker, prominent female cineaste Lúcia Murat specifically denied this, arguing that although her first feature, Que bom te ver viva (which will be further analysed in the next section), featured the stories of women, it was primarily a dramatic choice, not a ‘feminist’ one:

As pessoas às vezes acham que foi por uma opção feminista que eu fiz aquele filme com mulheres [...] A opção que eu tive naquele momento não foi uma

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21 Alvarez is also keen to point out, however, the continuing complexities of gender interests in Brazil, stating that women’s interests do not automatically stem from just race and class but are also constructed politically and discursively (1990: 27).
22 The intersection of women’s agency with race in Brazil is another area ripe for exploration. Unfortunately the scope is too broad for this thesis.
opção feminista, foi uma opção dramatúrgica. Eu queria fazer um filme sobre tortura em que funcionassem as vozes numa espécie de círculo vicioso, em que um depoimento fosse encaixando no outro [...] Como o filme tinha um componente fundamentalmente autobiográfico, ele precisava ser feito com mulheres para poder fluir. Colocar um homem seria acabar com toda essa dramaturgia.

Clearly Murat wishes to avoid the word ‘feminism’. When asked specifically about the term she had this to say:

Eu acho nos anos 70 e 80, quando a questão feminista era muito forte, esse diálogo era direto, a gente inclusive tinha um coletivo de mulheres aqui no Brasil. [...] Hoje é muito mais frágil, até porque realmente tem uma ascensão de mulheres muito grande na sociedade, fundamentalmente na classe média.

When asked if she thought there was a certain reluctance towards using the term ‘feminism’ in Brazil she answered:

Eu acho que existe no mundo inteiro hoje, não é uma questão do Brasil de jeito nenhum. Foram grande força nos anos 70 e 80, o movimento feminista, e os movimentos das minorias em geral [...] Essa visão, de ver a feminista como algo de passado, eu acho isso existe no mundo inteiro, não só no Brasil, mas na Europa e nos EEUU.

Clearly for Murat, feminism is an anachronistic idea, something that belongs in the 1970s and 1980s. As such it illustrates how the term cannot be unproblematically applied to all women’s experiences in the country. Pertinently, Murat is an educated, middle-class woman aware of feminist debates but for her, the term is no longer useful to describe women’s political activity.

Laís Bodansky, like Murat, also questions the contemporary relevance of ‘feminism’ and sees the feminist struggle as something belonging to her mother’s generation; something from which she has benefited but was not involved in:

Eu sou de uma geração diferente da geração da minha mãe [...] ela é uma mulher separada, independente, sempre trabalhou [...] Foi a primeira de uma geração que realmente abriu espaço para a mulher no mercado de trabalho, no seus direitos [...] e sofreu [...] muita dor, muitas dificuldades. Eu acho que ela já abriu uma porta para mim [...] Então, não tenho essa necessidade de discursar, de lutar, porque na verdade eu já recebi, quase de presente. Essa é uma conquista da
geração dela que eu estou desfrutando. Por isso acho que não tenho essa necessidade de ser feminista, de discutir tanto, porque eu não sinto isso na pele [...] não sinto essa dificuldade no mercado de trabalho [...] A minha participação então é diferente da geração de minha mãe.

When asked: ‘Is feminism a term of the past?’ Bodansky replied:

É uma conquista do passado [...] então é uma conquista em que a gente tem que estar sempre atenta.

Rita Buzzar’s interview also illustrates how the term is irrelevant to many contemporary female artists. For Buzzar feminism, as it stands, has its emphasis on ‘sameness’ rather than difference and as such is not conducive to women’s emancipation:

Eu não gosto muito do termo feminista. Existe uma confusão que me irrita um pouco que é que a mulher, para que ela se imponha, tem que assumir algumas características masculinas. Eu acho que não é isso, eu acho que é ao contrario. Ela tem um jeito muito próprio de ver as coisas e é esse jeito próprio que faz a diferença [...] O feminismo às vezes me incomoda se ele é visto como se a mulher tivesse uma necessidade de ser homem na atuação, eu acho que não é por af.

Buzzar in fact has her own culturally specific opinions about how feminism needs to be reinterpreted in order to help women:

Ele tem que ser relido […] reinterpreted [...] A capacidade que nós mulheres temos de cuidar das coisas e de preservá-las é muito maior do que o homem. O homem tem uma necessidade de agressão, de responder, uma maior tendência ao conflito, à guerra, do que uma mulher [...] Graças a isso a humanidade não se destruiu inteiramente [...] O instinto de sobrevivência para o homem é a disseminação do seu sêmen; com quanto mais mulheres ele transar, mais filhos ele terá, mais a espécie se propagará. Para as mulheres [...] o instinto é de cuidar. Ela tem que fazer aquela criança que leva nove meses para nascer, nascer e não morrer. Então o instinto do cuidado é muito feminino [...] e não é ruim.

Buzzar’s, Bodansky’s and Murat’s rejection or questioning of the discourse of feminism therefore further illustrates that this idea, with its bases in discursive
academia, is irrelevant to their day-to-day work and survival within the contemporary Brazilian film industry.

Helena Solberg’s attitude towards the term ‘feminism’ is somewhat different from the other female filmmakers interviewed above owing to her first-hand experience of its American manifestation during the 1960s and 1970s. Pertinently she describes how appalled she was at the treatment of Betty Freidan on her visit to Brazil in the 1960s. She describes how satirical magazine *Pasquim* launched an attack of Freidan based on her looks and her age, implying that, in Solberg’s words, ‘of course she is a feminist, she is ugly’. When asked if she uses the term ‘feminist’ she replied:

I do it on purpose for provocation. What I usually say is that it is a dangerous term in the sense that it can mean so many things. When you talk about ‘feminism’ there’s feminism and there’s *feminism*. One of the things in *The Emerging Woman* that I was careful to do was to include the Black women’s movement. Black women have different requests to White middle-class women because they have very specific questions besides being women; they have racial concerns. I think it is very complex; it is a term that came to mean women who hate men and so on. But I like to use it as provocation. I think it is very good not to be afraid of it.

Although Solberg would use the term feminism with some caution due to its complexity, she denies its interpretation as anachronistic or irrelevant, therefore revealing a more academic understanding of the term. This is not to say that Solberg’s acceptance of the term means she has a superior understanding of or commitment to, women’s rights: just that her cultural experience has shaped how she wishes to discuss female representation in her work.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Although the breadth and depth of discourse surrounding the concept of agency prevents us from fixing a definition, varying as it does amongst cultures, epochs and contexts, in simple terms it is the ability of the human subject to act. However, the
question ‘who acts – people or discourses?’ has become a fundamental consideration over the years and consequently the idea of agency has become bound up in what can be described as a Humanist/Structuralist dialectic (Gardiner 1995: 10).

Through a multi-disciplinary approach, theorists working during the 1980s, 1990s and beyond would attempt to break this paradigm by discussing the human subject though a myriad of angles, taking into account the complexity of its political, ideological, historical and social make-up. Social scientists, cultural theorists and particularly feminists (who had seen concrete evidence of women’s agency during the consciousness-raising groups of second-wave feminism), would have a significant part to play in this (Messer-Davidow, 1995).

In this vein, Judith Gardiner’s *Provoking Agents* (1995) features essays that confront the complexity of ideas regarding agency and gender, problematising the bi-polar Humanist/Structuralist debate. It seeks to embrace more developed ideas regarding female agency, in that it includes discourses which embrace both theory and praxis, both utopian and more post-modern notions of women’s agency. As Gardiner explains, ‘On all sides of battles among patriarchal and feminist forces are human actors constrained and enabled by social structures, ideologies, and discourses upheld by human actors. Action and Structure, freedom and constraint operate in individuals, in institutions, and in discourses’ (10).

Gardiner’s work also posits that agency has been a key tool for feminists in the battle to overturn the notion of the active woman as a threat to the moral and social order. As she explains in her introduction: ‘The title *Provoking Agents* evokes a dominant Western tradition that wants women to be passive and that suspects active women to be *agents provocateurs*, manipulators who incite others to harm. The essays in this
volume repossess such negative terms for feminist uses, revaluing women’s agency so that it can benefit women and advance other liberatory agendas’ (1).

Lois McNay’s complex *Gender and Agency* (2000) is a further example of how feminist agency theory has sought to bypass the simplistic humanist/structuralist debate in recent years and can be seen as an attempt to rescue feminism as the basis from which a more satisfactory notion of agency can emerge. McNay suggests a more measured critical concentration on both sides of the subject-formation debate, arguing that the ‘negative paradigm’ (the idea of subject formation dominant in psychoanalysis and post-structuralism which argues the subject is formed by subjugation to an ‘Other’), be overturned (2-3). This problem, she argues, is particularly pertinent to the construction of feminine identity ‘which is constructed in such univocally negative terms – woman as double lack – that it is difficult to see how it connects to the concrete practices and achievements of women as social agents’ (8). She suggests that this approach precludes the potentially emancipatory role of agency, particularly for groups such as women, whose ability to gain autonomy may mean a significant subversion of the dominant social order which should be recognised by critics.

Ultimately these theorists seek to rescue the idea of agency for women (and other subaltern groups), from the muddy depths of bipolarity: ‘Rather than seeing women either as a product of environmental forces or as autonomous determiners of their destiny, it is critical to view women in a reciprocal relationship with their particular situational and structural environment’ (Nelson-Kuna and Riger 1995: 176).23

As Judith Gardiner explains in her introduction, ‘definitions of agency are not as important as the social uses of such concepts’ (1995: 1). As such I will not provide a definition of agency but will use it as the critical idiom through which to talk about the

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23 Wimal Dissanayake’s *Narratives of Agency* (1996) further explores the debate by discussing agency from outside, but in dialogue with, dominant Western discourse, paying particular attention to film and literature in Asia.
representation of women in *Retomada* films and the political activities of the women’s movement in Brazil.

Agency in this study encompasses **narrative agency**, **political agency**, and **professional agency**. It generally accounts for women in Brazil both in society and film who work towards engendering rights and opportunities for women through confronting their restrictive positioning within a patriarchal (*cerned*) context, for example the military regime or the patriarchal family. Within this terminology the phrases ‘female agency’, ‘women’s agency’ and so on, will also be used interchangeably.

Whilst acknowledging the complexity of the following theories and that I am merely using their basic tenets from which to launch my own theoretical framework, I wish to use elements of Giddens’ theory of structuration and Paul Smith’s idea of the *cerned* subject as the basis for my discussion. Adapting these two ideas from the Social Sciences addresses the two problems discussed above; that of historical/national relevance (the complexities associated with ‘feminism’) and that of the removal of human subjects from their particular social contexts through discussion within a restrictive theoretical paradigm (the Structuralist/Humanist dialectic).

Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration is perhaps the most seminal and illustrative of the inter-dialectical approach to agency and indeed features prominently in many of the studies outlined above:

> Crucial to the idea of structuration is the theorem of the duality of structure […] The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise. Structure is not ‘external’ to individuals: as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices, it is in a certain sense more ‘internal’ than exterior to their activities in a Durkheimian sense. Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling (Giddens 1984: 25).
Fundamental to the ‘recursive ordering of social practices’ (3) is the reflexive monitoring of human activity, which also illustrates the duality of agents’ structure:

The reflexive monitoring of conduct refers to the intentional or purposive character of human behaviour: it emphasises ‘intentionality’ as process. Such intentionality is a routine feature of human conduct, and does not imply that actors have definite goals consciously held in mind during the course of their activities […] When lay actors inquire about each other’s intentions […] they abstract from a continuing process of routine monitoring whereby they relate their activity to one another and to the object-world […] The accounts that actors are able to offer of their conduct draw upon the same stocks of knowledge as are drawn upon in the very production and reproduction of their action (Giddens 1979: 56-57).

To clarify, Giddens presents the ‘stratification model’ (to illustrate how actors function in the social world)\(^24\) and explains that reflexive monitoring ‘operates against the background of the rationalisation of action’ which is constituted by both discursive consciousness, that which human agents can express verbally, and practical consciousness (Giddens 1979: 57). Giddens explains:

Human agents or actors […] have, as an inherent aspect of what they do, the capacity to understand what they do while they do it. The reflexive capacities of the human actor are characteristically involved in a continuous manner with the flow of day-to-day conduct in the contexts of social activity. But reflexivity operates only partly on a discursive level. What agents know about what they do, and why they do it – their knowledgeable as agents – is largely carried in practical consciousness. Practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to ‘go on’ in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression […] It has to be distinguished from both consciousness (discursive consciousness) and the unconscious’ (1984: xxiii).

**Practical Consciousness**

Giddens is keen throughout his writing to emphasise the centrality of practical consciousness to structuration theory, pointing out that, ‘it is that characteristic of the human agent or subject to which structuralism has been particularly blind’ (1984: 6).

\(^{24}\) This diagram can be found in Giddens (1984: 5).
Practical consciousness will also be a key element of my work. In my interpretation, it is the unspoken quotidian survival strategy of an individual which reveals a latent ‘politicism’. It covers all instances of human activity which is unspoken. However, this does not mean that practical consciousness excludes dialogue and sound. It should be pointed out that agents’ ‘theoretical understanding’ of the grounds of their activity [...] should not be equated with the discursive giving of reasons for particular items of conduct, nor even with the capability of specifying such reasons discursively’ (1984: 5-6). Giddens also contests that, along with straightforward ‘reasons’, human agency can be defined only in terms of intentions. He argues: ‘agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place (1984: 9). Therefore speech can be an element of practical consciousness when agents simply go about their daily lives without offering reasons or explaining intentions for why they are doing what they are doing. However, while practical consciousness is a key element of my work, I will explain how the most powerful representations of agency are in fact effected through a transition from practical to discursive consciousness.\(^\text{25}\) Political agency, as it will be known from now on, is seen in the actions of the Brazilian women’s movement, many elements of which make the transition from acting within unspoken quotidian survival strategies to discursively acknowledging a gender-specific political project.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{25}\) To reiterate, discursive consciousness is ‘what actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action: awareness which has a discursive form’ (1984: 374).

\(^{26}\) Although political agency does not always indicate feminism, feminism is a form of political agency as it is most often disseminated in an academic/institutional capacity; an inherently discursive context.
Paul Smith’s *Discerning the Subject* (1988) is another important example of how the Humanist/Structuralist dialectic has been challenged. Arguing that there has been an ‘abstraction’ of the subject in the human sciences of late, he introduces the idea of ‘dis-cerning the subject’. He elaborates:

The word “cerning” conflates and plays simultaneously upon two rarely used English verbs – “to cern” and “to cerne.” The first means “to accept an inheritance or a patrimony,” and I use it to suggest that the contemporary intellectual abstraction of the “subject” from the real conditions of its existence continues – and is perfectly consonant with – a western philosophical heritage in which the “subject” is construed as the unified and coherent bearer of consciousness. Simultaneously, I have used the second verb, which means “to encircle” or “to enclose,” to indicate the way in which theoretical discourse limits the definition of the human agent in order to be able to call him/her the “subject” as it is constructed in and by much poststructuralist theory as well as by those discourses against which poststructuralist theory claims to pose itself (1988: xxx).

In ‘an attempt to dis-cern the “subject”’ (xxx), Smith rescues, for what he terms the ‘subject/individual’, the possibility of resistance (agency) by focusing on the products that the Humanist/Structuralist dialectic engenders. From a clashing of the two, Smith argues, resistance and therefore agency emerges. In a similar vein to Smith, I will be using the idea of the cerned context in this study. In my interpretation, it is that environment which both defines and restricts a person, yet frees and empowers them. For the Brazilian woman, patriarchy is the cerned context, and by confronting her cerned context, agency emerges. The ways in which women do this, evident through their unspoken quotidian survival strategies (practical

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27 Of interest here is the inclusion in Smith’s work of a chapter on feminism which he attempts to describe as one of the most likely sites of agency owing to its heterogeneous and contradictory nature, the ideal conditions from which agency emerges: ‘Feminism is constituted as a highly complex and widely diversified discourse, and one of its strengths is that it holds in tension and contradiction many different theoretical and practical positions. Feminism is, in other words, an internally heterogeneous discourse, many aspects of which are concerned with questions of identity, subjectivity and agency’ (1988: 138).

28 Wimal Dissanayake gives a particularly succinct account of Smith’s project: ‘He seeks to enunciate a concept of human agency that both amalgamates and moves beyond the frameworks of humanists and structuralists and poststructuralists. He situates human agency in the play of social and cultural forces, on the one hand, and personal desire, interest, and intentionality, on the other’ (1996: xiii).
consciousness), and in some cases through the written or spoken word (discursive consciousness), is the subject of the following chapters.

Whilst acknowledging that Paul Smith engages profoundly with complex theoretical debates in order to ‘observe’ and ‘complain’ (1998: xxix) about how the subject is currently constructed in the human sciences, I also want to focus on two comments made by him in his preface which are relevant to the way in which agency is analysed in this study, that is from a practical, rather than a theoretical point of view. First, Smith explains ‘that current conceptions of the “subject” have tended to produce a purely theoretical “subject,” removed almost entirely from the political and ethical realities in which human agents actually live’ (xxix), and, more importantly that ‘a theory of resistance, it is argued, becomes possible only when we take into account the specific history of the “subject” and its implication into systems of knowledge, power, and ideology’ (xxx). As will now be illustrated, this idea of a specific history (in my interpretation that element of practical consciousness which relates to a subject’s internal monologue and thought processes), proves significant and is particularly pertinent in the filmic analyses that follow.

Finally, the idea of the ‘total woman’ (and the ‘total character’ as we shall now see) will be important in this thesis. This is a woman subject who simultaneously holds and balances various life positions equally within her concerned context whilst also avoiding becoming split or fragmented between them.

29 This also relates to how women subjects can become trapped within the Humanist/Structuralist dialectic, and, as is the case with their analysis in terms of third-wave feminism and Difference Criticism, to how their subjectivity is vulnerable to over-theorisation. This risks their removal from any relevant lived-reality which would render them valid women subjects.
Agency in Film

A narrative agent is a character in a film who finds the capacity to confront their cerned environment, even if ultimately they will not dissolve or change it. This is evident through practical consciousness. In film this is illustrated through dialogue, ‘identificatory’ camera-work, and other narrative devices and elements of the mise-en-scène. It is also manifested in our access to characters’ narrative autonomy, that is their positioning and treatment by other characters and their ability to direct the narrative. These characters can also be described as ‘total’ characters, that is, they are multifaceted yet unified, able to simultaneously hold multiple positions whilst surviving and fighting within a cerned context.

Although these elements are not necessarily perceptible to the character herself, or co-characters, these elements must be visible to the audience. The most successful narrative agents are those who make the transition during the course of the narrative from practical to discursive consciousness, in order to become a political agent. However, this does not mean engaging with their gender specificity as happens more frequently with the activities of the women’s movement, as we shall see in the following chapter. However, although they may not discursively acknowledge their specific gendered position in society, the attention paid to these displays of political agency makes a step towards what is hoped for the future: more critical focus on politically pertinent female characters in film.

In contrast are the women characters who are denied narrative agency (those in O que é isso companheiro?, Olga and to some extent As três Marias). They are not permitted, in narrative terms, to confront their cerned context. This is manifested in their lack of narrative autonomy, their position and treatment by other characters, a lack of definable personality traits, and lack of opportunity to direct the narrative and no
evidence of their quotidian survival strategies, either via practical or discursive consciousness. Their characters are also often fragmented and split between excluding binaries, denying the unity of character exhibited by the majority of women in this analysis.

*As três Marias* presents a more ambiguous representation of female narrative agency in *Retomada* cinema. Although on many levels the four female characters do indeed confront their *cerned* condition within the patriarchal family (by rejecting much of the tradition of the passive and pious mourning woman present in the Catholic faith), they are nonetheless prevented from gaining full access to narrative agency. One of the main reasons for this is the choice of genre used in the clear attempt by the director to allow them to confront their *cerned* condition. Placing the characters firmly within the revenge genre, which has historically presented the idea of the active woman as dangerous and a threat to the moral order, presents little opportunity to provide an emancipatory framework from which the characters can operate.

As is perhaps clear, the active woman is seen as a fundamental part of female narrative agency in this study. However, women acting must also be accompanied by evidence of practical consciousness if agency is to fully emerge. Not to provide such evidence, risks endorsing the view of the active woman as, in Gardiner’s words, an *Agent provocateur* (1995: 1). Unfortunately the characters in this film are also provided with limited access to practical consciousness. As such their narrative agency is severely compromised.
**Women Filmmakers and Professional Agency**

Apesar da articulação de cineastas e da crescente participação feminina na realização de filmes e vídeos no Brasil, o número de estudos sobre o tema é ainda pequeno (Hollanda, Pessoa and Mendonça 1989:12).

Roughly twenty years after it was written, the above statement still rings true. With this in mind, and taking into account the discussion of women’s narrative agency in *Retomada* cinema within the context of the political agency of the Brazilian women’s movement, it is also necessary to look at women’s professional agency during the *Retomada* and beyond: that is, how female directors practically or discursively confronted their *cerned* context of the film industry in Brazil during this time. When looking at this professional agency, a transition from practical to discursive consciousness (political agency) may or may not be manifest, and within this there may or may not be an engagement with a gender-specific discourse. Unfortunately to fully address the professional agency of *Retomada* filmmakers is not possible in this limited study. Again, it is important to reiterate that the following discussion is not an attempt to analyse in detail women’s films or female authorship but, as with the general aim of this study, to seek to initiate a more coherent and wide-ranging debate regarding female representation in Brazilian film.

Professional agency manifests itself differently from the way in which it is played out in narrative terms, and is also distinct from the variety of political agencies illustrated by the Brazilian women’s movement. However, female cineastes still act from within my model by confronting their *cerned* context, in this case the male-dominated film industry and their position as women in a patriarchal society in general. Although this

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30 The various definitions of agency, whilst helping to specify certain actions from certain sectors of society, are not fixed and at times are interchangeable. For example, the female film directors I interview are inherently professional agents but they may also exhibit political agency if they discursively address the political motivations behind their work. Female agency/women’s agency are general umbrella terms for any action taken (either practically or discursively), from a narrative, political, or professional point of view, which supports women’s emancipation.
agency is mainly expressed practically, either through narrative choices or approaches to work, many of the directors also make the discursive leap to display political agency.

Brazilian women, as in most other film industries in the world, are no strangers to the cinema and as well as acting, have often worked in many capacities behind the camera in roles such as editing, wardrobe, choreography and scriptwriting. There is little point in reproducing here a historiography of women filmmakers in Brazil.\(^{31}\) However, in keeping with the socio-political contextualisation which is fundamental to addressing the critical neglect of women in cinema in Brazil, it is important to mention that it was towards the end of the 1960s, as they began to take a larger share of the labour market, that women also began to take on more central roles within the film industry, moving from production assistants and co-editors and indeed acting, into documentary, experimental and short filmmaking.\(^{32}\)

The 1980s was a landmark decade which saw many important feature-length films made by women featuring notable female characters in prominent narrative positions. The concluding part of Johnson and Stam’s seminal *Brazilian Cinema*, documents the dialogue that was beginning to open up during this time between film and social movements. In terms of women’s social movements this mediation was seen in films such as *Eternamente Pagu* (Norma Bengell, 1987), *Que bom te ver viva* (Lúcia Murat, 1989) as well as Tizuka Yamasaki’s two films *Parahyba mulher macho* (1983) and *Patriamada/ Beloved Country Brazil* (1984) (1995: 456).\(^{33}\) In fact, this decade in general marked a distinct move towards female narrative and professional agency,


\(^{32}\) This information was gleaned from the bibliographical sources mentioned in the previous footnote.

\(^{33}\) This important paragraph is also evidence of how important socio-political changes are reflected in female filmic agents. More critical attention to this fact is a central concern of this study.
epitomised in Susana Amaral’s seminal adaptation of Clarice Lispector’s *A hora da estrela* (1985). This film, which tells the story of Macabea, a north-eastern migrant struggling with her own economic and emotional survival in industrial São Paulo, paints a detailed observation of social exclusion, femininity, class oppression and the triumph of Western consumerism over Brazil’s rural poor. Successfully broaching the gender-class intersection, this was the decade’s most famous contribution to female narrative and professional agency and achieved international recognition. The film was selected as Brazil’s entry in the Best Foreign Language Film category at the 1986 Academy Awards as well as winning various prizes at the Berlin and Havana Film festivals (Martin 1997: 323).

Perhaps the most relevant achievement of *A hora da estrela*, for this study, is that despite Macabea’s miserable existence Amaral reveals practical consciousness through particular filmic attention to Macabea’s daily routine and idiosyncrasies, therefore bestowing her with significant narrative agency. Geetha Ramanathan, acknowledging Michael T. Martin’s interview (detailed below), puts it another way: ‘the film does not render Macabea as an object of study, or as prey to her environment […] Despite the almost unnameable odds, Macabea is depicted wrestling a new contemporary subjectivity for herself and other *retirantes*’ (2006: 151). This film, then, further identifies the need to approach female agency throughout the decades via a particular concentration on practical consciousness, something which, as we will see, proves particularly fruitful during the analysis of *Retomada* films.

Looking closer at her interview with Michael T. Martin, there is no doubt that Amaral retains a practical commitment to representing female agency, evident through both her approach to work and her acknowledgement of a ‘woman’s code’. In this way she herself is a clear example of professional agency:
As a woman, I don’t see what men see. If I were a male director I probably would have other concerns. This is a problem of the theory of communication, because I have a code. As a woman I codify the world according to my code and my code in a feminine one. This is why it is evident in the film (1997: 329).

When asked ‘what would constitute a woman’s film?’ She goes on to reveal her inherent knowledge about the way in which female agency functions: that is, practically. In doing so she acknowledges the underlying link between day-to-day work, or practical consciousness, and successful film production:

It is very difficult for me to intellectualise […] I don’t face this problem as if I always have to have a reason […] this is how I’m going to use the camera […] I have no anger in me. I am not a feminist, and I have no anger against men. I don’t believe this talk about being a woman. We just have to work. We work. We do our work and, in doing so, we are being feminist (329)

Another important female-authored film of the 1980s, that reflects both narrative and professional agency, is Tetê Morais’ *Terra para Rose/Land for Rose* (1987). This film engages with the social conscience of Brazilian cinema, as well as with the gender/class intersection explored in Amaral’s film, and is perhaps one of the best examples of this tripartite representation. Morais’ film looks at the struggles of the landless rural poor and specifically a female MST member who was killed by government forces during a protest for land occupation.34

The same year saw actress Norma Bengell turn her hand to directing with the biopic of feminist and modernist agitator Patricia Galvão, in *Eternamente Pagu* (1987). Galvão or Pagu,35 as she was more famously known, was a contemporary of, and briefly married to, co-founder of the Brazilian Modernist movement and pioneer of the

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34 The MST or *Movimento Sem Terra* is a highly politicised social movement made up of rural workers evicted from their land. It campaigns against unequal land distribution in Brazil and one of its methods is to occupy unproductive farm land.

35 According to Hilary Owen, ‘Pagu’ was ‘one of the various pseudonyms which related to different aspects of Galvão’s work’. Pagu, coined by poet Raul Bopp in his 1928 poem *Coco de Pagu*, was the most famous (2003: 68).
antropofagista movement, Oswald de Andrade.\textsuperscript{36} She was also a left-wing political activist and in 1931 became Brazil’s first female political prisoner. Most important, although Pagu was a Marxist, she was also considered a bourgeois intellectual. This, combined with her outspoken views on women’s rights within the left-wing, meant she was not readily accepted by the Brazilian Communist Party (Owen 2003: 68-70). As Hilary Owen points out ‘Pagu’s insistence on viewing women independently from the family constitutes a major deviation from the dominant framework in which the woman question was discussed’ (2003: 70). Owen also points out that Pagu’s radical political position was one of the reasons for the small circulation of her first book, \textit{Parque industrial} (1933), described as dealing ‘thematically with the Marxist and anarcho-syndicalist organisation among a group of female textile workers in São Paulo’s Braz district during the massive industrial expansion of the 1920s and early 30s’ (2003: 69). Pagu can therefore be seen to be the forbearer of what middle-class women within the left would come to realise during the 1970s: that Marxism rarely encompasses the specific needs of women. The practical experience of these women, as we will see in the next chapter, would act as a catalyst for their discursive commitment to female agency into the 1980s and beyond. Bengell’s decision to chart Galvão’s life, not in front of the camera, but behind it, means this film marks yet another significant landmark in terms of both narrative and professional female agency.

As the 1990s dawned, women cineastes began to consolidate their role as mainstream...
feature-length directors. As we have seen, Carla Camurati symbolised this achievement and in the years that followed, with more women than ever making their feature-length debut, female professional agency was to become more pronounced. Some examples of this professional agency can be identified by looking again at some of the comments of those filmmakers interviewed for this study in 2007.

The professional Agency of Retomada Filmmakers

These interviews show a wealth of female professional agency during this time. One of the many issues these cineastes help to highlight is how female characters in Brazilian film are perceived as secondary, which, it can be argued, is the consequence of a paucity of critical attention. For example, Laís Bodansky is of the opinion that there are few notable female characters in Brazilian cinema at present. The star system in Brazil, as opposed to that in the USA or Britain for example, is organised around Television rather than film. She cites a recent phenomenon concerning male actors, who appeared first in films and were then invited to work in Television, as evidence.

Na televisão, aqui no Brasil, ultimamente está acontecendo um fenômeno muito interessante. Atores desconhecidos que fizeram importantes papéis no cinema, como Wagner Moura, Lázaro Ramos entre outros, ativeram seu valor reconhecido pela televisão que os contratou [...] Você não tem uma mulher. Por que isso não acontece? Porque, na verdade, não houve personagens femininas significativas no cinema brasileiro recente para chamar a atenção da televisão. A oportunidade só aparece através de um bom personagem, um personagem grande [...] Os homens tiveram essa oportunidade porque tiveram bons papéis e puderam mostrar seu trabalho [...] as mulheres não tiveram esse espaço [...] Então eu acho isso uma reflexão interessante, que você não tem realmente grandes personagens femininas no cinema.

It is interesting that Bodansky believes there to have been few notable female characters in recent Brazilian film. If we look at the films which feature the two actors she cites, we can see how they are all critically acclaimed or well-documented as
‘male’ narratives. For example, Lázaro Ramos starred in hit Retomada films such as Carandiru (2003), about a male prison, Cidade baixa (2005), about the trials of a friendship between two men, Madame Satã/Madame Satan (2002), although an outstanding performance and an interesting account of gender, nonetheless from a man’s point of view, O homem do ano/The Man of the Year (2003), another film that charts the adventures of a male anti-hero in the peripheries of Brazil’s big cities, and O homem que copiava/The Man who Copied (2003), another account of the (financial) aspirations and dreams of a young man. Wagner Moura has appeared in all of the above films (except O homem que copiava) alongside Ramos, as well as in various others such as Abril despedaçado/Behind the Sun (2001) and Deus é brasileiro/God is Brazilian (2003) notable for their patriarchal tones and corresponding critical appraisal. That we do not see any notable female characters in this list is unsurprising. To some extent this is because they are all narratives dominated by male characters, but also because, as is the case with the majority of Brazilian films, the social angles of these narratives, which bypass the socio-political situation of women, have been given critical priority. Although of course there are not as many examples of female narrative agency as male during the Retomada, there are strong examples of female agency in films that tell the stories of both men and women. The problem remains that these roles are not widely discussed. The first step in addressing these issues is by looking at female narrative agency in Zuzu Angel, Cabra cega and, to a lesser extent, As três Marias.

With regard to Bodansky’s professional agency, it is therefore important to point out that she clearly, discursively, acknowledges the secondary status of women in Retomada cinema at present, highlighting an awareness of the need to represent women during this important time. Her personal commitment to this task, although she
may not always discursively acknowledge a concrete gender-specific intention, is
evidenced in her latest project *Chega de saudade/The Ballroom* (2007):

Meu novo filme, *Chega de saudade*, é um filme que tem personagens masculinas
e femininas, mas tem boas personagens femininas, que não são poucas. É uma
delicia, e foi uma delícia toda a pesquisa desde o roteiro de Luisi Bolognesi [...] ele mesmo ficou espantado ‘nossa, como estou escrevendo sobre as mulheres,
pensando com as mulheres’ [...] Para mim também foi uma conquista grande
[...], tantas personagens femininas [...] tocantes!

Further evidence of her professional agency comes in her acknowledgement of the
*Retomada* as a particularly important and visible time period for female directors:

O que eu acho interessante na *Retomada* é justamente que ela é plural, muito
ampla [...] tão diferente aquele cinema brasileiro que foi muito importante nos
anos 70, que era masculino. A *Retomada* já vem dividida, não dividida, mas
mesclada com homens e mulheres. O mercado nasce já com o surgimento dos
cursos de cinema e com muitas mulheres que entraram no mercado de trabalho.

Bodansky also recognises that women have always been visible in the film industry in
Brazil, even before the *Retomada*, and that they helped to sustain the industry during
the dark years when it was assumed to be defunct. Furthermore, she also recognises the
*Retomada* as a watershed for female cineastes and understands it as a time that should
be discussed for its more democratic representation of men and women, compared to
other waves of film, such as *Cinema Novo*, that excluded women.

Então o cinema brasileiro teve uma interrupção na produção de longas. A grande
produção de curta metragem de qualidade e destaque no Brasil, e fora, foi
justamente quando não existiu a produção de longas, e daí a mulher vem com
muita força. Depois, quando o longa conseguiu uma política cinematográfica no
Brasil, essas mulheres entraram naturalmente. Elas não caíram do céu, foram
muitos anos trabalhando para chegar lá [...] Quando a produção volta, já é com
uma presença feminina forte.

With her answers Bodansky therefore provides clear evidence that, although she does
not discursively express a gender-specific commitment to women, her knowledge of
the patriarchal nature of the Brazilian film industry and her need to continue working
to represent herself within such an environment, to confront her *cerned* context, is
fundamental to illustrating female agency in Retomada cinema.  

Lúcia Murat and *Que bom te ver viva*

Although Lúcia Murat does not discursively commit to a gender-specific agenda she discusses how political and social issues in general and particularly those which have most marked her life as a woman, are an intrinsic part of her work:

> Eu não diria que a mulher seja uma de minhas motivações como cineasta, eu diria que a questão social e a questão da violência, sim. Eu acho muito difícil você não trabalhar com aquilo que mais marcou na adolescência. O que mais marcou na minha foi a tortura-prisão [...] Ela realmente marca todo meu trabalho, como se não conseguisse fugir mais dela. Obviamente que eu sou mulher dentro disso. Eu acho que todo cinema autoral fala de você, então de maneira nenhuma eu rengo o olhar feminino que tenho, ele é muito forte. Acho que um filme como *Quase dois irmãos*, que é um filme recente sobre o mundo masculino, ele é profundamente feminino porque é feito por mim, que tenho esse olhar.

Clearly Murat does not approach her work with the intention to represent women. That women are well represented is the inevitable consequence of her social positioning and need to represent that which has most influenced her life. It is the consequence of her need, in the words of Anthony Giddens, to ‘go on’. Murat’s professional agency is therefore most visible through practical consciousness. However, by illustrating a discursive understanding of how her own experience as a woman is reflected in her films and in acknowledging her particular ‘code’ as a woman she displays a profound awareness of the complexities of her cerned context therefore achieving political

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37 Another element of Bodansky’s work that should be mentioned as evidence of her professional agency is the work she does with partner Luiz Bolognesi for their production company Buriti Filmes. Bolognesi wrote the screenplay for *Bicho de sete cabeças/Seven-Headed Beast* (2001) and co-directed *Cine Mambembe*, a documentary charting a section of the couple’s 25,000 km journey around Brazil with a small projector, screen and a pick-up truck. Their marketing material states that the company specialises in exhibiting films for low income segments of society and this was the attempt to bring cinema to those Brazilians who had never experienced it. The film won a host of awards and the project won the support of the Companhia de Concessões Rodoviárias (CCR) enabling it to develop into the larger *Cine Tela Brasil* which takes the project to a larger and more sophisticated level. More information is available on the Buriti Filmes website, see bibliography.

38 This film’s international title is *Almost Brothers* (2004).
agency.

By looking at Murat’s debut film *Que bom te ver viva* it becomes evident how this political agency is reinforced through her characters narratively. Filmed in 1989, just a few years after Brazil returned to a multi-party system, this partly fictional documentary (which intersperses interviews with eight ex-militant women with a fictional monologue and actors who play the interviewees’ friends, family and contemporaries), provides continuity between the filmmaker’s, mostly practical, approach to agency and how this is illustrated in her films discursively.

The film opens with a rolling text explaining the context of the military coup of 1964. It documents the 1969 ‘coup within a coup’ or, AI-5, and continues: ‘A partir daí, a tortura tornou-se uma prática sistemática usada contra todos os que fizessem oposição ao regime. Este é um filme sobre os sobreviventes destes anos’. The fact that this film specifically documents how the female survivors of this period have rebuilt their lives is not mentioned and despite this non gender-specific opening, most of the women interviewed freely give over to a gender-specific discourse, many of them attributing their survival post-torture to their abilities to bear children. However, that both Murat and her characters, through the discourse of film and interview respectively, are confronting their *cerned* contexts, is never in doubt.

Murat’s professional agency as a director is of course represented through the narrative agency of her characters which is clear to see in this film from the outset. The quotidian survival strategies of these women, and therefore access to their practical consciousness, are inherent within the *mise-en-scène*. For example, all the women are interviewed in their own homes, we see their domestic setting and, on occasions, their families. This is interspersed with footage of them ‘going on’ with their daily lives; going to work, teaching, or on their way to community groups and so on. On occasions
their partners, children or pupils (some of whom are clearly actors) are also asked to give an opinion which helps to contextualise these women within a specific daily reality.

This practical *mise-en-scène* is supplemented with the interviews themselves which provide the transition from practical to discursive consciousness necessary for political agency. Keeping this in mind, further evidence of narrative agency can be seen in how their interviews transcend the risky representation of the women as ‘torture victims’ and instead they are presented and present themselves as ‘total’ characters. That is they are multifaceted yet unified and with an ability to simultaneously hold multiple positions, as mother, lover, professional, housewife and ex-militant, whilst continuing to act within their *cerned* context in post-dictatorship Brazil. This is evidenced particularly well in the interview with and footage of Maria do Carmo Brito. Interwoven with her to-the-camera interview are shots of her in the kitchen preparing a meal and looking out from her apartment onto a playground below where she waves to her daughter. At this point the narrator asks, ‘how do we reconcile the story of this housewife with the tale of one who organised farm workers, took part in an armed urban guerrilla organization, was imprisoned and exchanged for a kidnapped ambassador and spent 10 years in exile?’ Inherent within the film’s *mise-en-scène* however, from the juxtaposition of interview and footage of Maria’s daily life, there is no need to reconcile these ‘two women’. It is in fact the same woman we see but confronting different *cerned* contexts in different time periods. Crucial to understanding the idea of female agency is to realise that women agents have an inherent ability to develop, change and adapt, to ‘go on’, according to particular and changing *cerned* contexts.
The issue of discourse, of talking and conversation, or perhaps more pertinently, not talking, is fundamental to this film and with respect to the discursive nature of political agency, the interviewees reveal this in a variety of ways. Firstly, there is the simple act of talking to the camera/interviewer. Perhaps more interestingly however, discursive consciousness also appears when the women begin to speak about how they have been literally or symbolically silenced, either by themselves, their own minds, or by society and loved ones. One interviewee, Jessie Jane, begins her narrative by breaking down, explaining that she has not talked about her experience in prison for many years. This indicates reluctance, either stemming from her own insecurities or those of her friends/family, to return to such a painful time in her life.

Estrela Bohadana describes that as a response to the trauma it evokes, her own sons cannot stand to hear or talk about her time in prison: ‘O fato de eu ter sido presa, de ter sido torturada […] cria uma certa revolta; eles preferem que eu não fale […] é um assunto que incomoda tanto que é melhor que se esqueça […] eles de uma forma reivindicam que eu esqueça, talvez para que eles mesmos não entrem em contato com uma coisa tão dolorosa’. The idea of discourse, of discussion, of how one ‘goes on’ with one’s life through a mixture of dialogue and non-dialogue, through practical and discursive consciousness, is particularly pertinent in this interview. Estrela’s job as a philosopher and lecturer, shown through footage of her teaching and leading a discussion, illustrates how she maintains this balance, so difficult to achieve when she herself questions the right she has to create so much anger in people.

As Maria Luiza G. Rosa’s (medical hygienist and mother of two) interview begins it is soon interrupted by an actor playing one of her contemporaries. His comments also point to the difficulty of the discourse of torture, describing the embarrassment of both talking and listening in this context. We then return to her interview where she
explains how talking about her experiences makes her feel lonely. Her discourse, the
need to talk when no one wants to listen, is further complicated by the fact that Maria
(or ‘Pupi’ as she is known) ‘talked’, or gave information, during her interrogations by
the military police. This is clearly something which has affected her profoundly and
again creates the dialectic, discourse/no discourse.

Rosalinda Santa Cruz, a university lecturer and mother of three children, also describes
how she is often made to feel that talking about her experiences in jail or about her
disappeared brother, is irrelevant or anachronistic. An actor playing one of her pupils
describes how he avoids talking to her about it in order to avoid upsetting her.
Accounts given by Regina Toscano’s (teacher and mother of three) friends also
indicate the problem of reconciling discourse with the practical experience of torture
for these women and their contemporaries. These accounts describe how Regina’s time
in jail and her experience of torture does not and cannot feature in everyday life.
Another point made is that because it can’t feature in everyday life, her friends think
she has overcome the traumas of torture and imprisonment.

With this in mind, an additional point of interest in terms of discursive consciousness,
and therefore political agency, is that many of the women interviewed work in jobs
which use discourse as their main tool and mostly in pedagogical roles such as
teachers, lecturers and educators. Some also do additional work in gender-specific,
discourse-based community education initiatives. This clearly helps to rationalise and
come to a discursive understanding of some of the practical experiences these women
went through in jail. For example, Regina works in a women’s refuge on the outskirts
of Rio, described by the narrator as part of a ‘crusade against violence’ which has
become part of her post-prison life. Críméia de Almeida, a nurse and mother of one,
attends the meeting of the Direitos da Mulher no Constituinte. A further example of
how these women use discourse to understand and ‘go on’ with their lives, is that many of the women interviewed either received or are still receiving therapy (particularly psychoanalysis) in order to vocalise or discuss their experiences. Regina, Criméia, Pupi, and Estrela (whose husband is a psychoanalyst) all talk openly about this fact.

All of these activities, shown to us through Murat’s filmmaking, are perhaps an answer to the self-censorship and the censorship imposed by the outside world, to which all of the women featured are subjected. Most pertinently however, all of this varied activity indicates the transition from practical to discursive consciousness which makes these women important examples of political agency.

Another example of political agency through discursive consciousness, which again unites the women in this film with the experiences of the women to be outlined in the following chapter, is an engagement with the gender-specific experience of being a woman militant. This becomes clear in a number of ways. First through an acknowledgement (as we shall also see in the following analysis of Cabra cega) of the specific experience of female torture. Maria do Carmo tells the story of how menstruation was dealt with in prison and during torture, Rosalinda Santa Cruz, or Rosa, mentions the objectification of the female body and Regina Toscana tells of her sexual humiliation upon her capture.

Further gender-specific discourse reveals itself in this film through the subject of motherhood, which is one of its central tenets. All of the women interviewed have children and all use motherhood to contextualise and rationalise their former and current lives to varying extents and as a means of ‘going on’ with their lives. As we shall see in chapter five (which discusses narrative agency in the film Zuzu Angel)
motherhood, despite its innocuous representation by some reactionary discourses, is an inherently political vocation.

Maria do Carmo Brito, much like Rita Buzar, views motherhood as the rationale which separates the male and female worlds. She believes that as women produce life their instinct is to survive and nurture. In this way she understands why the political balance is tipped toward men. Maria describes how she and her partner had a suicide pact which meant if they were attacked by the military with no means of escape, one would shoot the other, then themselves. When the time came Maria shot at the police not at her husband, her husband then grabbed the gun and killed himself. Although she suffered years of guilt, clear to see in her emotional yet controlled interview, her first pregnancy led her to realise that it was, in her words, a ‘healthy’ course of action. This political agency, this passionate vocal release of that which has enabled her to ‘go on’ with her life, consolidates motherhood as a powerful tool and Maria’s role as a narrative and political agent.

Regina Toscano lost her first child in jail but she describes that, rather than lose hope, what enabled her to continue was the desire to have another child. The first thing she and her partner did when they were released from prison was to get pregnant. She explains passionately that her answer to those who wanted to end life was to create life and that her children are a powerful symbol of this re-birth and freedom. Criméia de Almeida also sees the experience of motherhood as symbolising freedom. However, the experience of pregnancy and birth in jail marked her life to such an extent that she feared for the life of a second child, leading to her to the decision not to have any more children.

This important film illustrates the political agency of both its director (who despite not acknowledging a gender-specific agenda in her work, is clearly committed to
documenting female agency in her films), and its characters, who are both narrative agents within film yet have also achieved political agency in their own lives. This is evidenced by the fact that despite being surrounded by censorship these women have made connections with a variety of important discourses that have enabled them to rationalise their traumatic experiences, share them and ‘go on’ with their daily lives. Their stories can be seen as a continuation of the stories of those women we will now see in the socio-political contextualisation and as a precursor to the films of the Retomada which show how important the militant woman, who displays her discursive consciousness in film, has become.

Helena Solberg: Professional Agency Abroad

As early as 1966 veteran director and Retomada star Helena Solberg had made her first film, entitled A entrevista/The Interview, which interrogated bourgeois values at work in female education. This film, in which she overlapped the image of a traditional marriage preparation ritual with voices from interviews conducted with middle-class female PUC (Pontifícia Universidade Católica) students about sex, politics and marriage, had the effect of demystifying the traditional image of the virgin bride. Her second film made at PUC was O meio-dia/Noon (1969), a short which touched on the pertinent issue of the dictatorship and linked to Caetano Veloso’s seminal anti-dictatorship song É proibido proibir. Her first feature-length film, The Emerging Woman (n.d), was also a consequence of her interest in representing female narrative agency in film, this time within the context of the American women’s movement.39

39 From an interview with Helena Solberg on the website Mulheres do cinema brasileiro. See bibliography.
40 Her Retomada films, such as Bananas is My Business (1995), a documentary on Carmen Miranda, also represent female narrative agency. This is also true of the more recent Vida de menina (2003). This film is an adaptation of the diaries of Alice Dayrell Caldeira Brant (1880-1970) entitled Minha vida de
The film was something of an unexpected success:

What I didn’t know was that there wasn’t any film like that on the market, so it was unbelievable. The film was so much used by all the schools and organisations, it became like a tool for information and education. It was an education for me too, because I then understood a lot of things about which I had no idea before.

The unintended pedagogical role of Solberg’s film is fundamental to understanding how elements of the conception of many women’s films conform to the model of practical consciousness. For example, although she wanted to make a film about women she did not intend it as an educational tool on women’s issues. The success of this film then led her to explore women’s issues within her own continent. *The Double Day* (1975) explored the female labour force in Latin America. She travelled around the continent with an all female film crew (apart from director of photography Affonso Beato) interviewing women in the factories and labour unions of Bolivia, Peru and Mexico. This illustrates a form of political agency in that Solberg made the transition from the practical, simply ‘going on’ with her job as a filmmaker, motivated by unspoken survival strategies, to discursive consciousness, engaging more discursively, in her film, with women’s cerned contexts within the labour market.

Despite this female-led focus Solberg states that she wouldn’t necessarily say that the subject ‘woman’ was one of her main motivations as a filmmaker. In fact she is keen to mention other foci that interest her. For example the relationship between Latin America and the USA, evidenced in films such as *Chile: By Reason or By Force* (1986). Domestic politics have also motivated her in films such as *The Forbidden Land* (1989) about the MST and the role of Liberation Theology in Brazil. Solberg explains: ‘What I am saying is that it was my interest in politics in general that took

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*menina/The Diary of Helena Morley* who, writing under the pseudonym Helena Morley, documented her childhood years in nineteenth century Diamantina.

41 From *Women Make Movies* website. See bibliography.
me to the woman issue’. This illustrates that although political agency is characterised by a transition to a profound, discursive, knowledge of one’s context, it does not always constitute a gender-specific focus.

Though not discursively acknowledged, through political agency Solberg illustrates a particular commitment to representing female agency in her films. Solberg’s feature-length documentary *Bananas is My Business* (1995) is a particularly pertinent example of this. The film is a biography of Brazilian singer and film star Carmen Miranda who launched a successful career in Hollywood during the 1940s. In this film Solberg highlights the star’s struggles and successes within a network of patriarchal (context) contexts, as both the manifestation of the Good Neighbour Policy between Brazil and the United States and as a highly successful actress at Fox Studios. In these two roles she flourished, becoming the highest paid female star in Hollywood in 1946 and winning the hearts of the American and for a time, Brazilian, public. However, like many Hollywood stars she was overworked by the studios, making nine films for Fox between 1940 and 1946 (Shaw and Conde 2005: 189). This punishing work schedule, which inevitably involved the heavy use of prescription drugs, undoubtedly contributed to her premature death in 1955, caused by a heart attack. During her time in Hollywood Miranda also found herself confronting another context: her abusive husband, whom she could not divorce due to the cultural and religious implications. Solberg’s attempt to look inside Miranda’s complex and often

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42 During the Second World War the United States had limited access to European import/export markets. Latin America was the only market left open to the US and, as many of the countries, including Brazil, had links to the Fascist regimes in Europe and significant Italian and German immigrant populations, the US was keen to forge political and economic links with them. In particular Brazil, whose Estado Novo had rapidly increased economic growth, was of interest to President Roosevelt. One of the main ways in which Roosevelt wished to express this newly termed ‘Pan Americanism’ was through film (Shaw and Conde 2005:187).

43 From the film *Bananas is My Business*. 
enigmatic life in order to reveal her practical consciousness reflects both her and Miranda’s agency.

Helena Solberg’s commitment to female agency through her work, her professional agency, is particularly clear in her earlier films, via her characters, including those short and medium films earlier discussed. Like Murat and Bodansky, although Solberg does not wish to classify herself as a ‘woman’ film director, she also makes it clear that, as a woman, a film she directs will reflect that particular social experience and have a specific viewpoint and focus:

Because of our social experience as women, which is different from men, like it or not it is a fact, we tend to have female characters that are very telling, very revealing, but this doesn’t mean that a man cannot also make incredible female characters. I think it is true that you carry with you a lot of experiences that will come out in your film.

Furthermore, when asked, ‘So being a woman is going to influence your work as a director?’ She answered:

I don’t see how it can’t, but that doesn’t mean that women can’t make films with incredible male characters, but there is a particular point of view, a focus, that I think will be there.

Part of Solberg’s rejection of the classification ‘woman’s filmmaker’ is tied up with her experience of being a member of the largest and most economically important country in Latin America. Before arriving in the USA she had never had to deal with being homogenised into the general category of citizen of Latin America. When she arrived however, she and everyone else from Latin America were placed into the same category of ‘Latina’. This is something she found strange and also very isolating. For this reason she rejects any attempt to become co-opted into one restrictive category.

It is so complicated to try not to fall into stereotypes. So at the same time I was interested in Latin America, I didn’t want to become know as the Latin American filmmaker or the woman’s filmmaker. You know it begins to restrict
you a lot. I think I came through that door when I did these two films on women […] Any time there was a problem about a woman they would call me and I would say, ‘can we talk about something else?’

Solberg also had a perceptive answer to give when faced with the question ‘do you think space has increased for women filmmakers in recent years’? To this she replied: ‘I don’t think spaces have opened up, I think women have opened them up’ agreeing that this was part of a general trend in which women have opened up space for themselves in society. Rather than see it as a passive relationship, Solberg therefore positions women as active subjects, and at the same time suggests what has been briefly touched upon in this section in general: that female film directors, through practical consciousness, their day-to-day struggle to thrive and produce, have been confronting the male-dominated industry through their work and have now carved out a legitimate space for themselves during this critically acclaimed period.

These comments by prominent Retomada filmmakers are insightful, giving some evidence of how women filmmakers see themselves and their work during the Retomada and in positing the idea of professional agency as a critical position that could be taken in the future. However, such analyses merely act to reinforce the point that female representation in general is something that must not be, as has currently been the case, analysed singularly. It is hoped that by uniting the descriptive, numerical or interview based accounts of women filmmakers, with close-textual analyses within their relevant socio-political context, a fuller picture of female agency will begin to emerge.
Chapter Three

The Brazilian Women’s Movement and Political Agency

Introduction

In order to highlight the inherent link between socio-political and filmic representations of women in Brazil and to address the issue of an overreliance on purely theoretical conceptions of the subject, a socio-historical contextualisation of the activities of the women’s movement in Brazil during the 1964-1985 dictatorship (and beyond into the 1990s) will now follow. Based on Sonia Alvarez’s thesis that the military regime inadvertently pushed women into the political arena in Brazil, I will illustrate how Brazilian women entered politics and consequently disseminated the message of gender equality, not as part of a discursive intention to confront patriarchy, but as a consequence of their quotidian survival strategies. The work of the women’s movement during the dictatorship will therefore serve as the contextualisation of my filmic analysis, which will illustrate the varied extent to which agency has filtered into the representation of women in Retomada cinema and beyond. Although this contextualization is only specific to the films O que é isso, Zuzu Angel and Cabra cega, it acts as representational to the general cerned context of patriarchy which exists in slightly different guises in Olga (the Vargas regime) and As três Marias (the landed Brazilian family of the northeast).

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44 Alvarez is one of the main theoreticians of women’s political mobilisation during the regime in Brazil and so plays a large part in this initial contextualisation. Many important texts that discuss the Brazilian women’s movement during the transition to democracy come back either to this book (Marques-Pereira and Raes, 2005) or to the original PhD thesis ‘The Politics of Gender in Latin America: Comparative Perspectives on Women in the Brazilian Transition to Democracy (Yale, 1986), which was obviously its starting point. See for example Cynthia Sarti (1989) and Francesca Miller (1991).
Agency at Grassroots Level

During the tumultuous months leading up to the 1964 coup in Brazil which would begin one of the longest dictatorships in Latin America, right-wing forces began to manipulate accepted ideas about the traditional role of the Latin American woman, in order to perpetuate a façade of stability in an otherwise volatile political environment. By appealing to deeply ingrained ideas about the importance of the family and women’s role in society, the military were able to use elements of the female population to propel itself into power. During this time it incited conservative middle-class women to march for ‘the Family, with God for Liberty’. Groups such as the Campanha da Mulher pela Democracia, Liga da Mulher Democrática, Movimento de Arregimentação Feminina, and the União Cívica Feminina organised mass demonstrations against the populist Goulart government. These women were participating in order to defend a way of life which they perceived to be under threat, in reaction to the right-wing’s rhetoric citing of the ‘communist menace’. After the military seized power in an April Coup women were relegated to their rightful domestic sphere in line with the traditional stance the patriarchal right took on gender relations. However, they continued to be used rhetorically to bolster the legitimacy of the regime. Despite wanting to keep women away from politics by prioritizing them as ‘spiritual beings of the nation’ as the dictatorship progressed the regime’s regressive political model catapulted women from all classes back into the centre of the political arena and this time in an oppositional capacity (Alvarez 1990: 5-6).

During the early 1970s cracks began to appear in the façade of the regime’s so-called ‘Economic Miracle’, part of an aggressive neo-liberal agenda designed to fast-track the development of the Brazilian economy. Although seeing some initial success, ultimately the country fell further into debt and economic dependence due
to an over-reliance on high-interest foreign loans. Those poorest sectors of Brazilian society bore the brunt of this in the form of poor housing, inadequate healthcare, regressive wage policies and higher living costs. Most pertinently, the failure of the government to provide enough social provision for working-class women during this time affected their ability to carry out the tasks to which they had been ideologically assigned, preventing them from doing the very thing it had instructed them to do: be good wives and mothers (Shaw 2005b: 12-16). The terrible social and economic conditions with which the poor in Brazil had to contend during this time gave rise to significant political participation by the urban working-classes and particularly by working-class women in the form of grassroots social survival groups. These movements formed mainly on the peripheries of the sprawling cities of Rio, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte, grossly overcrowded through economic overdrive. Women were forced to mobilise as a result of the government’s failure to intercede but the lack of official avenues of protest under authoritarian rule pushed them to search within their own communities, for survival strategies. These groups were to provide the organisational bases for some of the country’s most important social movements and more important, the bases for the mass mobilisation of the women’s movement in Brazil (Alvarez 1990: 39-43).

Such groups were not however ‘opposition movements’ in the traditional sense of the word and were initially mobilising in order to simply ‘go on’ with their daily lives. Furthermore, there was never any mention of a feminist discourse during this initial period and for many; feminism would never be an appropriate way in which to describe their political activities. However, by protesting against the inability to carry out their ideologically assigned duties these working-class women were practically confronting their cerned identity. Through this clashing of the
ideological with the individual, agency emerged and blossomed:

Thus, participants of popular movement organizations sometimes developed an oppositional consciousness and a combative political practice, as the regime’s inherent contradictions and its narrow class character were laid bare in its lack of responsiveness to popular demands (Alvarez 1990: 39).

Working-class women’s increasing action within the political arena must also be linked to contemporaneous ideological innovations within the Catholic Church in Latin America which had previously allied itself to the elite. In Brazil this conservatism had manifested itself in the clergy supporting the aforementioned marches of ‘the Family, with God for Liberty’. During the late 1960s however, the Church officially redrew its traditional view of society, and two important conferences were to contribute to this sea change. The Second Vatican Council and the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín in 1968, redefined the attitude of the Catholic Church towards social injustice in Latin America: ‘As Pope John XIII opened the Second Vatican Council and invited the Church to look at history and at the social processes, Latin America responded unanimously; more specifically, it reacted to the exhortation to give the theme of misery its proper importance in a continent of social injustice’. What followed was ‘a redefinition of the theocratic relation’ in which ‘the Church, which previously prioritised the elite, should now invert the perspective: relations should be foremost with those at the base of the social pyramid’ (Vieira 2000: 322). As a result many sectors of the Catholic Church in Brazil positioned themselves in opposition to the military regime and aided in the organization of the urban social movements. *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (BECs) were small community groups that would meet to discuss the application of faith to the struggles of daily life using the theoretical bases of this revolutionary idea: Liberation Theology. As Else Vieira
notes, referencing Frei Betto, through the BECs, ‘the Church provided a channel of expression for the socially excluded who gathered and took the floor, a site for political mobilization, enabling participation in popular opposition otherwise suppressed during the military dictatorship’ (324).  

Again women were to make up significant membership of these groups and although the Catholic Church’s view on the roles of women were hardly progressive, such groups did encourage women to participate more in the public sphere and helped to create networks which would become the organizational core of many important gender-based movements. For example the Struggle for Day Care Movement, the Cost of Living Movement, and the Feminine Amnesty Movement (Alvarez 1990: 62-9). Furthermore, as Marques-Pereira and Raes point out: ‘Local participation allowed women to set up an intermediary space between the private domain and the domain of the state. In this space movements expressed specific needs and translated them into demands addressed to local public authorities as well as to the state’. However, although through these groups women ‘were able to learn the skills of citizenship, leadership, and negotiation, and to legitimise their own social organization’, such organisations often bolstered or confirmed the traditional division of labour (2005: 70). Therefore at this point these women were acting solely to defend their roles as wives and mothers. However, after Geisel’s decompression policy allowed for the celebrations of the 1975 ‘UN Year of The Woman’, gradually women’s movements, feminists and female workers would begin to share political space and to articulate more concrete demands based on both Strategic and Practical Gender Interests.  

45 The most notable proponent of Liberation Theology was Leonardo Boff. Some important works, as noted by Vieira, include: O caminhar da Igreja com os Oprimidos: do Vale de lágrimas à Terra Prometida (1989) and Introducing Libertation Theology co-authored with Clodovis Boff (1990).  

46 Poor/working-class grassroots women’s groups made up a significant element of women’s agency during the dictatorship. However there were many more groups that contributed to female agency during this time than are mentioned here. To describe all the various groups and their particular aims is beyond
Women and the Resistance Movements

A transgressão feminina era maior porque ser mulher e criminosa consituiu uma dupla transgressão. A mulher que extrapolou seu universo doméstico e feminino para “agir como homem” receberia um estigma adicional por desafiar o “código de gênero de sua época”, tal como sucedeu com as mulheres que participaram da resistência armada (Moraes 2004: 308-309).

As four out of the five films that make up this corpus feature representations of female militants, an examination of how female members of armed resistance groups contributed to the articulation of female agency in Brazil will constitute the bulk of this contextual framework. The multiplicity of experiences recorded by these women will serve to illustrate how problematic it is to simplify the complex experiences of female militants, as happens in both O que é isso companheiro? and Olga and will show how well agency is illustrated in Zuzu Angel and Cabra cega.

The Ato Institutional V or A-I 5 of 1968 intensified political and social repression, closing Congress and access to opposition channels. This would see many on the left seek a policy of armed resistance in answer to the intensified repression of the regime. The ideology of these armed groups, whose fundamentally Marxist nature prioritised class as the primary obstacle to social emancipation, precluded the specific pursuit of gender interests. For this reason most of the women who joined did not enter wishing to specifically further the rights of their gender, believing the destruction of capitalism would break down all social barriers including those of gender and even race. Also, the disparate nature and relative disorganisation of these groups, compared to those in Cuba or Nicaragua for example, precluded a specific women’s arm. However, the shift from rural to urban guerrilla warfare as pioneered by Carlos Marighella, afforded

the scope of this thesis. For a detailed analysis of the complexities and varieties of Brazilian women’s movements see Alvarez (1990), particularly chapters two, three, four and five. The political activities of women workers can also be seen in Paola Cappellin Giuliani’s article (1997). For a general discussion of the activities of feminist groups, see Céli Regina Jardim Pinto (2003a) and Cynthia Sarti (1989).

47 This will be further discussed in chapter four.
women the best opportunity yet to participate in armed resistance. This was due to the increased presence of women in the universities, inherently linked to the left-wing struggle, and mostly concentrated in the large urban centres of Rio and São Paulo (Miller 1991:169-170). In fact women made up a surprising percentage of the urban armed resistance in Brazil during the dictatorship. In his article *As mulheres na política brasileira: os anos de chumbo*, Marcelo Ridenti provides a varied and detailed statistical analysis of this participation. He explains that women in urban armed resistance groups typically made up 18.3% of the total membership, and that the number of women from such groups that were judicially processed was between 15% and 20% of the total group number. He attests that, although this number may appear small, it was surprisingly significant considering the traditional role women played in political life in Brazil during the 1960s, and taking into account the fact that many guerrilla groups tended to avoid female membership and had historically failed to convert women into soldiers. Ridenti also points out that although 18.3% was perhaps not proportionate to the number of women in Brazilian society as a whole, it was close to the number of women who were economically active in Brazil during this time (1970) (1990: 114-115).

Women joined these groups for a number of different reasons: some independently, some becoming members through their partners or husbands. The personalities, beliefs and experiences of these women created a complex tapestry of female political participation not possible to generalise. The sheer diversity amongst these women can be seen in testimonial accounts such as *Mulheres, militância e memória* (Ferreira: 1996), *Memórias das mulheres do exílio* (Costa: 1980) and *A resistência da mulher à ditadura militar no Brasil* (Colling: 1997). For example, when asked about why they

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48 When I use the term ‘guerrilla’ it is with an acknowledgement that the scale and intensity of armed resistance was not the same in Brazil as in other Latin American countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua or Bolivia.
joined the resistance, women’s answers were wide-ranging: some felt socialism would dissolve inequalities between men and women (Ferreira 1996: 114), some joined because of a relationship and for a sense of belonging (118), some because of an emotional attachment (128), some because of an independent personal decision (Costa 1980: 247), and some because of the opportunity for social interaction (125). A politicised upbringing was also often the motivation for many women like Dulce Maia, the first woman to be arrested and tortured by the dictatorship (Carvalho 1998: 22-28). Some also admit to being attracted by the romantic utopianism of an ideology that promised profound social change, or because of the effervescent cultural scene the Left inhabited (Costa 1980: 356). Others felt a stronger sense of social injustice based on experience of poverty, as Damáris Lucena explains:

Eu já nasci na luta, do lado humilde. A pobreza, que às vezes me obrigou a catar comida no lixo, foi me deixando revoltada desde criança. Não entrei na luta porque achei o fulano bonito ou uma greve bonita. Entrei com consciência de classe, aquela que a gente vai criando quando quer estudar e não pode, quando quer comer um doce e não tem. A miséria foi sempre presente na minha vida (Carvalho 1998: 46).

Although most of the women came from the intellectualised middle-class student movements, there were also a number of working-class women involved. This is exemplified in *Cabra cega*, as we shall see. Amongst all this diversity however, these women did share a number of uniting beliefs. All joined because of a sense of frustration in their lives, with the *status quo*, with their country, and above all because of a profound sense of social injustice. Despite not dealing specifically with Brazil and describing guerrilla warfare more common to countries like Bolivia and Cuba, Karen Kampwirth provides a useful comment on why women joined Marxist resistance groups in Latin America: ‘The reasons women have given for participating in the
guerrilla struggle are similar to those given by men: to end the dictatorship, to end the 
exploitation of the poor and the indigenous, to create more just countries for their 
children’ (2002: 6). These women were motivated by the idea of social change having 
all experienced the lived reality of being a woman in Brazilian society, whether from 
the middle or the working-classes. Although few gave a gender-specific reason for 
participating, all joined as a way of rebelling against their prescribed social roles, 
believing Marxism would afford them sexual liberation and an opportunity to escape 
from patriarchal institutions such as marriage. Most important, their participation was 
a fundamental contribution to the breaking down of politico-spatial divisions in Brazil 
(Ridenti 1990: 114).

However, despite believing that the ‘Leninist principles of democratic centralism’49 
(that rhetorically characterised most of the organisations), would facilitate gender 
equality as part of the wider political agenda, women increasingly found a reactionary 
attitude to female gender roles, or worse, a total denial of the specificity of woman, as 
Sonia comments in Memórias das mulheres do exílio:

A teoria que pairava era que mulher e homem são iguais. A gente era militante, 
soldado da revolução, e o soldado não tem sexo! Era mais ou menos a história 
dos anjos sem sexo, os anjos redentores da libertação! Mas eu já sentia alguns 
problemas como mulher, por exemplo, os companheiros achavam que as 
mulheres não tem muita condição de participar das ações (Costa 1980: 248).

This contradictory stance in revolutionary theory, seeing women at once as sexless 
soldiers, yet at the same time unfit to complete tasks deemed specifically ‘male’, led to 
difficulties for female revolutionaries, drawing their attention to the problematic and 
hypocritical stance of these groups and to feelings of isolation. These feelings were 
compounded by their day-to-day experiences, particularly within the arena of personal

49 Phrase used by Angelina in Memórias das mulheres do exílio (Costa 1980: 249).
relationships, which often reinforced the boundaries society had so profoundly instilled in both sexes: those between men and women, and public and private spaces (Colling 1997: 67). This meant women were often given tasks such as cooking, caring, organising, the preparation and maintenance of safe-houses, and logistical roles, rather than being allowed to participate in the decision making process or to reach positions of authority (Alvarez 1990: 72). Vera Sílvia Magalhães attests to the difficulties involved in reaching a position of power as a woman:

Era uma guerra, enquanto mulher, ser de uma direção. Era uma coisa muito barra pesada, nada fácil para mim. Acho que em 1969 eu sairia da direção por mil outras razões, inclusive porque havia quadros novos surgindo. Mas houve um argumento fantástico, de que eu era uma pessoa instável emocionalmente. Só que as pessoas que diziam isso eram os homens que eu namorava’ (Ridenti 1990: 120).

Of the 13 women interviewed by Ferreira, only Catarina reached a high position of command within the hierarchy of her organisation (1996: 137). Although some women resented their subordinate positions within the armed groups, at the time they were not equipped with the discursive tools to express their frustration and it was only with hindsight that they recognised their specific oppression as women within these organizations (Alvarez 1990: 72). These women were confronting their censored condition both by actively participating in armed resistance and finding the ability to ‘go on’ amongst the difficulties presented by their male comrades. At this point agency was exerted through practical consciousness. The problems this situation created for women would become discursively manifested only later.

It must be remembered however that some women took heart from the sexless rhetoric of revolutionary theory. By manipulating or denying their gender specificity they felt better disposed to penetrate the higher echelons of the organisations. Nonetheless, discrimination still occurred, and women, still recognised as such by their male
comrades, had to work much harder to achieve the same stability within those higher positions. First, they had to break with their accepted social roles (which were being reinforced within the organisation daily), then they had to work their way up to the higher position in the same way as their male comrades. In Ferreira’s analysis, Angélica makes an interesting observation when discussing those women who did make the higher positions, describing them as ‘duronas e masculinizadas’ (1996: 138). This fits in with what Colling notes from talking to her interviewees: ‘A mulher militante negava-se enquanto mulher como forma de ocupar espaços nas organizações de esquerda que se caracterizavam pelo domínio masculino’ (1997: 68). Colling further develops the point about women’s views of each other by describing internal jealousies and rivalries that occurred between more masculinised women (serious political thinkers), and feminine women (merely concerned with social climbing). The words of the interviewees point to a situation whereby women felt they had to choose between the ‘feminine woman’, who took care of her appearance but who was politically ineffectual, and the masculinised or desexualised woman, who was taken (and took herself), more seriously as a political force. The terming by one ex-militant, Simone, of the revolutionary women as ‘deusas’, points to the sense of superiority some felt in rejecting their femininity (1997: 67-69). Clearly this type of behaviour stems from an ideology (instilled in both men and women), that sees the overtly feminine woman as an ineffective political force and the masculinised woman as an object of ridicule. Although some women justifiably choose not to conform to the ideal of the aestheticised, feminine woman, in this instance it is clear that most were not choosing this stance through their own conviction, but rather being forced to choose it as the only available strategy to try and exploit the patriarchal system. By rejecting femininity and taking on male traits, some of these women
believed they would be taken more seriously. This strategy had mixed results: on the one hand it may have allowed women to rise up the ranks more easily, but these women were not necessarily taken more seriously. This is shown by the fact that women rarely reached positions of authority, masculinised or otherwise, and by reading the accounts of the women militants who overwhelmingly describe what is now recognisable as sexual discrimination. The complexity of this situation is dealt with in the films with varying degrees of success. *O que é isso* for example perpetuates rather than problematises the perceived bi-polarity of women militants thus leading to character fragmentation and a preclusion of agency, as does *Olga, Cabra cega* and *Zuzu Angel* however, present the truly multifaceted nature of the militant woman and her internal contradictions; therefore narrative agency is successfully achieved.

In terms of personal relationships within the resistance groups, women often found themselves in almost impossible positions. For example, although rhetorically non-monogamous relationships were to ‘liberate’ women from the repressive institution of marriage, it often meant that such partnerships were oppressive to women, who were forced to tolerate adultery for the good of the revolution (Costa 1980: 249). Consequently, childbirth also became an issue, with which women dealt in different ways. Luzia, featured in Ferreira’s book, took her recently born child to meetings involving the higher echelons of the organisation and breastfed it in front of her male comrades, despite knowing they disapproved of her even having a child. This was a survival tactic that enabled her to agitate and thrive within the group. By refusing to tolerate male gender superiority on any level, Luzia carved out a position for herself in which she did not feel inferior as a woman. Her actions also practically acknowledged gender tensions within the group and were key to her later participation in more discursive, gender-specific politics (1996: 121). However, many women like Angélica
were forced to have an abortion (139) or, like Corina, had to go into hiding knowing a member of the group (in this instance a woman), disapproved of a relationship that had subsequently produced a pregnancy (139-140). Sonia, interviewed in *Memórias das mulheres no exílio*, describes how her beliefs in the revolutionary fight came into conflict with her ‘maternal instincts’. Her organisation wanted her to abort the child, a decision she found difficult having always wanted children (Costa 1980: 245). Some women like Damáris, even took their children with them when carrying out actions: ‘A Telma tinha 10 meses, mas foi junto, pra ajudar a disfarçar’ (Carvalho 1998: 47).

Militant women therefore exploited two large weaknesses within their cerned contexts. First they confronted the regime itself simply by joining the resistance groups. Second women’s experiences within these groups (which despite their democratic rhetoric refused to recognise women as legitimate political agitators), again led them to question their subordinate status first practically then discursively. Resistance for these women was therefore manifold and as a result, so was agency.

From the late 1960s onwards, evidence would begin to emerge, initially from within the women’s movement itself, that women had gone from articulating their agency practically to articulating it discursively; both from the point of view of a recognition of their specific needs as women and also by bringing these specificities into the public domain. A discourse of feminism would also become appropriate to some groups of women. All this would culminate in women’s issues becoming a major part of institutional and international politics in Brazil during the 1980s and 1990s.
Towards a Feminist Discourse\textsuperscript{50}

As the Economic Miracle began to reveal its contradictions and the 1968 AI-5 closed official channels of opposition ‘the dialectic of violence between armed organisations and state repressive forces continued to spiral’ (Alves 1985: 119). With it came the institutionalization of torture and the reality of exile or clandestine living. Many left Brazil, forced out either by the government or because of the risks and pressures of living in hiding. There were three waves of exile during the military dictatorship in Brazil. The first came after the initial \textit{coup} of 1964, in which people fled to other Latin American countries such as Cuba and Uruguay. Around 1970 many left for Chile, and after the 1973 \textit{coup} were forced to flee to Europe (Brito 1986: 63-67). It is this final destination of exile that is of interest here and in particular the arrival of a significant number of Brazilian women exiles in Paris, which came at an opportune moment in the development of one type of agency in Brazil, that is the discourse of Feminism. As we have seen, during the early to mid 1970s, European social movements were at their peak and the left were calling for a new political agenda that eschewed traditional hierarchical power relations (Pinto 2003a: 52). Brazilian women militants, accustomed to an unbending Marxist ideology and a repressive military regime, were confronted with an unfamiliar atmosphere of political freedom. As Angela Neves-Xavier de Brito explains: ‘We must not forget that most of them arrived in France in 1973, which saw the launching of the \textit{Mouvement pour la libération de l’avortement et la contraception}’

\textsuperscript{50} As described above, some articulations of female agency in Brazil are feminist and must be discussed as such. This is particularly the case with militant women who came into contact with academic feminist discourse during their time in exile. However, not all women militants would embrace ‘feminism’ despite being very much politically motivated towards female agency.
(Movement for the Freedom of Abortion and Contraception, MLAC)’ (1986: 69). Although for these women reconciling Marxist principles (instilled in them from within the national context), with new French feminisms was not an easy nor linear process, the establishment of specifically ‘feminist’ groups (those motivated towards SGI), of Brazilian women in Paris was linked to this environment of political freedom (Brito 1986: 69-70). The networks already in place in terms of political mobility facilitated the creation of the most important Brazilian feminist group in exile, the *Círculo de Mulheres Brasileiras em Paris*. This group was notable in that it had the specific agenda of enfranchising the particular rights and issues of women, viewing women’s interests as not simply subsumable under the general class struggle. It was also able, without fear of serious consequences, to disseminate the message of feminism publicly by organising meetings, leafleting and even sending information back home to groups of women mobilizing in Brazil, where such freedom of expression was still impossible (Pinto 2003a: 55). Reading the accounts of members of the *Círculo* in *Memórias das mulheres no exílio*, a consensus that the experience had returned a sense of self-realisation to these women, making them aware of their own relevance and subjectivity as women, is palpable. It is also clear that having the opportunity to meet other women and exchange ideas outside the context of the resistance groups was a liberating experience. For the first time women recognised their experiences mirrored in each other without rivalries, jealousies or suspicions that were characteristic of the Brazilian context, where women felt almost compelled to deny or disguise their womanhood. Furthermore, the experience of the *Círculo* allowed these women the opportunity to reconcile their sense of self with their wider political ideals. As Angela explains:

Em todo o processo de militância, por mais que houvesse uma tentativa de mudança do mundo, nós jamais pensávamos que tínhamos uma especificidade
enquanto mulheres. Éramos combatentes, militantes, ou seja, um homem inferior. Agora, pela primeira vez, a gente se arruma pra gente, pelo prazer de se sentir bem (Costa: 420-421).

It also gave women, many of whom had entered the resistance as the wife or girlfriend of a male militant (but had nonetheless made a significant contribution), the opportunity to carve out an autonomous political identity. This was not always possible in the Brazilian context where one was merely branded the wife or girlfriend of a male militant.

Back home, despite the climate of repression, small pockets of resistance still existed, especially at grassroots level but also amongst those middle-class students and intellectuals who had remained in Brazil. In 1972 lawyer Romy Medeiros da Fonseca, creator of the *Conselho Nacional de Mulheres* (1949), organised a congress which addressed those issues most pertinent to women, such as family planning and the discrimination against women across all areas of society. Prominent women authors and journalists such as Heleieth Saffioti, Rose Marie Muraro and Carmen da Silva also participated. Although Romy Medeiros had close relations with the military government, the conference was a brave move in such a climate and signalled a significant challenge to the dictatorship and therefore a significant breakthrough for female agency in Brazil. During the conference Fonseca was questioned by the military police on eight separate occasions (Pinto 2003a: 46-49).

In other areas some middle-class groups made up of militants and students, academics and professionals, began forming to provide ‘the organisational bases for nascent feminism in Brazil’ (Alvarez 1990: 90). These included groups of a more clandestine nature such as the one formed by Branca Moreira Alves in Rio de Janeiro in 1972. In dialogue with Danda Prado (living in exile in Paris at the time), this group would serve as an example of how Brazilian feminism would begin to establish a dialogue with
women abroad, and forge a stronger relationship with foreign theoretical models in the late 1970s (Pinto 2003a: 49, 54). This would form a specific type of discursive agency that was to become fundamental to the political mobility of the country in the decades to come.

Back home however such groups were cautioned by the traditional left not to simply become co-opted by ‘imperialist’ feminist models imported from the US and Europe that were seen as irrelevant and, more importantly, illegitimate. Legitimate feminist discourse therefore was still concentrated within a primarily Marxist approach to gender, meaning the fight for women’s agency was simply subsumed into the socially collective task of widening the political space in more general terms. (Alvarez 1990: 90-91). Whilst this was still a viable example of female agency, some women who had begun to organise discursively, in terms of a gender-specific ideology, found it frustrating:

Parece haver quase um pedido de desculpa dessas mulheres por estarem tratando de seus problemas naquela época quando o país precisava tanto de ações políticas. Enquanto no resto do mundo ocidental as mulheres procuravam discutir sua posição na sociedade, seu corpo e seu prazer, um punhado de mulheres brasileiras fazia a mesma coisa, mas pedindo desculpas (Pinto 2003a: 51).

1975: ‘The Year of the Woman’

Under increasing pressure to relax the repression on the population and because of the increasing failure of the ‘Economic Miracle’ to redress the widening wealth and wage disparities, the period 1974 to 1979 saw a very gradual reduction of political and social repression, with the Geisel government’s development of *distensão* or ‘policy of decompression’ (Alves 1985: 142). With it came the increasing visibility of those myriad social movements, amongst them many of the women’s movements described above, mobilised around various issues but mostly concerning calls for political
amnesty and more social and economic provisions, predominantly concentrated at grassroots level. Professional bodies such as the Brazilian Bar Association and the Brazilian Press Association also began using their status to call for greater civil liberties and human rights (160-166).

As part of ‘distensão’ women were also allowed to organise for the celebration of the United Nations International Year of the Woman in 1975. It was to begin a whole decade dedicated to women and the opening conference would be held that year in Mexico. This allowed women in Brazil to begin to discursively articulate their agency with more legitimacy in the eyes of the state. Even the regime had to concede to the international viability that the UN year had bestowed upon women. As other avenues of protest were still very much closed and the articulation of women’s rights were considered relatively innocuous, the celebrations also provided the oppositional left with a new platform from which to articulate their demands (Alvarez 1990: 91).

The creation of the Centro de Desenvolvimento da Mulher Brasileira was an important consequence of the activities and meetings that materialised over this important year, particularly the Encontro para o Diagnóstico da Mulher Paulista held in October 1975 which was a specifically female-centred offshoot of the I Encontro da Comunidade: São Paulo, O Povo, e Seus Problemas (Alvarez 1990: 92). Francesca Miller describes this event as concrete evidence for the new social conscience of the Church in Brazil (that had its official articulation at Medellín in 1968), sponsored as it was by the UN and the Metropolitan Episcopal Tribunal of

51 Celi Jardim-Pinto cites a conference held in Rio with the title ‘O papel e o comportamento da mulher na realidade brasileira’ as the catalyst for the creation of the Centro de Desenvolvimento da Mulher Brasileira. The conference however appears to have been organised by women with more of an overtly ‘feminist’ agenda than the conference in São Paulo (2003a: 56-57). Even so it is clear both had to avoid specifically feminist rhetoric in order not to arouse the Marxist left or the regime, both of whose support was vital at this stage.
São Paulo (1991: 194). The meeting addressed practical concerns of feminine grassroots groups, including the demand for day care, as well as questions regarding rights for women in the workplace and women’s health and education. Issues such as reproductive rights, abortion and discussions concerning women’s bodies and sexual freedoms were not on the agenda. This was not only in order to prevent provocation of the regime but also the Marxist left and the Church who at this stage still provided the organisational and ideological framework for the articulation of women’s interests in Brazil and who still believed the solution to the ‘woman’ question would be resolved with the ‘class’ question. Overtly feminist rhetoric, which continued to be associated with an ‘alien’ concept emanating from the US and Europe, was also avoided. Emphasis was therefore placed on socialist conceptions of gender issues, and particularly on the participation of middle-class women in the grassroots struggles of the poor working class (Alvarez 1990: 92-94).

Although wide-ranging in its activities, the Centro, which was the result of the various meetings in São Paulo, did encounter criticisms from more ‘radical’ feminists who condemned it for aligning itself with the general struggle and not dealing with the ‘real’ issues of women such as abortion, sexuality and issues associated with the body (Pinto 2003a: 59-60). The struggle for amnesty was also of paramount concern. In this respect the Movimento Feminino pela Anistia, instrumental in the campaign for political amnesty that bore fruit in 1979, was of particular importance (Pinto 2003a: 63).

As a result of the 1975 celebrations the bridge between feminine and feminist movements would begin to close. Women now realised the dual issues of SGI and PGI must be addressed in less polarised terms if female emancipation was to prove successful:
The endorsement by the Brazilian government of the goals of the United Nations Decade for Women – equality, development, and peace – opened the door further for organizing Brazilian women. Groups that had previously organised around “feminine” issues, such as child care and maternal health, and neighbourhood associations in which women came together to work for better housing, clean water, and lower food prices gradually began to insert the discussion of their specific disadvantages as women into their meetings (Miller 1991: 192).

Whilst embracing the class struggle in order to explore the woman question, middle-class feminists working within the urban peripheries also began to notice how feminine movements had provided poorer women with a platform from which to articulate their Specific Gender Interests. The groups shared a context that allowed them to talk to each other about issues in their personal lives such as sex, reproductive rights and the desire for more education (Alvarez 1990: 100-101). A further signal of this discursive approach to female agency was the articulation of gender-specific demands within the workplace carried out by women in relation to male co-workers within the trade unions during the late 1970s. The first and second Encontro da Mulher que Trabalha, held in 1977 and 1978 respectively, and the first congress of the Mulher Metalúrgica, in the ABCD region of greater São Paulo, was a sign that the specific must now be tackled along with the more general (Pinto 2003a: 66). Some women’s groups would now begin to break from the traditional bases and voice their concerns on a more autonomous level, realising the persistence of gender stereotypes within even in the most ‘progressive’ sectors (Marques-Pereira and Raes 2005: 73).

1979: The Amnesty Bill and the Consolidation of Discursive Agency

The 1979 Amnesty bill saw political reform and the opportunity for greater opposition to Government. It also allowed the return of some political exiles from abroad.

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52 ABCD is a primarily industrial area of greater São Paulo. It consists of a number of areas but is named after the four main municipalities Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, São Caetano do Sul and Diadema.
Bringing with them new ideas from Europe and the US, some of the women who had formed feminist groups whilst in exile clashed with those who had remained in Brazil and ‘ridden-out’ the repressive government policies (Brito 1986: 78). To compound the problem, women who had remained in Brazil had successfully created their own feminist movements, with their own nationally focused aims and agendas. However, at the same time as the relationship between these two groups of women was strained, it was also fruitful. For example, those women who had lived in France and Italy had had much success creating dialogue around pro-reproductive choices for women within these predominantly Catholic countries. This gave renewed hope to many in Brazil. Furthermore, issues that had been proscribed such as the idea of an autonomous women’s movement began to be given more discursive space (Alvarez 1990: 118-119). In fact by this time the women’s movement in Brazil had grown to encompass cross-class, and cross-regional tendencies. As part of the 1979 International Women’s Day celebrations, a myriad of both ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’ groups in São Paulo organised a major women’s conference. The First Paulista Women’s Congress is described by Sonia Alvarez as ‘one of the women’s movements’ most unique contributions to the struggle for a democratic Brazil’ in that it truly addressed the whole spectrum of class/gender issues. The idea was to embrace the multifaceted nature of the women’s movement in Brazil, which was continuing to fragment and to try and reach a consensus on women’s political and social rights (1990: 113-115).

53 Further problems would reveal themselves later. As Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda points out: ‘Between 1985 and 1996, women’s studies was the fastest growing research subject within ANPOLL, Brazil’s important Association for Literary and Linguistic Studies. However, a first observation to make is that most of our feminist scholarship has its focus abroad. Feminist scholars were often former political or voluntary exiles, or wives of exiles, who had left the country during the dictatorship, had contact with international feminist studies, and from this distance gained a new perspective on Brazil’s contradictory discourses and social practices relating to gender relations. On their return home, they first found jobs in Brazilian departments of French and English, focusing mainly upon English and French authors, paying little attention to Brazilian writers. Many said they often felt lost when working with Brazilian literature, as though the feminist theories they had learned just could not fit the analysis of Brazilian novels and poetry’ (2002: 324).
By 1981 Brazil had returned to a multi-party political system. This brought with it new challenges for the women’s movement mostly surrounding the autonomization versus the institutionalization of women’s demands. Some groups would opt for alliance with the political parties and others would distance themselves from politics altogether, seeing this as co-optation. Others would occupy a transitional space somewhere between the two. Overall however, women’s insertion into the male domain of politics proved instrumental in implementing the concrete demands of women in their day-to-day lives:

Although women’s participation in politics brought about divisions within the movement, it did lead to the inclusion of some of their demands in party platforms and programs. It was also crucial to the process of institutionalizing such demands. Partisan competition and the courting of the female electorate played a role in politicizing gender issues in Brazil in the 1980s. No party could afford to ignore women voters or women’s demands, and issues once considered as belonging to the private domain, such as violence against women, day care or contraception, made their way into party programs and candidates’ speeches (Marques-Pereira and Raes 2005: 77).

This discursive expression of female agency in this context, for example addressing women’s specific issues in the form of policies, documents, papers and electoral campaigns, became manifest by the end of the decade, for example via the Conselho Nacional da Condição da Mulher in 1985. This was part of the Ministry of Justice, but with autonomy of its own. Its role was to articulate the demands of feminists and the women’s movement in general within government (Pinto 2003a: 72). The council was instrumental in organising a nationwide campaign that would insert gender-specific demands via the Carta das Mulheres a Assembleia Nacional Constituinte into the 1988 Constitution (Marques-Pereira and Raes 2005: 78). Other organisations were also set up such as the Conselho Estadual da Condição Feminina, which was the result of the Partido Movimento Democrático Brasileiro’s, coming to power in 1982 (Alvarez

54 For more information on O Conselho, the Carta das Mulheres and the 1988 constitution see Pinto (2003a: 69-79) and Alvarez (1990: ch. 9 and 10).
In 1985 the *Delegacia de Polícia de Defesa da Mulher* was also set up in São Paulo which provided female-run-only police stations that encouraged women to report domestic violence and abuse (Blay 2001: 88). It was during this decade also that feminism in Brazil would begin to develop within educational institutions. The founding text of academic feminism is perhaps Heleith Saffiotti’s *A Mulher na sociedade de classes: mito e realidade* (1969). Many centres for women’s studies in universities also established themselves and continue to be important today, for example the *Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero* or PAGU at the University of Campinas in São Paulo. It publishes the eminent feminist journal *Cadernos Pagu*, named after Patrícia Galvão, a prominent figure of first wave feminism in Brazil. Another important centre for women’s studies is NEMGE (*Núcleo de Estudos da Mulher e Relações Sociais de Gênero*), based at the University of São Paulo. Other publications such as the *Revista de Estudos Feministas* published by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) is also worthy of note, as is *Fêmea*, published by the NGO CFEMEA (*Centro Feminista de Estudos e Assessoria*). The Federal government also has an internet page dedicated to women’s issues (Pinto 2003a: 93). Virtual libraries and citation websites such as the *Portal Feminista* also allow online access to an extensive bank of information that now exists on Brazilian women. Finally, the Carlos Chagas Foundation, as well as the Ford Foundation have also been instrumental in funding various academic publications concerning women’s issues in Brazil.

**The 1990s**

55 In 2001, 125 of these were established in São Paulo State and near to 250 in the rest of Brazil. They have also been established in other countries in Latin America (Blay 2001: 88).
56 Another key text is: Branca Moreira Alves’ *Ideologia e feminismo: a luta da mulher pelo voto no Brasil* (1980).
57 For web addresses see bibliography.
Perhaps using the UN Year of the Woman as a marker, the various meetings, seminars and conferences organised by different sectors of the women’s movement in Brazil, as well as the increase in academic publications and journals, shows how female agency in Brazil has clearly gone through a transition from being practically to discursively articulated. This political agency, which has been accompanied by an acknowledgement, in these discussions, of a gender identity specific to women, became even further defined during the 1990s.

Despite a decrease in women’s practical activism (which occurred not only in Brazil), women’s issues would begin to populate public discussion ever more frequently: ‘Se, por um lado, a década 1990 não foi especialmente propícia à expansão dos movimentos sociais, havendo mesmo um retraimento da maioria deles, por outro nela foram criadas as condições para que suas demandas fossem incorporadas por largas parcelas dos discursos públicos’ (Pinto 2003a: 92).

Another issue, noted above, was the increase in women’s issues gaining more currency in electoral campaigns. Although this was not proof that society had suddenly conceded to the demands of the women’s movement, it was perhaps proof that women’s issues were now part of a legitimate political discourse and could win votes (2003a: 93). In an earlier article which examines women’s political participation and representation, Céli Jardim Pinto gives details of the legislation that accompanied one strand of this discursive ‘opening up’ of political space. In 1995, a law which established a minimum quota for the inclusion of women candidates in electoral lists was established. The first law required a minimum of 20% female candidates in lists for the elections of 1996. In 1997 this quota increased to 30% for the elections of 2000 and an intermediary quota of 25% for the elections of 1998. The law did not immediately make a huge difference to the participation of women in party politics:
many parties simply invented candidates or ignored the legislation. However, it did encourage some small movement towards female participation in party politics (2001: 99-102).

Pinto’s argument is complex and addresses the wider issues of women’s roles in public/private life. However, I want to take her discussion of NGOs as being one of the main mediators between the women’s movement and institutional politics, as evidence of the more discursive nature of women’s agency in Brazil during the 1990s. Pinto outlines the NGO as an important alternative to party political participation that involved both those groups that can be termed feminist, as well as those who participated in the grassroots social movements (104).

Pinto describes three types of NGO in her analysis. She begins with those run by professional women whose principal role is to mediate a space for women in the Brazilian legislative process. The *Centro Feminista de Estudos e Assessoria*, CFEMEA, acting in conjuction with the Congresso Nacional is the most pertinent example of this: ‘A importância desse tipo de organização não está no número de mulheres que articula ao redor de si, mas na sua capacidade de provocar eventos e ações de grande repercussão além do próprio trabalho de assessoria legislativa e publicações de interesse das mulheres que pretendem se integrar na política (2001: 110). As we have seen, it also publishes the journal *Fêmea*, giving yet another example of how women’s agency is more discursively produced during this decade.

The second type of NGO works in the area of services such as advocacy (for example *Themis - Themis Assessoria Jurídica*) or health services. The *Rede Nacional Feminista de Saúde* which works together with *Direitos Reprodutivos*, collectively forming *RedeSaúde*, is an example of how networks of NGOs are important in the legislative process of women’s health. Formed in 1991 *RedeSaúde* comprises 110 branches in 20
states. Again, referring to the discursive nature of women’s agency in the 1990s Pinto describes how ‘A RedeSaúde tem tido um importante papel no acompanhamento da implantação de políticas públicas referentes à saúde da mulher’. A further example of this is how, together with the Ministry of Health and the Legislature, it played an active role in promoting legal abortion clinics in public hospitals (2003a: 102).

Another important example of how female agency became discursively produced during the 1990s and for Pinto an important example of how NGOs constitute an alternative to party political participation is a document entitled ‘Propostas para o estado brasileiro – níveis federal, estadual e municipal – medidas concretas para o enfrentamento da violência contra a mulher no âmbito doméstico/familiar’, developed in 1998 by three important NGOs in Brazil: CFEMEA, CEPIA (Cidadania, Estudo, Pesquisa, Informação e Ação) and Themis. Together with CLADEM (Comitê Latino-Americano e do Caribe para Defesa dos Direitos da Mulher) and in conjunction with the Commission on Human Rights in the Brazilian parliament, this document, which calls for concrete policies geared towards women at the level of the executive, legislature and judiciary, is an important example of how NGOs in networks can penetrate the legislative process in Brazil. Pinto explains its recommendations:

Para o Poder Executivo recomenda políticas públicas, campanhas e programas educativos [...] para o Legislativo, recomenda a aprovação de leis que garantam recursos orçamentários, reformulação de códigos; para o Judiciário recomenda medidas de sensibilização das autoridades judiciárias, como promoção de cursos para seus funcionários (2001: 111).

Lastly she cites those NGOs which she describes as similar to the social movements of the 1980s in structure, and whose work is to organise women to act not in a professional capacity directly with the State, but in a popular capacity promoting women’s empowerment within their own communities and popular spheres. As such,
these appear to promote a more practical approach to agency. She cites the *Movimento das Mulheres Sem Terra and Movimento das Mulheres Negras Geledés* (2003a: 105, 2001: 110). Pinto concludes her detailed analysis of NGOs in Brazil by mentioning an important network known as the AMB (*Articulação da Mulher Brasileira*) which was created in order to prepare Brazilian women for the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (2001: 111).

Despite Pinto citing some aspects of the NGO as examples of alternative forms of political participation for women in Brazil, in contrast to institutional politics, Sonia Alvarez provides a more thorough analysis of this situation in her article on the internationalization of Latin American feminism, which shows that the AMB in particular, as well as meaning political empowerment for women, is also considered by some as a further example of this institutionalization.

Alvarez explains that the AMB coalition ‘launched an unprecedented nationwide effort focused on drawing public attention to the importance of international conventions on women’s rights and raising public awareness of gender inequality’ (1998: 309). The AMB secured funding from the Ford Foundation, the McArthur Foundation and various other European agencies and aided the creation of women’s movement forums in twenty-five of Brazil’s twenty-six states. She goes on:

> State women’s forums promoted ninety-one local meetings and debates to evaluate progress towards women’s equality over the course of the two UN – designated “decades for women” […] Over eight hundred women’s organizations were involved in this unprecedented national articulatory process, unquestionably infusing renewed mobilizational energies into local women’s movements – especially in more remote areas of Brazil where the movement was still weak or incipient (1998: 309).

Alvarez also describes how during this preparatory process for Beijing, between 1993 and 1995, there were many conferences, seminars and meetings between all kinds of feminist groups which would contribute to discursive articulation of women’s rights

Alvarez further discusses how, during the 1990s, the distinction between Feminist and Feminine political activity, that she had argued characterised much of the 1970s and 1980s, was becoming more and more blurred. She cites what she terms ‘the Beijing process’ (the preparatory process Latin American women participated in for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in August and September 1995), as proof of this blurring:

The Beijing process further revealed that the once-rigid boundary between feminists and nonfeminists was also being challenged by new movement actors who insisted on resignifying feminism and who claimed to enact their feminist politics in a wide range of arenas. With the expansion of black feminism, lesbian feminism, popular feminism [...] and so on, the mid-1980s and 1990s witnessed the proliferation of new actors whose political –personal trajectories often differed significantly from those earlier feminists (now referred to as the “históricas,” or historic feminists), whose discourses emphasised the ways in which race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and so on are constitutive of gender identities, and whose practices sometimes differed from the cultural politics of the early years of Latin American feminism (Alvarez 1998: 300-301).

However, as Alvarez goes on to outline there were indeed tensions during this process, which relied largely upon professional feminists working within the context of the international development community and utilizing funding from outside agencies. Many of those women involved in the wider women’s movement objected to such institutionalization and international cooptation which often precluded working class or grassroots women’s movements (1998: 311-315).

Whilst the ‘NGOization’ of the women’s movement in Brazil, which increasingly relies upon networks and dialogues with outside agencies and professional funding bodies, does risk marginalizing other forms of ‘cultural-political intervention – such as local mobilization and conscientización work with women of the popular classes’ this has had some positive effects in terms of bringing women’s agency a discursive
context, making it an intrinsic part of ‘institutional-political arenas’ in the form of documents and policies and in terms of its serious discussion by governments and social institutions (1998: 315-317).

Although making a major impact on women’s social, economic and political visibility and representation, the activities of women during the dictatorship and beyond are a comparatively small step in the longer and wider battle to address gender inequality in Brazil. In the report on the fourth conference of REDEFEM\textsuperscript{58} (\textit{Rede Brasileira de Estudos e Pesquisas Feministas}), Eva Alterman Blay describes how, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the problem of implementing proposed changes for women is still a major issue. This is despite the real constitutional gains achieved in this area from the 1980s onwards by the women’s movement in Latin America. She points out that problems concerning women and poverty, women and violence, women and war, and women and power are still very much salient issues (2004: 29).

**Provoking Agents**

Reworking Judith Gardiner’s rather ingenious title (Provoking Agents), it is clear the Brazilian authoritarian dictatorship (through its regressive economic, social and political policies), as well as the gender-blindness of leftwing militant groups, provoked Brazilian women into becoming agents. To return to Anthony Giddens’ theory of agency, it must be recalled that agency comes not from a set of concrete goals but through the ability to act, and that most of this action is manifested in terms of practical consciousness, simply ‘going on’ with one’s daily life. Furthermore, we should reiterate the point that actors maintaining a theoretical knowledge of what they are doing, an inherent feature of human conduct, ‘should not be equated with the

\textsuperscript{58} For web address see bibliography.
discursive giving of reasons for particular items of conduct, nor even with the capability of specifying such reasons discursively (1984: 5-6). As we have seen, Brazilian women, both militant and those at grassroots level, acted not because of a ‘consciously held’ goal to address women’s specific inequalities but out of a necessity to ‘go on’ with their daily lives. It was not initially the discursive ‘intention’ of the grassroots women to contribute to a rearticulating of women’s rights in the country through their community based mobilization. Indeed confronting their gendered inequalities (their cerned context) was not initially discursively manifested. Similarly, the women who entered the militant leftwing did not intend to disseminate the wider message of feminism throughout the country and abroad but this was a consequence of their lived realities within these organizations. In terms of the reflexive nature of human agency, proposed by both Giddens and Smith, it was the weaknesses inside these cerned contexts, the economic miracle and the patriarchal Marxist left, that led these women to act not only in defence of their human liberty but also in defence of their specific gendered oppression.

As we have seen, these women also engendered political agency, that is a transition from practically to discursively exhibiting their agency, seen in the way women's issues have now become an important part of social and political campaigns and legislation. In this case discursive agency is characterised by these women connecting with their specific gendered identities, calling for policies and documents which addressed their problems and rights as women.

Although no direct causal relationship can be established, the changes that the movement effected in the day-to-day lives of women are mirrored in the Retomada. This is evident in the dramatic increase in numbers of successful mainstream feature-length female directors during this time period, the way female film directors
practically connect with female agency in their films and the recent (particularly within the last decade) increase in notable female characters in prominent narrative positions. Political agency is also in evidence in the two films that most successfully deal with narrative agency, in that the characters show discursive awareness of their political contexts.
Chapter Four

O que é isso companheiro? The Removal of Narrative Agency from the Militant Woman

Introduction

As duas mulheres também são uma invenção do roteiro: acho que os autores pretendiam apresentar lado afirmativo da Vera Sílvia (a Fernanda Torres) e o lado doce da Vera Sílvia (a Cláudia Abreu). O personagem de Fernanda Torres está muito caricatural (Daniel Aarão Filho)\(^59\)

Bruno Barreto’s 1997 film *O que é isso companheiro?* (Bruno Barreto, 1997) is set during one of the most repressive periods of the country’s military dictatorship. The film charts the true story of the *MR-8* leftwing resistance group that kidnapped the US Ambassador in 1969.\(^60\) This was in protest against the oppressive measures the dictatorship had introduced on civil liberties and as part of a socialist agenda that had been suppressed with the 1964 coup.

The majority of characters in *O que é isso companheiro?* lack narrative agency. However, it is by looking at the two female characters, Maria and Renée, that this becomes particularly clear. This foreclosing of narrative agency manifests itself in a variety of ways. First, by dividing the militant woman (these two characters are in fact based upon just one woman, Vera Sílvia Magalhães) between two stereotypical polar opposites, the film presents a fragmentary representation of the militant woman. Second, these two characters, although beginning with the potential to direct the narrative, or at least play a key role in the film’s development, are forced, by their positioning and treatment by other characters, into roles where they possess little narrative autonomy. This is compounded by little illustration, within the *mise-en-

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59 Interview with Helena Salem (1997c).
60 This stands for *Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro* or Revolutionary Movement 8 October. So called to commemorate the death of Che Guevara, whose revolutionary actions and book, *Guerrilla Warfare*, inspired many of the left-wing militant groups in Latin America.
scène, of the characters’ practical consciousness, that is, scant evidence that the female characters may be confronting their cerned contexts.

The film impressed critics both at home and abroad; an engaging narrative and shrewd marketing and distribution policies leading it to become a major success. Consequently, it is now widely accepted as one of the most internationally recognised films of the Retomada. It was produced by LC Barreto (Luis Carlos Barreto Produções Cinematográficas), the director’s father’s production company, and co-produced by Sony Corporation and Columbia Pictures. It was distributed by Columbia Tri-Star in Brazil and internationally by Miramax. Bruno Barreto is also what could be described as an ‘international’ director, returning from a successful filmmaking career in the US61 to direct his first ‘Brazilian’ work since the major box-office success Dona Flor e seus dois maridos/Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands (1976).62 The aggressive marketing of the film ensured it was nominated for an Oscar in the 1997 Best Foreign Language Film category. The inclusion of American sources in the project is clear, not only in terms of financing, marketing and distribution, but this is also obvious in some aspects of the mise-en-scène, as well as the Anglo-Brazilian soundtrack and inclusion of American actors.63 The film was also given the specifically English title Four Days in September in order to appeal to Anglophone audiences. In fact on a VHS or DVD copy of the film released in the US, the cover and ‘blurb’ are written in English, as if it were an English Language film. Also, actor Alan Arkin features in the main

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61 Whilst working in the USA Barreto directed, amongst others, A Show of Force (1990) starring his then wife actress Amy Irving, and Carried Away (1996), again with Irving and also Dennis Hopper. See Bruno Barreto’s profile as listed on the Internet Movie Database. Details in bibliography.

62 According to the LC Barreto website this film ‘was seen by more than 12 million Brazilians and commercially in over 80 countries of the entire world’ (my translation). According to the Guia da Folha, a weekly entertainment guide published with the Folha de São Paulo, this film remains the most watched in Brazilian history with 10.7 million spectators (March 2007: 9).

63 The soundtrack to the film was composed by ex-’Police’ drummer Stewart Copeland. See cast/crew list on the Internet Movie Database. Details in bibliography.
photographic image on the sleeve, revealing no clues at all that the film is Brazilian and, mostly spoken in Portuguese.

Taking the international focus of the film into account, an additional argument that arises is that the generally poor representation of narrative agency in this film can be viewed partly as the result of the production team’s clear search for international box-office success. Whilst this appears to have compromised the nuanced telling of a particularly sensitive period in Brazilian history and has affected the portrayal of all of the characters, it is particularly the women who have suffered. The same cannot be said of the well-documented loss of agency of the male characters, who retain most of the critical focus.

In order to illustrate how the facile representation of women in this film differs from their real-life experiences, this chapter will provide an analysis of the two main female characters Maria and Renée, accompanied by a comparison with the eponymous book, by journalist Fernando Gabeira, upon which the film is based. The testimonies of Vera Sílvia Magalhães, on whom the two female characters in the film are based, will also be used as evidence.

**The 1964 Coup**

In early April 1964 a bloodless military *coup* unseated the populist leader João Goulart from government and he fled to Uruguay. A dictatorship of over twenty years was to follow reaching its most repressive peak during the years 1969 to 1973. Military intervention in 1964 responded to the fears of the landed oligarchy, who, despite maintaining their position at the political helm, began to fear the increase in political mobilisation from the left, and particularly university students, artists, intellectuals and rural workers. Students were represented mostly by the UNE (*União National dos
Estudantes) and the UEEs (União Estaduais de Estudantes). These groups were particularly well mobilised, not only defending their own interests in terms of university reform, but also championing other social issues, associating themselves with national reformist groups and often disseminating their message via artistic and cultural events (Toledo 2004: 70). A significant rumble of unrest was also to be heard from rural workers in the form of the Ligas Camponesas, who were keen for agrarian reform and leaning towards a socialist solution to the land problem in Brazil.64 These issues by themselves could not threaten the military might of the traditional elites, but fears were also fuelled by tensions in world politics such as the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution and the increasing political visibility of civil rights movements. At home this unease was aggravated and facilitated by president Goulart's pursuit of agrarian reform, his tacit support of trade unionism and his wavering over other important issues, namely the failure to tackle an increasingly unstable economy. A bloodless take-over and a relatively straightforward usurping of power resulted in many on the left feeling frustrated and disillusioned as the promise of socialist reform evaporated. The failure of any counter action to the coup would lead to profound self-criticism within revolutionary groups (Ridenti 1993: 27-28).

As the 1960s drew to an end, the intensification of extreme economic measures (the Economic Miracle) was accompanied by a series of increasingly repressive social policies intended to curb political freedoms. This phase was marked by the inauguration of President Arthur da Costa e Silva in March 1967. As he began his term, a deeper rumble of dissent emanated from various sectors of the population, again from politicised students, artists, intellectuals and particularly the Tropicália

64 The Ligas Camponesas fought against the eviction of agricultural workers and tenant farmers from their working land by latifundio owners. They had a large presence in the northeast and fought against the oligarchic nature of Brazilian agriculture, and society in general, sometimes via armed conflict (Toledo 2004: 72).
movement, such as the musicians Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso.\footnote{Tropicália was a term coined by artist Hélio Oiticica taken from his eponymous installation first held at the New Brazilian Objectivity exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio in 1967 (Basualdo 2005: 13,16). It blossomed into a cultural movement in the late 1960s also enfranchising music, and is most often associated with Gil and Veloso who, along with other influential musicians of the time, created the landmark album Tropicália ou Panis et Circencis (Dunn 2005: 69). Its tone was avant-garde and contained some of the influences of the anthropophagite movement of the 1920s. As a movement however it was short lived and faded out when Veloso and Gil returned from exile in 1972 (Dunn 2005: 76). However its influences continue to be seen. For example in 2006, the New Brazilian Objectivity exhibition was updated in the form of the Tropicália exhibition held at the Barbican in London.} It was the murder of working-class student Edson Luís de Lima Souto in March 1968 by military police (during a peaceful protest about the price of meals in his school canteen), that led the students, and indeed the whole population’s, political grievances to deepen. This would eventually lead to the famous \textit{Passeata dos 100 mil}, a massive protest march held on the 28\textsuperscript{th} June 1968 in Rio de Janeiro (Alves 1985: 84- 85).

On 13\textsuperscript{th} Dec 1968, the \textit{Ato Institutional V} or \textit{A-I 5} was declared. It was a measure that would suspend all civil liberties including \textit{habeas corpus}, increase media censorship, close Congress and plunge Brazil into arguably its darkest age. As the government clamped down on dissenting voices, many of Brazil’s most famous and influential artists were forced into exile including famous cineaste Glauber Rocha and musician Chico Buarque de Hollanda. It was within this context that some leftwing resistance groups intensified their campaigns and took up arms. These groups were numerous, disparate and had varied political profiles, but they were all influenced by the theory of \textit{foquismo}, the Cuban Revolution and relied heavily on the works of Che Guevara.\footnote{Foquismo was a theory of revolutionary warfare that believed small groups of armed individuals could spark a national armed rebellion. Régis Debray, heavily influenced by the Cuban Revolution and having fought with Che Guevara in Bolivia, was one of the principal theoreticians of \textit{foquismo} (Alves 1985:104-105).} To describe all the different movements and their particular ideologies is too great a task for this study.\footnote{Marcelo Ridenti provides a detailed study of the characters, ideologies and motivations of these groups in \textit{O fantasma da revolução brasileira} (1993).} What is relevant here however is that it was the actions of one of these groups, the \textit{MR-8}, that led to one of the most daring and momentous acts in Brazilian political history: the kidnapping of the US Ambassador to the United States.
A “loura dos assaltos” - Vera Sílvia Magalhães

Vera Sílvia Magalhães, a sociologist and economist from Rio de Janeiro was the only woman involved in the kidnapping of the US Ambassador in September 1969. Twenty-one years old at the time, she and her comrades carried out one of the boldest acts in Brazilian political history. Despite being an audacious and risky undertaking, the kidnapping achieved its aim, which was the release of 15 political prisoners being held by the military and a statement by the group condemning the brutal dictatorship to be brought to the attention of the public via a media broadcast. She was imprisoned in March 1970 whilst out leafleting the Rio favela of Jacarezinho. She was shot in the head during her capture and suffered terrible torture at the hands of the military police which temporarily paralysed her. However, Vera Sílvia was liberated from prison a few months later in exchange for the safe release of German Ambassador Ehrenfried Von Holleben, who was kidnapped in June 1970. She was then taken to Algeria, spending some years in exile, and returned to Brazil in 1979. Until relatively recently she worked as a civil servant in the state planning department of Rio de Janeiro. After suffering years of ill-health, she died in December 2007.

Vera’s upbringing was privileged and her background middle-class, but she was never far from socialist influences. Her father was a Communist sympathiser and her uncle (who was a member of the Communist party), gave her a copy of the Communist Manifesto for her 12th birthday. On entering university this political education was to be furthered. As we have briefly seen, resistance groups were intrinsically linked to the universities in Brazil and many armed groups, largely made up of students formed as the dictatorship gained greater power. In 1967, as an Economics student at UFF

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69 For a full version of the demands of the MR-8 see Alberto Berquó (1997: 67-69).
70 For more information see Ridenti (1993: 115-149).
(Universidade Federal Fluminense) in Rio, Vera was able to define her political role before entering the armed struggle and becoming a prominent member of the DI-GB (*Dissidência do PCB da Guanabara*). This was a splinter group of former student members of the PCB (*Partido Comunista Brasileira*). As Ridenti explains: ‘Entre 1965 e 1968, as bases universitárias romperam com o Partido em todos os cantos do território nacional, constituindo as conhecidas dissidencias estudantis, as “DIs”’ (1993: 28). One of the principal leaders of this split was Carlos Marighella, who would form the radical ALN (*Aliança Libertadora National*). Vera would later become a member of the more militant department of the DI-GB, the FTA (*Frente de Trabalho Armado*). This would eventually become the MR-8, and organise, (along with the ALN), the 1969 kidnapping referred to above.71

In an interview with Helena Salem, Vera Sílvia explains how the group was required to learn the theories of Marx and Engels, as well as the philosophies of Kant and Hegel; also to read the books of national political thinkers and historians such as Caio Prado Jr. and Wanderley Guilherme. As well as this they received arms and strategy training. Vera talks passionately of her generation, describing how they were motivated by a profound need to realise social change, and that this was their dream. She also talks of her cultural influences: cinema, theatre, music, also mentioning *Tropicalismo* (1997a: 63-64). Like so many others her age around the world, 1968 was a seminal year. However, her revolutionary hopes were specifically for Brazil:


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71This information regarding Vera’s political background was gleaned from three main sources: (Carvalho 1998: 168-181), (Salem, 1997a), (Santos, 2004) and (Gaspari 2002: 88, 296).
As well as her cultural and theoretical knowledge, Vera also played a key practical role in the planning, preparation and execution of the kidnapping. Her first task was to appropriate funds to finance it. Days before the abduction, she and other members of the group carried out an assault on a Rio federal deputy Edgar Guimarães de Almeida, who lived on the Avenida Atlântica in Copacabana. They posed as an editorial team from the magazine *Realidade*, Vera impersonating an art critic/journalist, the others masquerading as photographers and reporters. Although accounts vary slightly (Berquó 1997: 46-49, Gabeira 1996: 96-97), the team carried out a successful assault and escaped with a large quantity of US dollars. As Vera describes:

*Levamos todos aqueles troços do equipamento fotográfico, e de repente aparecemos com revólveres e metralhadora, esta guardada na maleta do “fotógrafo”. Era um apartamento imenso, com muita gente dentro. A conversa inicial foi chamar todo mundo pra sala, pra tirar fotografia. Recolhemos dinheiro, jóias e quadros […] Mas na hora H o cara teve um problema grave no coração. O comandante da ação, João Lopes Salgado […] interrompeu tudo para atender o deputado […] Demorou coisa de 30, 40 minutos, mas o resultado foi bom. Foi uma ação bombástica de propaganda armada (Carvalho 1998: 175).*

Vera was also a key part of the preparation stage of the kidnapping, infiltrating the US Embassy in order to gain information regarding the Ambassador’s daily routine. Without her involvement the feat would have been impossible. In an interview with the newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* Daniel Aarão Reis Filho (former member of the MR-8), explains the fundamental significance of Vera’s actions: ‘A Vera Sílvia fez um trabalho muito importante da ação, indo à porta da embaixada, engabelando os seguranças’ (Salem, 1997c).
One Woman’s Struggle? Vera, Maria and Renée

Given her fundamental importance to Brazilian political history, her unrelenting commitment to the resistance, as well as her physical involvement in the 1969 kidnapping, it is unsurprising that Vera Sílvia Magalhães was unhappy with her portrayal in O que é isso, where her character is divided into two female stereotypes: the masculine hard-line Maria (Fernanda Torres) and the softer, more feminine Renée (Claúdia Abreu). By conforming to a bi-polar representation of woman, a variation on the virgin/whore dichotomy, Barreto presents the age-old idea that a woman inhabits a space that is either/or, rather than being the complex multifaceted subject that the Brazilian militant woman clearly is.

Vera’s first incarnation, Maria, is presented as a masculinised militant woman. This is not initially problematic: her masculinity can be justified as a façade she has adopted in order to assert herself within the (mostly male), group as we have seen with some of the women described in chapter three. However, the problems appear because Maria is not given the narrative opportunity to confront her concerned context of the male-dominated group. For example we see no evidence of practical or discursive consciousness that would explain her sometimes exaggerated, stereotypical male behaviour. Therefore Maria comes across as a woman who is struggling with her gender identity but without any explanation of why this is so. Her position as just one simplified element of the many facets of the militant woman therefore means her agency is primarily challenged through fragmentation of character.

Maria is masculinised via the style and colour of her clothes, her body language, her voice and physical frame. She is mostly seen wearing men’s trousers and shirts (either brown or green to fit in with her militant status), that are loose rather than figure-hugging or fitted. In this way we are given no access to any part of her body that may
betray her as biologically female. In fact the actress Fernanda Torres is deliberately cast for her boy-like, androgynous figure. She is thin, sinewy and her sharp lines are accentuated by these plain, straight clothes that disguise any softer, feminine lines or womanly ‘curves’. Her sharply defined facial features are framed by shoulder length hair, which is often dishevelled. Maria also displays an unconvincing adoption of stereotypical male traits such as an overtly aggressive tone, a deep voice (which is clearly forced), a constant scowl and a failure to show any emotion other than a feigned practical and focused motivation. Her stance too is often unconvincingly masculine with legs apart and hands in pockets. This forced stance in particularly clear to see in the scene where she proudly introduces to the group, two older and more experienced revolutionaries from the ALN, Jonas and Toledo. Accompanying these physical traits however, are few insights into more profound elements of Maria’s character.

In the only article that dedicates significant critical space to Maria’s hyperbolic representation, Izaías Almada suggests how it is Maria that symbolises the overall image of the caricatured militants in this film, supporting the argument that it is through the female characters that the agency of the whole group is compromised:

Com roupa escura, estilo militar, cabelos curtos e braços para trás, a companheira Maria surge por detrás de uma parede do aparelho em que se reúnem os novicós da luta armada […] A primeira imagem, masculinizada, e a primeira sentença […] formam a caricatura de uma militante revolucionária dos anos 60 no Brasil (1997: 88).

Despite this hyperbole, Maria’s initial representation leaves room for a strong assertion of narrative agency. For example she is shown as leader of the MR-8 (until the two members of the ALN appear) selecting and vetting the potential members of the
resistance group. She also shows herself to be a highly trained marksman, coordinating the arms training of the group herself.

Figure 1 - Maria instructs the MR8 how to fire a gun (Courtesy of LC Barreto Filmes)

However, eventually Maria’s agency is challenged though the undoing of her narrative autonomy due to treatment and positioning by other characters. From early on there are hints that the men in the group do not take her seriously as a militant leader. After a target practice session that Maria directs (see Figure 1) ‘Oswaldo’,\(^{72}\) makes a patronising remark to ‘Paulo’,\(^{73}\) suggesting she is acting aggressively towards him in order to disguise romantic feelings. The affirmation that she is pretty also confirms the sexual validity of Maria, as if she were worth Fernando’s affections. Maria is infantilised by her male comrades and relegated to a secondary position in the narrative where she is no longer a military leader but ‘fair game’ in a male society. This paternalistic attitude is reinforced further by Fernando’s comments about her.

\(^{72}\) This is a codename. His true name, we learn at the beginning, is César.

\(^{73}\) This is Fernando’s codename. This character is based on the real-life Fernando Gabeira.
cooking: ‘A companheira pode tirar muito bem mas comer sua comida é prova verdadeira de coragem revolucionária.’

Despite a clear aptitude for strategy and organisation as a woman ‘subject’, to the men she is still very much an object to be sexualised or rhetorically condemned to her traditional sphere of the home, where she should excel at activities such as cooking. Having failed as a man, by being relegated to the kitchen, she also fails as a woman due to her inability to effectively carry out the task that Brazilian society most often and most comfortably assigns her. The subtext behind this comment also reveals that in criticising Maria as a woman Fernando is also ridiculing Maria’s attempts at leadership, her attempts to appropriate the male role. Evidence that Maria may be confronting this positioning by the characters is lacking since there is no access to her practical consciousness. For example, Maria does not reply, and there is no voice-over indicating an internal monologue which would give us access to her reaction. All we
can read is her irritated facial expression which is not sufficient to achieve agency at this point. Additionally, all the other characters laugh at Fernando’s witty comment (see Figure 2). The decision to exclude Maria from this joke, prevents her from exhibiting a self-awareness through the device of humour, which would illustrate she understands the patronising and paternalistic overtones of this comment. Clearly Fernando is teasing her but Maria’s silence perhaps only confirms Oswaldo’s suggestion that she is playing ‘hard-to-get’, and Fernando’s suggestion that she is incompetent and ridiculous. Maria’s scowl, which then simply cuts to the next scene, leads to her depoliticisation and loss of agency since it confirms the idea that she is not able to offer any more insight into her personal experience than can be read in her one simple facial expression.

Yet another way in which Maria’s narrative autonomy is challenged is through a disproportionate number of ‘mistakes’ being attributed to her personally. As the film develops she is seen increasingly to ‘let herself down’ as an effective strategic thinker. The best example of this is when we see her cutting out advertisements for new apartments (to use as hideouts after the kidnapping) from the newspaper. Her failure to dispose of the newspapers properly is an action that ultimately leads to the discovery of the group and to its capture. However, as Elio Gaspari points out, this was not the reality during the 1969 kidnapping:


This illustrates how mistakes relating to the 1969 kidnapping have been deliberately and unnecessarily attributed to a female character, again supporting the argument that it is through the female characters that the agency of the whole group is challenged.

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74 This account is also reinforced in the book by Fernando Gabeira (1997: 138).
Maria is seen at various points trying to reassert her lost authority. For example, during the interrogation to which Jonas subjects the Ambassador, she begins asking him questions in between those asked by Jonas. However, his hold over the group by this point is so strong that Maria’s attempts at authority are ineffective. Again we are not permitted to enter Maria’s practical consciousness in order to assess how this treatment may affect her behaviour.

Maria is treated disrespectfully by her male comrades and at times her dismay is shown, but only on a superficial level. Often the result is that Maria is seen sneering, narrowing her eyes or reacting defensively. In this way she is not a likeable character and it is difficult to identify with her on any human level. In fact it is not possible to escape from the feeling that somehow Maria deserves the treatment she gets. If Barreto had intended to show the contradictory and discriminatory roles women had to embody in the resistance groups (which would quite possibly explain Maria’s behaviour), he would surely have made more of her personal struggle and given us more access to her quotidian survival strategies. For example, this could include more shots of her in isolation, with more lingering close-ups and more detailed concentration on her disappointment, fear and anger: signs that Maria was confronting her cerned context.

Also, when César makes the sexist comment towards Maria, instead of her not hearing this, she could have been shown to be aware of it via a close-up of her facial reaction. As none of this happens, agency is foreclosed.

It therefore becomes clear that Maria’s unsympathetic and exaggerated representation stems from paternalism rather than from a commitment by the production team to show the rigours of female revolutionary life. To show this façade of masculinity and highlight Maria’s identity crisis without any context or narrative insight into her cognitive processes, her practical consciousness, intensifies her representation as an
ineffective and inhuman militant woman: it displays a one dimensionality that has no relevance to the female revolutionary of the Brazilian resistance movements.

The Walk of Shame

Towards the end of the film Maria is captured by the military police. This occurs when she is shown to be at her lowest point. Broken and almost delusional, she describes to Fernando how it is possible to hear the words ‘Marighella’ in one of Gilberto Gil’s songs played backwards. As Fernando explains that no one listens to songs backwards, Maria becomes angry and then bursts into tears. As she enters the kitchen to wipe her face the camera remains with Fernando. When she doesn’t return he realises she has been taken by the military police, although we do not see it. Again precluding access to any practical or discursive consciousness, it is a scene that avoids telling the full story of Vera Sílvia’s courage and strength:


After she is released from prison, Maria’s undoing and final spectacular downfall are epitomised by her portrayal as unable to walk at the end of the film. Although Vera Sílvia was temporarily confined to a wheelchair, the final scene in which Maria is wheeled onto the runway (and the final tableaux of the film), seems to over-emphasise Maria’s physical and mental breakdown. Perhaps this would be justifiable if we had witnessed the scenes of torture that temporarily paralysed Vera Sílvia or had some narrative insight into how she coped with the challenges of imprisonment. However, this key removal of context accompanied by Maria’s silent entrance into the final scene provokes a feeling of failure and weakness rather than providing us with the
opportunity to reflect on the way in which women’s agency was constituted during the military regime. Maria’s isolation and her comparative weakness are more pronounced when we compare her with her co-characters, who look reasonably well and in high spirits. Although their hair is slightly tousled and Renée has some dark rings under her eyes, this seems to be the extent of their suffering. As she is wheeled onto the runway, a shot, counter-shot exchange between her and Fernando reveals only that Maria feels the shame that the mise-en-scène suggests. This is confirmed as she bows her head:

Maria é conduzida lentamente pela pista em direção à aeronave que levará mais um grupo de prisioneiros para fora do país […] Todos, nós espectadores, e cada um dos seus companheiros, olhamos para ela com comiseração e um nó na garganta. O que fizeram com esse ser frágil, desprotegido, com essa mulher? Somos convocados à piedade, o sentimento do preconceito, quando - na verdade - deveríamos olhar a cena com revolta e orgulho (Almada 1997: 92).

An aerial shot then reduces Maria to a tiny dot on the runway, the camera ridiculing rather than supporting her. Her presence is at once exaggerated and then immediately diminished, indeed suggesting a fragile, helpless woman with all agency removed. Rather than portray the horrors of the military regime and of torture (the scenes of torture are brief and heavily censored, featuring only the male characters, Fernando and Oswaldo), this final scene only serves to enforce the message that was hinted at throughout the film: that women and politics are incongruent and that any woman trying to conquer, not only a patriarchal military regime, but also a patriarchal society in general, will perish. It is telling, regarding the priorities of gender criticism in Brazilian film, that many critics (some of whom are keen to point out the controversies or even inadequacies of the film), have reported how moved they were by this scene in which Maria appears in a wheelchair (Salem, 1997b, Oricchio, 1997).75

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75 Fernanda Torres also defends this scene in an interview with Luiz Carlos Merten (1997).
This hyperbolic representation of how politics has undone woman is particularly clear when we compare this final still (Figure 3) in which the prisoners are frozen in a montage with the original photograph upon which it is based (Figure 4). Here Vera has been taken out of her wheelchair and has a chair to sit on. Also she is not placed in the centre of the frame, a position that highlights Maria in the film, but is seated at the far right. She looks thin, drawn, and unwell, as though she has suffered, but her facial expression is more neutral: she does not look utterly broken and bitter as Maria does.

Figure 3 - Final still from O que é isso companheiro? (courtesy of LC Barreto Filmes)
This observation does not diminish the physical and psychological pain of torture by suggesting Vera was not profoundly marked by her experience, but in the film Maria’s pain is prioritised above the pain of the others and her inability to walk is a symbol of her loss of agency not her ability to survive. Without any other account of Maria’s suffering in the form of practical or discursive consciousness, we are denied the full story of her experiences. The idea that Maria may recover from her ordeal is also nowhere to be seen in this final frame and the prevailing feeling is one of utter hopelessness. In the account below Vera clearly describes her own experiences of torture, and also acknowledges there were others who were temporarily paralyzed.

Fomos todos muito torturados. Eu levei um tiro na cabeça, tive uma convulsão cerebral, muita tortura psicológica também – estou pagando até hoje para isso […] Não acho que exista isso de heróísmo, depende de cada um, de como você se sente. Nossa organização era muito ética, acho que a geração 1969 lutava por um ética, uma estética, que continua até agora […] Fiquei sem andar por causa do pau-de-arara, muitas horas com os pés e as mãos amarrados, pendurada, levando choque. Mas quando cheguei em Argélia me recuperei logo. Houve
muitos homens que saíram sem andar também, como o Fayal, o Mário Japa (Salem 1997a: 67-68).

Clearly Vera suffered greatly from her experience in prison and this undoubtedly led to her untimely death in 2007. However, in this account she does not fall into self-loathing or self-obsession and as well as her suffering, also describes how she recuperated. Showing Maria being wheeled onto the runway more physically and mentally broken than the others, then placing her (without access to discursive or practical consciousness) at the centre of the frame, has no result other than to show us how the political voice of woman has been silenced and political agency stripped away.

**Renée**

The other half of Barreto’s simplistic rendering of the female militant is the character of Renée. Physically she is the antithesis of Maria; more conventionally attractive, paler and noticeably European-looking with light-brown hair. She is also softer spoken than Maria, ‘curvaceous’, and clearly comfortable with exposing more of her body. This is seen in her costumes which are tighter, lighter in colour, primarily pastels of blue, pink, yellow and white, and characterised by softer lines and materials. Her costumes are also often matched or coordinated, showing care and attention to detail in clothes that Maria lacks. Renée is twice pictured with a matching t-shirt and hair band. She also accessorises her outfits, sometimes wearing earrings and carrying a handbag. Even when Renée is conducting operations, her clothes are well-fitting and sometimes glamorous. In fact, although she is wearing clothes as part of a military mission, they are what one would expect her character to ‘wear’ on a day-to-day basis. This is in marked contrast to Maria, whose adoption of more ‘feminine’ clothes and accessories
clearly deviates from her normal wardrobe. The fact that she is ‘in disguise’ is obvious. This is most noticeable when the group carries out the bank raid that funds the kidnapping. Here Renée is in disguise, but her clothes suit her. She wears a white dress, her hair is highly styled and she has matching earrings and a handbag. Although she looks glamorous, she also looks inconspicuous. In contrast, Maria’s clothes hang off her; they are ill-fitting making her appear more worthy of suspicion.

Renée’s more ‘feminine’ appearance is the link to the way in which her narrative agency is compromised: specifically, her role is constrained to that of a seductress. Renée’s contribution to the kidnapping is to act as sexual bait in order to infiltrate the US Embassy. She plays the part of a naïve country girl who has come regarding a cleaning job. On hearing there are no jobs and that the address is in fact the residence of the Ambassador to the United States, Renée reacts with a mixture of confusion and anxiety. On seeing her infantile state, the head of security takes pity on her. The seduction is helped by her costume. She has her hair in bunches and wears the virginal colours of white and blue. When he offers to take her out for dinner, she uses the opportunity to probe him about the Ambassador’s daily routine, having already primed her target with her childish demeanour. After the meal Renée accompanies the security guard back to his house. She is seen drinking, dancing provocatively, touching her hair and body and pressing herself against him as they dance. In this scene it is heavily suggested that she has sexual relations with him. There is no mention of this seduction episode in the book, and Vera herself fervently condemned it:

Nunca tive relação com nenhum segurança. Era muito fácil se aproximar, fazer perguntas, ele mesmo gostava de contar para se mostrar. Eu me apresentei como

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76 In the Brazilian version of the film Renée calls her parents house after this episode. On hearing her father’s voice she breaks down and this appears to further confirm that she has spent the night with the security guard. This section was cut from European versions of the film. However it seems the decision was taken for reasons relating to running time, rather than because of any controversy it had caused (Decia 1998: 4).
uma moça de classe média baixa, que queria ver os jardins da embaixada, voltei lá umas três vezes, fiz as perguntas evidentes, se o embaixador fazia sempre o mesmo roteiro etc. [...] Eu ia lá, acho que ele me achou bonitinha, foi falando, era troca de olhares e conversa. Não cabia na nossa cabeça transar com um segurança da embaixada norte-americana ou de Banco. Para que ir para a cama? (Salem 1997a: 66).

Renée appears merely as a seductress in this episode, rather than as an agent in a complex political plan because, as with Maria, we are provided with no evidence that she is confronting her cerned context. At no point do we see firm evidence of Renée’s practical consciousness through cinematic emphasis on facial expression or body language or discursively through dialogue, to suggest this is a strategic political act. Without such evidence, what is suggested in the film is that Renée’s behaviour is part of her role as a naïve woman rather than because she has a political point to make. In contrast, Vera Sílvia explained her own fear as well as the strategic difficulties involved, especially due to the lack of backup she received from her male comrades:

Eu fui sozinha fazer o levantamento do sequestro do americano [...] Em todas as ações eu tive um papel bem feminino, que evidentemente facilitava a ação, por isso eu aceitava. Mas eu discutia isso no organismo, queria no mínimo uma cobertura, ir sozinha era um tremendo risco [...] Todos eram comando, a gente revezava os comandos das ações. Evidentemente que eu tinha medo (Ridenti 1990: 120).

In order to add more layers to Renée’s one-dimensional representation, and increase her access to agency, more narrative space could have been afforded to the difficulties and fears involved in infiltrating the Embassy, using the camera to emphasise these emotions to the audience. The fact that this incident is not discussed at any point with the others also isolates Renée’s experiences from those of the rest of the group and plays down its political importance. If Renée had been shown in discussion with the group, acknowledging either practically or discursively how her role as a woman is manipulated in this patriarchal environment (as Vera and also those women discussed
in chapter three acknowledge), this would have significantly increased narrative agency.

A further way in which Renée’s narrative agency is challenged is through a compromising of narrative autonomy, seen through her placement and treatment by other characters. It is Renée’s placid demeanour, which makes her appear child-like and innocent, that mostly contributes to this. Her hesitancy, her quietness and her calm disposition mean she is less threatening to the group, to the military, to society in general. As such she is treated like a child by the other members of the group. In this instance it is her particularly limited dialogue which means agency is compromised. For example, as Maria looks for new hideouts in the classified section of the newspaper, Renée flicks through a magazine about Woodstock and excitedly enquires if she has found anywhere. When Maria refuses to tell her she acts in an offended and downcast manner, as a child would, sulkily replying that she ‘only wanted to know the area, not the address’. Maria’s stern reprimand is enough to silence Renée for the rest of the scene. When the group is talking about what course of action to take after the bank robbery, she is almost completely ignored, and Marcão continues to talk over her when she attempts to calm him during a moment of passion.

As with Maria, Renée’s strategic and logistical ineptitude is made a central focus but without any insight into her practical or discursive consciousnesses, evidence which would explain or justify her behaviour on some level. When the group finally carries out the operation, she mistakes the US Ambassador’s limousine for that of the Portuguese Ambassador, causing confusion amongst the group and jeopardizing the kidnapping. At this point Toledo curses ‘essa vaca incompetente’. Again this is Barreto attributing general ineptitude particularly to the female characters. Elio Gaspari illuminates:

In fact Renée continues to be the manifestation of the group’s incompetence during this scene. As they escape, the camera lingers on her as she has difficulty maneuvering her car, reinforcing the stereotype that women are poorer drivers, or less able to cope with pressure.

As the Ambassador begins his imprisonment, Renée’s position as his carer and nurse becomes consolidated and we see no evidence of her trying to confront this. In fact, Renée blossoms in this role. In a sequence (set to the Intermezzo from the opera, Cavalleria rusticana, by Pietro Mascagni) in which all the other characters are shown engaging in ‘revolutionary’ or leisure activities, we see Renée washing and hanging out the Ambassador’s shirt; it is an act from which she appears to gain great satisfaction. As she bathes his wounds and changes his dressings, she apologises to him for not being able to get all the blood out of his tie. When the Ambassador writes a letter to his wife describing the hands of his kidnappers (Fernando is described as ‘well educated’, Julio a ‘fanatic kid’ who scares him, Toledo is ‘the head vampire’), Renée is featured thus: ‘These are the hands of the girl who put on my bandages, she’s the one who washed my shirt, something that really touched me and for which I will be eternally grateful. What kind of sad destiny led these delicate hands to pick up such a cold weapon?’ At this point, when we see Renée’s hands, the music changes to a major key, a hopeful guitar strum sounds and a glimmer of hope floods into the Ambassador’s life as he peers through the blinds at a sun-bathed Cristo Redentor: it is as if she had saved him. During this sequence her delicate state as a woman is portrayed by the
Ambassador as having been ‘ruined’ by her participation in revolutionary fighting, her place is as a kind and gentle woman, not a cold hard revolutionary like Maria. Again this points to Renée’s role as one half, the softer, feminine half, of the fragmented militant woman.

Although Renée’s capacity as nurse could be deemed to be a realistic portrayal of a woman’s role within the armed resistance, as with Maria, it is the failure to provide Renée with access to her own thoughts, or with the opportunity for her (or the audience), to question that role, via practical consciousness, that presents problems and compromises narrative agency. What is particularly difficult is that we are expected to accept Renée’s vocation as nurse and carer as her ‘natural’ role, and at face-value. Evidence of this is provided when these tasks are afforded greater narrative space. As a nurse Renée is given more dialogue than in any other part of the film and she seems at her most relaxed and satisfied, fulfilling the roles that society has rightly assigned her. Presenting Renée so successfully in this capacity is in great contrast to her earlier blunders within the more cut-throat world of ‘male’ politics. In this way the film is taking the same stance as those men within the resistance movements who continued to perpetuate hierarchical gender relations despite rhetorically supporting democratic centralism. Again whilst no discursive reference to agency is required, some small practical insights into Renée’s world would have richened the diegesis and the intricacy of the representation of human relations. Her simplistic portrayal at this point again shows a one dimensionality that is in total contrast to the variety of roles embodied by militant women during the dictatorship.
Elvira

‘I saw a picture of her in the newspaper. She’s a very beautiful woman […] I like that turban that she wears […] it makes her look like an opera singer, you know, a Diva’. Renée’s description of the Ambassador’s wife is revealing for a variety of reasons. For example, it suggests Elvira is a classic female Hollywood icon in terms of her physical appearance, and the presence of such a strong symbol in a film about American imperialism and its effect on Brazilian national reality, does not go unnoticed. However, the soul of the Diva, of the Classical Hollywood actress is never seen in this character. In fact Elvira possesses little narrative agency and strength of character. Her presence is only as a sentimental wife figure. I believe this is less a political comment and more a further example of the general loss of agency of female characters in this film. The first time we see Elvira she is shown breakfasting on the terrace of the Embassy, apparently having been awoken uncharacteristically early due to a bad dream in which the Ambassador, her husband, is attacked by Count Dracula. Immediately she is cast as a decadent character, dressed in pearls and the colourful turban. Interestingly, looking at photos of her from the time of the real events, we can see that she appears considerably older than the actress playing her here (Caroline Kava). Her tendency to sleep late is pointed out by the Ambassador who comments ‘you haven’t had breakfast since Eisenhower’. She clearly has few dealings with her husband’s official affairs and seems to know little of what he does. As he leaves for work he patronisingly coos: ‘go back to bed’ as if she needs her beauty sleep or to be protected from the harsh realities of diplomatic life. Her only other narrative contribution is to cry: she cries on hearing the news of his capture, she cries when she receives news he is safe and she cries when he arrives home from his ordeal. This is not a problem in itself, but when it is basically the only narrative contribution she
makes, unaccompanied by any other practical or discursive insight into her character, it becomes problematic, reinforcing the stereotype that women are hysterical and emotionally unstable. When the Ambassador is told he must write a letter to Elvira to prove to the government he is alive, he comments, ‘it will help to calm her considerably’ as if she were an unruly child. Although he describes her to Renée as ‘dramatic and grand’, we never see Elvira as anything other than an emotional, sentimental character who has a total lack of insight into the political affairs in which her husband, and presumably she, is embroiled.

Perhaps it is true that Vera was, to some extent, a fusion of these two sides of womanhood. However, as are all human beings, she was a complex fusion of many elements that cannot be simply divided into two extreme representations. As Franklin Martins explains: ‘Era uma mulher muito madura para sua idade. Ao mesmo tempo muito frágil. Bonita mas simples. Corajosa nas ações, mas absolutamente desleixada no dia-a-dia’ (Carvalho 1998: 176). In reality Vera was neither the hard-nosed fanatical Maria nor the quivering seductress Renée. Presenting these two extremes and failing to allow access to the quotidian survival strategies of the militant woman forecloses the narrative agency of these two, potentially emancipatory, female characters.
Criticism and *O que é isso…*

Despite its undoubted success, this film caused a critical storm in Brazil angering ex-members of the *MR-8* due to its tendency to infantilise and patronise the young group of revolutionaries. Also, because it was marketed as a ‘true’ story, the creative licence employed in adapting the events of the kidnapping caused controversy. Although a multiplicity of opinions was recorded, in general the critical consensus was one of a hyperbolic and erroneous representation of the character of ‘Jonas’ (Virgílio Gomes da Silva). Imbuing Jonas with traits such as authoritarianism, unbridled anger and fanaticism bordering on the psychotic, made him an obvious focus for critics. Furthermore, as he died at the hands of the military, having suffered violent torture (and so was unable to defend his characterisation personally as the others have done), his misrepresentation inevitably assumed critical priority. With a view to redressing this imbalance the following section will provide a breakdown of the main criticism of the film, taken from both journalistic and academic sources, in order to provide evidence of how the misrepresentation of women continues to be ignored.

The documentation centre of the *Cinemateca Brasileira* in São Paulo holds most of the newspaper clippings on the film from the national press and from cinema magazines. The number of clippings runs into hundreds and they are mostly dated between January 1997 and August 1998. Looking through these, it is possible to identify various critical trends. There are many that document the film’s national and international success statistically, within the context of its Oscar nomination and the controversy surrounding this. They also include discussion of the effective marketing, exhibition and distribution of the film and its financial and commercial viability. This extract from *Estado de São Paulo*, is an example of this first trend:

> Barreto julga que a produção atual tem mais chance de êxito do que teve *O Quatrilho*, de Fábio Barreto, em 1996. “É uma questão de marketing” disse ele,
afirmando que o filme [...] já está sendo exibido em 22 cidades dos Estados Unidos, entre elas Nova York, Los Angeles e São Francisco. Na sexta-feira, o filme expande seu circuito para mais de 42 cidades (n.a February, 1998).77

Another article in Folha de São Paulo, charts the films’s significant distribution in Brazil by Columbia Pictures: ‘No Brasil, o filme de Barreto será lançado simultaneamente em mais de 30 cidades’ (Decia 1997: 4).78 There also exist articles that explain the reasons behind the film’s Oscar nomination: how it meets international criteria as well as how it is subject to wider financial and economic variables.79 Although almost all the articles mention the controversy caused by the film, two in particular comment on how the film has to some extent depoliticised the events it narrates in order to make them more palatable to mass audiences.80

Another identifiable trend are those articles that recognise the problematic representation of the militants but believe this can, to some extent, be reconciled with the film’s success, its ability to entertain, its technical quality, or the competency and maturity of the production team.81 There are also those who acknowledge the technically sound nature of the film but find this harder to reconcile with the representation of the characters: ‘os guerrilheiros dos anos 60 não eram tão ingênuos, tôlos, caricatos como são apresentados […] Bem narrado, bem filmado, com ótimos

77 References which have no obvious author will hereafter will be referenced as [n.a]. The source can be located in the bibliography using the date. Where there are no page numbers listed the article is only 1 page long or without standard page numbers.
76 See also n.a (August, 1997).
80 Inácio Araujo, speaking within the context of the representation of Jonas, points out how prioritising action over politics has pushed the film towards the US market (1998: 4). Paulo Carneiro describes how recent Brazilian films such as Ed mort (1997), O homem nu/The Naked Man (1997), Baile perfumado/Perfumed Ball (1997) and O que é isso companheiro, have all depoliticised elements of their narratives in order to reach a wider public. He sees the result of this as a more Americanised yet more commercially viable film. He also subscribes to the view that the film ‘does not take sides’ (1997: 14-21).
81 In this article Inácio Araujo describes how the film, despite failing to subscribe to a particular point of view, therefore in some ways presenting a conservative style of cinema ‘tem um ponto de vista, que parece anunciar a maturidade desse cineasta’ (1997: 5). See also Luiz Caversan (1998: 1), Christian Petermann (1997: 70), Artur Xexéo (1997:8), Luiz Zanin Oricchio (1997) and n.a (May, 1997).
atores, mas, é importante que se diga, *O que é isso, companheiro?* não é “uma história verdadeira”, como vêm anunciando os trailers’ (Salem, 1997b).

Lastly there are those articles that totally condemn the filmic representation of the militants, proclaiming it to be historically inaccurate, patronising, caricatured, and even refute the viability of the international success of the film. One critic describes it thus: ‘Do ponto de vista formal, *O que é isso, companheiro?* aproxima-se da linguagem hegemônica da TV. Isso obviamente ajuda vendê-lo aqui e no exterior, mas essa estratégia de Marketing, como bem notou o crítico Marcelo Coelho na *Folha de São Paulo*, é também um sinal de malandragem ideológica’ (Silva 1998: 18). The account below is an example of how critics view the tendency to caricature as aimed particularly at Jonas: ‘Aos militantes da ALN […] Barreto reserva um olhar caricato, transformando Toledo em um velho quase senil, obcecado pelos símbolos da esquerda, e Jonas em um “recalcido social”, que alimenta pequenas invejas contra os jovens guerrilheiros’ (Rangel, 1997). Also in this category are the reactions of those involved in the kidnapping, whose responses are varied and complex. First printed in the national press they are now collected in the volume *Versões e ficções: o seqüestro da história* (1997).

In the Anglo-American press and media, the film was received more consistently and positively.83 A review article from the *American Historical Review* provides a typical response: ‘Barreto is careful not to create heroes or villains; rather, he recalls the multiplicity of emotions and responses to Brazilian dictatorship’ (Davis 1998: 634).84

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82 Another article less than sympathetic about the film’s international aims is Gilberto Felisberto Vasconcellos’ (1998: 1). Other articles that criticise the film mostly concentrate on the misrepresentation of Jonas, the general caricaturing of the militants, the soft torture scenes and the fictionalization of “facts”, to varying degrees. See Elio Gaspari (1997: 1), José Roberto Torero (1997), and César Benjamin (1997: 2), who also briefly mentions the weak portrayal of Maria.


84 See also Joe Leydon (1997: 70).
Mostly these critics accept the argument which Barreto consistently gives in all interviews: ‘I did not make a film about politics but about human beings. I did not make a film about ideas but about the fears, desires and tensions involved in a specific episode’ (Norton-Smith, 2005).

The response to the film in academic literature in Brazil was more in line with the view that the film was problematic, promoting commercial aims over political ones. In his book *Cinema de Novo*, Luiz Zanin Oricchio points to the director’s strong association with the US which is obvious in the film’s attempt at entertainment rather than political discussion. He describes how this is facilitated through the inclusion of the love story and the presentation of the events as ‘apenas uma grande aventura’. He also describes the polar opposite characters of the good Renée and the bad Jonas and the problematic attempt at finding a happy medium between the two using the torturer character (2003: 114). ‘Enquanto um dos guerrilheiros era retratado como fanático impiedoso, um torturador recebia tratamento nuançado, no qual cabiam dúvidas e sentimentos contraditórios de culpa’ (219). Most important he points to the fact that the film totally depoliticises an inherently political narrative:

A sua estratégia é neutralizar um campo de ação que, ao contrário do que se vê na tela, era cheio de som e de fúria. Essa esterilização programada talvez obedezça às leis de manufatura de um produto de entretenimento, mas nem por isso deixa de ser ideológica em sua essência (115).

Despite the women characters constituting one of the main sites of political misrepresentation and loss of agency in the film, none of the articles cited above probe into the specifically female experience of being a militant during the 1960s. Admittedly this is intrinsically linked to, but nonetheless is not totally subsumable within the well documented general experience of resistance during the 1960s. Despite Maria/Renée’s loss of agency being briefly mentioned in some of the newspapers and
articles, it is not broached to the same extent as the misrepresentation of the male characters and in particular Jonas.

Although the unjust treatment of Jonas and other members of the group has been acknowledged as representing a major loss of narrative agency, Barreto did imbue some of the characters with a more nuanced representation presumably to keep in line with the ‘human’ touch he wanted to give the story. For example the Ambassador is presented as a calm, reasonable man who disagrees personally with all the controversial foreign policies of his country. Also portrayed as a loving family man, intelligent and amiable, he is a more complex character. This is also the case with the character of the torturer. Although most critics agree that the inclusion of a torturer from the military regime (who suffers an internal struggle with his conscience) is inappropriate and crudely presented, it is also obvious that his character is the attempt by the director/scriptwriter to present a multidimensional human character. However, only simplistic representations of military torturer and tortured soul are juxtaposed.

Fernando’s character (the most complex and multifaceted so perhaps the most ‘human’), presents another example of this attempt to humanise the group. He is a mixture of doubts, hopes, and fears, he believes in a cause but fears the consequences of armed resistance; he is creative and sensitive but feels the need to fight for a political ideal. As well as this he is presented as well-educated, intelligent and eloquent.

Clearly Barreto realises his idea to present the ‘human side’ of the struggle through these three, male, characters. The same cannot be said for the simplistically rendered militant woman seen in the dialectic Maria/Renée. Divided into the oppositional feminine and unfeminine, again their representation confirms the thesis that the paucity
of narrative agency of the characters in general is primarily manifested through its
female protagonists.

**Márcia, Vera, and Gabeira**

As previously mentioned *O que é isso companheiro?* is based on the eponymous work by politician Fernando Gabeira, a leftwing activist and journalist and founder member of the Brazilian Green Party. Gabeira played a small yet significant part in the kidnapping of Charles Burke Elbrick in 1969. His book was published in 1979, in a period controversially known as *abertura*. This was after the repeal of the AI-5 in 1978, when the government bowed to increasing pressure to relax the repressive state apparatus, and after the 1979 amnesty law that allowed some political exiles to return to Brazil (Alves 1985: 167, 211). In truth however, the authoritarian state was still very active. Gabeira’s text was just one in a series of works situated within the wider genre of testimonial literature known as *memorialismo*. Within this context, recently returned exiles sought to unify the fragments of their own personal and national histories.\(^85\) For this reason the book must be seen for what it is: the personal memoirs of a male leftwing militant and not as an unbiased analysis of the armed resistance movement. It is an extremely subjective and personal work and should not be confused with academic or critical writing. In fact it too received its own criticisms causing a polemic that rivalled that of the film: ‘Não era a História oficial, a dos vencedores. Era a dos vencidos, a primeira versão permitida, que vinha da esquerda. O fio narrativo que aí se desenrolava era, na verdade, a tentativa de juntar os pedaços de um narrador/personagem, quase esmagado pela História de seu tempo’ (Simis and Pellegrini 1998: 12).

\(^{85}\) For a more thorough analysis of the period in terms of Gabeira’s book see Joan Dassin (1992) and Idelber Avelar (1999).
In terms of the representation of women, the book is more nuanced in its approach to female militants than its filmic interpretation and widens the possibilities of presenting women as political agents. Gabeira presents only one female character, referring to her either as Vera, or occasionally using one of her codenames, Mária. There is no conflict between the masculine woman and the feminine woman but one woman who is a multifaceted human being united by one strong personality. Evidence of Vera’s political agency is freely described by Gabeira, particularly in an episode previously cited, when some of the group pose as an editorial team from the magazine *Realidade*.

In Gabeira’s version he explains this episode with some slight variations: one of them is a reference to how Vera’s quick thinking averts a crisis (1996: 97). Gabeira also openly congratulates Vera on her work in infiltrating the Embassy, including a particularly sensitive and perceptive reference to female militants:

Vera estava em melhores condições do que nós para realizar a tarefa. Ela resolveu compor um tipo de empregada doméstica em busca de emprego. Saiu-se muito bem. Os maiores levantamentos do gênero foram sempre feitos por mulheres. Apesar das sucessivas notícias sobre a participação de mulheres em ações armadas, o peso da estrutura patriarcal ainda impedia que muitos associassem à violência ou mesmo à coragem (110).

Here Gabeira acknowledges that women’s representation, although clearly not a priority of the anti-dictatorship movements, intersected with the wider political struggle. It also shows awareness, by Gabeira at least, of the ignorance surrounding female participation, and is a subtle yet important recognition of the difficulties faced by women participating in armed resistance. Also significant is that although Gabeira describes the sexual intentions of the Embassy’s head of security and how Vera used her sexuality in order to gain information relating to the Ambassador’s daily routine, there is no allusion to any sexual encounter with him, unlike in the film. This reiterates the incongruity of this narrative choice with Vera’s, and the MR-8’s, political strategy.
This is not to deny the reality that both Gabeira and also Vera recognised, that women were required to use their sexuality during the armed resistance: ‘Todo mundo sabe, é uma coisa cultural, que a mulher oferece mais segurança para uma atividade dessas. Você pode jogar com a sedução, mas sem ir as vias de fato’ (Salem 1997a: 66).

Whilst acknowledging the more nuanced attitude to female militants in the book, it is important to avoid interpreting Gabeira’s text as a feminist tour de force or as an historically accurate account of gender relations in authoritarian Brazil, for it includes too many patronising comments about women. Frequently Gabeira’s male fantasies betray him, as do his ideological priorities. For example when he daydreams, he wishes a beautiful girl would come into his room whilst he is sleeping, lay a gun down on the bedside table and say, ‘dorme em paz, meu bem, que dentro em breve o Brasil será socialista’ (1996: 89). It is his greatest wish that Brazil become socialist but this dream is further ornamented with the figure of a beautiful girl. In the chapter Visita, só aos domingos, he begins by describing ‘Márcia’ as fulfilling his earlier fantasy of beautiful militant women who would save Brazil: ‘Márcia era a loura dos assaltos. Mais tarde, conheci outra loura dos assaltos, muitas louras dos assaltos. Cheguei mesmo a ter a impressão de que todas eram a loura dos assaltos! Coloquemos assim: Márcia era a loura dos assaltos à disposição de minha fantasia’ (101). When he later goes to visit a friend in prison, he describes her as follows:

Você precisava conhecer Márcia. Também não conheço, mas é diferente de nós. Apenas escrevo panfletos, amigo […] Ela tem uma metralhadora dentro da bolsa, um revólver dentro da liga e, possivelmente, uma navalha no sutiã. Loura, morena? Depende da luz filtrando na entrada do meu apartamento no Leblon, dos olhos dos motoristas que ela intercepta nua, abrindo sua capa preta’ (103).

Although to some extent he is still indulging in a sexual fantasy, it is a fantasy that is now mixed with admiration and reverence for Márcia (Vera). These are all small but
significant differences which aid the representation of the militant woman as agent, and which provide a more accurate view of their role in armed resistance and how they were perceived by their male comrades.

Despite in some ways being relevant and informative, the representations of Renée (the feminine woman) and Maria (the masculinised woman), constitute a sparse spectrum of female gender identity, one which does not take into account the individual complexities inherent within militant women and explored in the socio-political contextualisation. Probing into the accounts of how these women felt jealous, felt a sense of rivalry, or had their own personal reasons for their choice of appearance, we have access to a rationale that shows them as multifaceted and at times torn between contradictory roles. But in the film, as we have seen, we are not given any insight into the quotidian survival strategies of Maria or Renée via practical or discursive means.

It is vital that women in such politically pertinent positions are accurately and comprehensively represented during key moments of influence in Brazilian cinema, like the Retomada, and that their agency acknowledged and reflected. If this is sometimes impractical, misrepresentations should at least be problematised by criticism. To present such simplified versions of militant women, as is seen in O que é isso, without providing access (within the diegesis) to their practical consciousness and to critically ignore this representation, is to ignore the fundamental contribution such women have made to the country’s political history. This in turn severely compromises the validity of cinematic movements such as the Retomada.
Chapter Five

Initiating a Critical History: *Cabra Cega, Zuzu Angel and the Militant Woman as Successful Agent*

Introduction

This chapter examines two films that successfully represent female narrative agency: *Cabra cega* (Toni Venturi, 2004) and *Zuzu Angel* (Sergio Rezende, 2006). By receiving ample opportunities to illustrate their practical consciousness, we see how, in contrast to the film previously discussed, these characters are shown to confront their cerned context of patriarchy. Both characters also make the transition from practically to discursively articulating these affronts to patriarchy through a vocal or written act which illustrates a profound awareness of the political situations in which they become embroiled. This political agency represents a significant advance in the representation of the woman militant in film compared to what is seen in the earlier *O que é isso companheiro?* The women in these two films, and in particular Rosa of *Cabra cega*, are also ‘total’ characters; representing a rich spectrum of behaviour rather than being fragmented or divided between two excluding binaries. Despite being relatively new films, their critical appraisal from the point of view of women’s agency, already appears long overdue. This chapter therefore begins what hopes to be a long and detailed critical history in terms of these films’ female characters.

Both films are based on the real life experiences of those in opposition to the 1964-1985 dictatorship and, as all the films studied, have not as yet been analyzed using the model of narrative agency. *Cabra cega* tells the story of the experience of clandestine living, a reality of many of those who fought within the armed resistance. *Zuzu Angel* tells the story of prominent fashion designer Zuleika Angel who was murdered by the regime whilst trying to discover the body of her militant son Stuart Angel-Jones.
Zuzu Angel’s initial reasons for confronting the regime result from her role as a mother but are facilitated by her economic and emotional autonomy, a consequence of her alternative life-style choice as a divorced single mother with her own business. This was a controversial social position to embody in 1960s Brazil, but the narrative does not prioritise her maternal role over her professional one and in fact she uses her traditional female vocation, dressmaking, as a political tool against the government. Rosa, the main female character of *Cabra cega* also begins as an unlikely political agitator. At first she appears as a cleaner and nurse. However, the narrative gradually dissolves our initial assumptions to again reveal how women’s work acts as the basis for overt militant behaviour. Rosa’s representation as a ‘total’ character is aided by her position role what Ismail Xavier describes as a ‘Humaniser of the Inevitable’, that is, she is able to combine her role as a political agitator with that of a woman who remains linked to the world of human experiences and emotions.

Interestingly both of the films’ directors are based permanently in Brazil, as opposed to Bruno Barreto who shares his directing base with the US, with its wider access to finance, exhibition and distribution. Made almost a decade after *O que é isso* this extra space to reflect, this opportunity within the national context to re-evaluate a historical event traditionally seen as relating only to the world of men, appears to have had a positive outcome for the narrative agency of the militant woman and can be seen to significantly further the discussion of women in *Retomada* cinema.  

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86 Perhaps due to their recent release, there is not a great deal of criticism to be found on these films. Most of the reference material in this chapter therefore comes from the DVD commentaries and ‘making ofs’, and the production notes, all complimented by in-depth textual analyses. Full details can be found in the bibliography.
Cabra Cega

Cabra cega takes its inspiration from *No olho do furacão*, a documentary by Toni Venturi and ex-militant Renato Tapajós. The documentary, based on interviews with eleven ex-militants, focuses specifically on the day-to-day lives of those involved with the leftwing resistance movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Four of the testimonies were to feature directly in the documentary and gave rise to the two main characters of *Cabra cega*, Thiago and Rosa. The first of these figures is Carlos Eugênio Paz, successor to the leadership of the ALN after Carlos Marighella and ‘Toledo’ (who features in *O que é isso*), who lived in hiding between 1970 and 1973 and in exile between 1973 and 1984. The second testament comes from Pedro Lobo, ex militant of the VPR (*Vangarda Popular Revolucionária*), who was arrested in 1969 and sent to Europe until 1979 in exchange for the liberation of the German Ambassador, Von Holleben. The two female militants that feature in the documentary and who inspired the character of Rosa were: Robêni da Costa, who headed the production of the clandestine newspaper of the ALN and who was imprisoned between 1971 and 1973, and Dulce Maia, also ex VPR, whose testimonies also appear in chapter three.

*Cabra cega* has many similarities to *O que é isso*. As well as documenting the same historical period, its director has also professed the desire to take on a ‘human’ angle. Like Barreto, screen writer Di Moretti commented that he wanted to make a human drama using the political history of Brazil but positing a fictional story.\(^7\) Also in line with Barreto, Venturi admits he didn’t want to make a didactic film but one that would engage and involve the audience, especially young people. Furthermore Venturi wanted to create a ‘representation’ of the life of the militants on screen so as to achieve

\(^7\) From an interview featured on the DVD extras. All further dialogue from the production team or cast is taken from these interviews.
a certain level of verisimilitude. Barreto’s realist approach and desire for a popular audience are also in line with this thinking.

There are however, some significant differences between the two films. For example *O que é isso* uses an Anglo-American soundtrack or songs with ‘international’ purchase such as *The Girl from Ipanema*, whereas Venturi’s film updates songs such as Chico Buarque’s *Roda viva*. Buarque was an outspoken opponent of the regime, which is particularly clear in this song with its direct references to the oppression Brazil was suffering. Remixing the song through a contemporary artist such as Fernanda Porto, ensures the track is also part of the film’s aim of engaging with the Brazilian youth of today on national issues of the 1960s.

There are further disparities in the cultural approaches to the two films. Barreto dramatised a political event, not to make a statement of any kind, but to entertain global audiences. In this case it was not that he wanted to avoid didacticism but that he wanted to avoid any political statement whatsoever. Of course this approach is paradoxical and, as we have seen, the decision to attempt to depoliticise an inherently political and historically important event has had controversial consequences for Brazilian cinema and has been particularly damaging to female agency. Venturi, on the other hand wanted to avoid lecturing his audience, but he recognised that to make a film about the dictatorship necessitated some engagement with a political agenda. He also acknowledges that it was important to recognise the sensitivity of audiences to the period he was dealing with and this is clear in the production. In this way he wanted make a film to show the Brazilian population that, to those who organised against the dictatorship in the 60s and 70s, the fight was worth it, despite all the horrors they suffered. Most pertinently he felt the film, through what he describes as a ‘circular’ production and rehearsal process, matured at a moment in which ‘parece que a
sociedade brasileira está preparada para fazer uma revisão, para aprender um pouco com aqueles episódios que o Brasil passou durante a Ditadura Militar'. Coming almost ten years after *O que é isso*, perhaps this time to reflect and this approach to production also meant character representation, as well as the events portrayed, was subject to a ‘revision’ resulting in a more sensitive approach to the portrayal of the young militants. This is something that is particularly visible in the female characters.

To summarise, by far the most significant difference between the two films in this context is how they deal with the representation of female agency. The ‘humanist’ angle in Barreto’s film is characterised by paternalism in contrast to *Cabra cega* which successfully combines its aim to view the period with an ‘olhar humano’ with female political (narrative) agency.

**Rosa: The Personal is The Political**

One of ways in which this film develops narrative agency is by gradually revealing the inherent agency of women during the dictatorship rather than gradually stripping it away, as happens in *O que é isso* and also as we shall see, in *Olga*. Again this helps to present the characters as complex, multi-faceted yet unified, ‘total’ characters. For example *Cabra cega* begins by showing Rosa as a daily domestic help, smoothing sheets and fluffing pillows, hanging clothes in a wardrobe and placing items into carefully arranged drawers. At this point Rosa is simply presented as a cleaner. However, she is already asserting her agency through practical consciousness, ‘going on’ with her day-to-day life within the context of the dictatorship. As the opening credits run, a montage of newsreel and amateur documentary footage of the student
rallies of the 1960s is seen. The political importance of Rosa’s apparently innocuous and straightforward role at this point is hinted at in these documentary shots which show the now infamous *Passeata dos 100 Mil*. Also, as this image is cut with more quotidian images of student life; people smiling, hugging, playing table tennis and preparing for the massive rallies organised by the UNE (*União National de Estudantes*) it suggests Rosa’s domestic portrayal as perhaps just one element of a militant woman’s life. Juxtaposing Rosa’s image as she gets on with day-to-day tasks, with the image of politicised students who were also in touch with their quotidian realities, is the first illustration of Rosa as the manifestation of the union between the personal and the political and as a unified, ‘total’ character.

We can also look further into Rosa’s apparently innocent portrayal at the outset of the film if we examine how during times of actual or ideological colonization, women are acknowledged as a strong political force when mobilised and feared by patriarchal regimes. As such they are often manipulated and sought to be controlled, relegated to perceived unthreatening contexts, such as the home. However, assuming women can be ‘won over’ or pacified is to ignore the inherently political nature of their quotidian survival strategies. This foolish assumption is evidenced by the way in which the Brazilian rightwing forces attempted to keep women away from the public sphere of politics yet inadvertently pushed them into becoming the keystone of the resistance movement. In his article *Algeria Unveiled* Franz Fanon discusses how during the colonization of Algeria, the French also began their campaign by believing they could ‘conquer the woman’ (1989: 37-38). In simplified terms, by forcing Algerian women

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88 It is interesting to note that all three films that feature the 1960-1985 dictatorship begin this way, using, to varying degrees and in various styles, this, now infamous, footage of the student resistance. The footage shown in this film is in contrast to that shown in *O que é isso* which despite featuring some of the same newsreel, focuses exclusively on the overtly political and violent aspects of the struggle.

89 This article is also used as a reference in my MA thesis, ‘The Political Voice of Rosa in Glauber Rocha’s *Deus e o Diabo na terra do sol***’ (QMUL, 2005).
to unveil, they sought to destroy any notion of national difference within the country and impose on the people a European political model. In this case, however, the veil, perceived as a symbol of feminine passivity by the French, would serve an overtly political agenda and women of the resistance would use it against the colonizing forces.

Upon the outbreak of the revolution against the colonisers, women were enlisted firstly as carers then as soldiers (47-50). After a while newly ‘unveiled’ Algerian women, ‘European’ in appearance, would carry messages and money, then weapons, bombs and grenades into the colonised areas of the city in order to help the Revolution. Due to their unveiled appearance, they were not seen as suspicious, but simply as a product of neo-colonialism in action (58).

The French were initially taken in, but as time went on they began to suspect and infiltrate these unveiled Algerian women. Subsequently, female revolutionaries began to take to the veil again. By re-veiling, women were again able to manipulate the European paternalistic view of the humility and passivity of the traditional Algerian woman by concealing weapons beneath the veil itself (61-62). Eventually, veiled women were again targeted and this began another cycle in which the colonisers began to try and westernise the Algerian woman. As a result the veil was again taken up, illustrating it to have ‘a historic dynamism [...] concretely perceptible in the development of colonization in Algeria’ (63). All this highlights not only the political importance of the veil, but the political importance of women, whose capacity for action is often assumed to be subject to control through relegation to the domestic or traditional sphere. What is not considered by these patriarchal regimes however, is that it is these spheres which provide the bases which support women’s inherent capacity for agency.
Although Rosa’s real agenda is hidden from those who merely observe her comings and goings, there is a subtlety in the way in which these tasks are presented that point to Rosa as a more complex character than perhaps she first appears. The opening sequence showing her performing domestic tasks is decidedly neutral, merely presenting her as a competent domestic labourer and not derogating or revering her role in any way. The scene is presented via reasonably quick cuts between shots and the tasks are not celebrated or emphasised by the use of non-diegetic music or by an increase in dialogue (as is the case with Renée). In fact there is no sound at all to embellish the tasks other than the diegetic sounds of pillows being fluffed and drawers being opened and closed.

As well as looking after the apartment Rosa also nurses the recently wounded militant Thiago, who hides in the flat belonging to leftwing sympathiser Pedro. One of her jobs is to change Thiago’s bandages and clean and dress his bullet wound. This is illustrated by a mini-montage prioritising her nursing skills with a series of quickly edited close-ups using a hand-held camera. Continuing to compare and contrast this film with *O que é isso*, although in this sequence Rosa’s hands are made a feature of (as are Renée’s in a scene of a similar nature), they are shown to be competent rather than ‘delicate’. She is shown pulling on latex gloves, filling a syringe, cutting tape and bandages, applying iodine and expertly dressing the wound. As Rosa comments that Thiago was lucky because the bullet ‘quase que pegou a artéria’ she reveals an anatomical knowledge far superior to Renée’s. Again, although this sequence sees her in the traditional role of carer, through the camera work we see clear evidence of how Rosa is confronting both of her *cerned* contexts: firstly that of the military regime, by playing a part in the resistance, and secondly that of the leftwing struggle, by being
allowed to reveal her particular proficiency as a nurse in such a way as to prevent the relegation of this role to its perceived ‘inferior’ status.

As Rosa continues to dress Thiago’s wound, his internal musings about his near capture that generated the wound, take over. This sequence, which seamlessly runs between a close-up of Rosa, then Thiago, and then a blurred black and white section (symbolising Thiago’s imaginings), links Rosa to Thiago’s female companion Dora, who is shown in this black and white shot as running from the police and armed with a gun. Linking Rosa to this more overt manifestation of the militant woman through Thiago’s internal musings begins the symbolic joining of Rosa to Dora and helps to slowly reveal the inherent agency of Rosa’s character.

For the moment however, Rosa remains a maternal figure, quiet and obedient; smiling and always accommodating, urging Thiago to take care of himself and eat properly, insisting his wounds are constantly bathed and his bandages changed. Thiago seems to consider her naïve and constantly makes demands of her, rudely inquiring ‘Eu pedi para trazer o jornal’ or ‘cadê as cortinas?’ Initially she continues to field his torrent of demands with patience and a friendly disposition. As the film progresses however, we begin to see more clearly the fundamental role Rosa will embody. Not only is she Thiago’s carer and domestic help but also a vital messenger between Thiago and Mateus, the leader of the revolutionary group. This is facilitated by her work in a shop which acts as a façade for the exchange of messages. Mateus visits the shop posing as a war veteran and passes notes to Rosa under the counter.

As Thiago’s time in the apartment wears on the experience of clandestine living begins to control him and he becomes frustrated and angry. Paranoia eventually sets in and his attitude towards Rosa also becomes more hostile. On one occasion, when she attempts to change his bandages, he blankly refuses. Rosa then begins to challenge his
increasingly erratic behaviour therefore challenging one of her cerned patriarchal contexts: the leftwing militant group that Thiago represents. When Mateus demands a change of group policy with which Thiago doesn’t agree, he grows angry and begins to shout at a volume that compromises his security. At this pivotal moment Rosa approaches him and implores him to lower his voice. In response, Thiago asks Rosa directly what she thinks about the plans. Rosa confidently answers that she thinks Mateus is right and that the new strategy is in place in order to stop anyone else being killed. By revealing her opinion about the strategy of the group Rosa demonstrates that she has inside knowledge of their policies and through this rhetorical invitation she becomes directly engaged in the political world of Thiago. At this point Rosa also reveals a piece of information of which Thiago is unaware: that the group are plotting his return to action. This revelation then serves to silence him. By possessing knowledge equal and beyond that of Thiago’s, and confidently revealing this to him, which has the effect of stopping his narrative flow, Rosa reveals herself to be in a strong position, fundamental to and able to direct the narrative; therefore an important narrative agent. This is also evidence of Rosa’s transition from practically to discursively asserting her knowledge of the group’s political strategies therefore revealing her political agency. Instead of restricting Rosa’s political potential, these opening sequences allow her to grow, revealing the latent agency of her character slowly and subtly. Presenting Rosa in an almost naïve or at least traditional way and then slowly revealing her to be a conscious political agent, is the opposite of the treatment of women in O que é isso who begin in positions of potential agency and are then undone by the narrative.

This angry exchange leads Thiago into another one of his sepia day-dreams but rather than just a memory lapse, this one also relays to us what is happening to his female
comrade. Dora is pictured naked and drenched in water; electric shock treatment is then applied to her wounds and genitals. Although set in a dream-like sequence and filmed in blurred resolution, we see the methods of torture and the female body graphically. Again this is in total contrast to the ‘censored’ scenes of male-only torture in *O que é isso*. The last we see of Dora is when she is liberated from prison by Mateus and brought back to the apartment. Again the abject horror of torture is not avoided at this point as we see her lying on the sofa dressed in a white hospital gown. As Thiago brushes back her hair from her face the camera slowly zooms in on her bloody, swollen features. Although she is almost unable to speak she manages to relay that she revealed nothing during her interrogation. Again this harks back to Dulce Maia’s assertion in *No olho do furacão* that she took great pleasure in withholding information and of resisting torture. Most importantly however, Dulce Maia explains that she was tortured particularly brutally because she was the first female militant to be captured and so was to be made an example of.

These scenes featuring Dora are a fundamental contribution to the representation of female narrative agency in Brazilian film in that they acknowledge the specific reality of female imprisonment and torture, which acquired its own sinister characteristics because the military emphasised culturally assigned gender differences. Women prisoners were thus in a double bind, tortured not only for their political ideas but also because of their gender. Female militancy was seen as a particularly profound challenge to the dictatorship as it represented women breaking with their traditional roles and attacking one of the rhetorical keystones of the regime: the woman as submissive wife and mother. Therefore, for daring to subvert the active male/passive female binary imposed by the dictatorship, they were also targeted. In a patriarchal society, of which a military dictatorship is a distilled version, domination of a
woman’s body epitomises its central tenet, power. This domination was therefore realised through sexual slavery and humiliation, including rape, which was common practice (Bunster-Burotto 1985: 300-307). The torture of pregnant women, ‘in an attempt to harm the foetus’, was also a reality and of course specific to women (Franco 1992: 109). A narrative that references the, in Paul Smith’s words, ‘specific histories’ of female torture victims, however indirectly, presents a more sophisticated representation of narrative agency than one that either ignores the reality of it, or treats male and female torture as the same (1998: xxxi).

**Rosa as a ‘Humaniser of the Inevitable’**

In his 2005 article ‘Humanisers of the Inevitable’ Ismail Xavier analyses how recent Brazilian cinema, specifically the period 2002-2003, presents characters that illustrate an affirmation of the individual in the face of inevitable barbarism and institutional or patriarchal power. He explains in the opening paragraph: ‘Our attention has […] increasingly been drawn to the experiences of positively influential characters, rare authors of emancipating actions and gestures that allow them to survive and liberate themselves from the mechanism’ (2005: 97). Although these characters may not ultimately change their concerned contexts, they escape, and particularly in Rosa’s case, help others escape from the horrors of seemingly impossible situations through decisive action.

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90 Although some of the ideas in this article gloss over the shared experiences of both sexes and there are issues, in places, with presentation, it contains some useful information regarding the specifically female experience of torture and uses many personal accounts taken from Amnesty International reports.

91 This is an expression Xavier borrows from Roberto Mangabeira. Mangabeira’s article, as referenced in a footnote to the title of Xavier’s text ‘analyses the difficulties of a leftist “social policy” in a state without effective powers to face the inputs and perverse effects of the contemporary global order’ (Xavier 2005: 97).
More specifically, it is Rosa’s insistence on joining the personal with the political that ‘saves’ both her and Thiago.\footnote{In this capacity Xavier mentions, amongst others, the character of Pacu from Abril despedaçado (Walter Salles, 2002) who sacrifices himself so he might break the patriarchal cycle of blood revenge and liberate his older brother (2005:102-103). Chapter seven discusses the difficulties involved in female characters confronting the cemned context of the revenge narrative.}

As the scene featuring Thiago’s companion dissolves back into one which contains Rosa in a way that cleverly binds the two, their political connection is made all the more emphatic this time as Rosa is seen copying from the prison diaries of Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh, the act of writing referencing another act of discursive consciousness. At this point Thiago comments ‘Ô Rosa, sabe que tinha uma época que eu achava que o Mateus ia ser o nosso Ho chi Minh’ to which Rosa sarcastically retorts: ‘Ô Thiago, a luta não pode ser uma desculpa para a gente deixar de viver, não, viu?’. Rosa refuses to indulge Thiago in his self-pitying musings and combines her humanising logic with her political awareness, acknowledging that ‘personal emancipation is an important part of political emancipation’ (Franco 1992: 109). The concentration on her face as she carefully copies from the book and the playful resolve in her voice as she reprimands Thiago and then returns without hesitation to her work, illustrates this idea and is further symbolised in the gift she presents to Thiago. As he stares in wonder at the small wooden music box, she almost forces him to acknowledge its function of making him smile by blowing chalk dust directly in his face.

In her interview Débora Duboc, who plays Rosa, also points out the human side of her character when she talks of the two women upon whom Rosa is based. She describes the inspiration she received from both Robêni da Costa and Dulce Maia. During one of the interviews Robêni da Costa explains the concept of the ‘double life’. Apart from her militant activities she also desired a conventional existence: a career, a husband
and a family. She explains how she was working as a teacher, in order to send money home to her parents, until her arrest.

In her interview Dulce Maia talks of a desire to express her femininity and sexuality during that time by dressing up, dancing and falling in love. She speaks of the intensity of her life then and looks back with fond memories. All of this we see in Rosa, who is always positive, takes pride in her appearance and is well dressed. However, she is never presented, unlike Renée, as a seductress. Evidence of her humanising role is clear throughout the film, even when it is combined with more overt militarism.

Rosa’s humanising role is particularly clear in one scene featuring her and Thiago. Her representation in this scene also presents Rosa’s unity of character, charting the successful realisation of her (and Thiago’s) personal needs within the difficult political context in which they find themselves. All this is further evidence of her narrative agency. This in stark contrast to the fragmentary representations of Maria and Renée who are presented as unable to cope with both their personal realities and the political climate of the dictatorship. The scene begins by showing Rosa getting ready to go out. As she explains to Thiago, it is Saturday night so she is going to a show. At this point Rosa pays attention to her appearance, brushing and styling her hair and applying make-up. However, this attention to femininity is never suggested as weakness, as in the case of Maria, or ineptitude, as is the case with Renée. It is merely an act of personal expression which Rosa is unafraid to display. It is at this point that she questions Thiago’s apparent lack of social needs and his fear of human interaction, particularly when Thiago admits he finds it hard to make friends with women, pointing out that he had no experience of them at university or in Cuba (where presumably he received training in guerrilla warfare). As Rosa reassures him that one never loses the ability to relate to the opposite sex he replies: ‘Meu negócio é política, sabe? É ir para
porta de fábrica, greve, subir no caixote, ir para cima da polícia’. Rosa’s ability to combine the various strands of her life without conflict is thus compared with Thiago’s inability to remove himself from overt militancy.

Also at this point the narrative is addressing the particular situation of women militants and the strained relationships which sometimes existed between the two sexes within the context of armed struggle, as documented in chapter three. When Rosa reveals her own political background she explains to Thiago that her father was a communist militant who was imprisoned for his beliefs but that he was also a man of great community spirit, organising competitions in order to raise money for the cause. This is how she became involved in the resistance. She recounts examples of her own political acts, such as the time she scribbled the words ‘Trabalho, Terra e Liberdade’ on the walls of her town, an experience she describes she will never forget. Although Thiago tries to prevent her from speaking of these experiences for security reasons, Rosa insists, needing to articulate her own political background rather than Thiago just assuming she is stepping into his. She wants to challenge the assumptions that Thiago has about her explaining: ‘Vim de um lugar muito diferente do seu’. It is this insistence on the articulation of her own political background which is another example of her transition to a more discursive consciousness and therefore her political agency.

In order to alleviate Thiago’s suffering, something that she recognises before Thiago himself, Rosa organises a surprise prison break for him. She leads him blindfolded to the roof of the apartment block where there is an aerial view of São Paulo. This access to fresh air and the outside world is an important therapeutic measure for Thiago and enables him to begin to address his human needs within the context of his political agitation. At this point he admits to Rosa that he is lonely and the two then begin a relationship. Again this is Rosa aiding Thiago in his emotional journey, helping him to
realise that, though he must fight, he must not abandon his own personal needs which are essential to his survival. Guiding Thiago through his problems is further evidence of Rosa’s role as humaniser and something which also affirms her narrative autonomy, and therefore agency. 

_Cabra cega_ uses various other cinematic tools, particularly close or detailed camera work, which allow us access not only to Rosa’s, but also to other characters’ practical consciousness. For example there are many close-ups, which, not only afford concentration on a singular character, as intended, and access to facial expressions, but also draw our attention to other dramatic devices that report on their practical consciousness. Also there is much emphasis on abject bodily realities and physical pain, such as blood, tears, naked flesh, beads of sweat on brows and pallid skin. Make-up and costume of course play a key part. For example Thiago’s heightened state of shock and anxiety are constantly emphasised in this film in his unwashed hair, his stained bandages, and his dishevelled clothes. This is particularly clear during the scene in which Rosa first changes his bandages. Thiago’s physical pain and exhaustion are almost forced upon us as the camera shows us his bruised skin, the rings under his eyes and the sweat forming as his discomfort intensifies. As a droplet of water appears just below his eye it is unclear whether it is a tear or a bead of sweat, and we can almost feel Thiago’s pain as he sharply draws in breath.

Along with the discursive expression of her political agency, access to Rosa’s practical consciousness, again through camera work, is seen through the detailed reporting of her emotions. This again serves to unite her personal and political experiences, thus further destroying the myth, imposed both by the military and the armed resistance groups, that women militants unproblematically lived out the gender stereotyping to which they were subjected, being seen either as feminine and emotional, and thus
ineffective, or masculine and devoid of emotion, yet more threatening. As Jean Franco describes, within the context of the Latin American Southern cone dictatorships: ‘The polarization of masculine/feminine, active/passive was taken as the natural not only by the military but by other armed groups fighting the military government (1992: 108). As is explained in chapter three, although this was the rhetorical stance, the reality was often very different with women simultaneously adopting practical, theoretical and emotional roles.

Examples of this detailing of emotions within the political context are seen in the way the camera often faces Rosa head-on in an uncompromising and intrusive way, for example when she is on a bus travelling from the apartment to meet Mateus and is stopped by the military police. As the soldiers check each passenger’s identity card the sense of fear on the bus is manifested in Rosa. Close-ups reveal her wet hair and un-made-up face, emphasising the strain of her current existence. As the soldiers hand back her identity card, the relief Rosa, and the spectator, feel is revealed as she closes her eyes and swallows hard. Non-diegetic music at this point also heightens the sense of anxiety, which is increased as ‘wanted’ flyers announcing Thiago’s face are posted around the bus.

Handheld and erratic camera work often mirrors the uncertain lives of these young people. Quick editing between shots adds to the feelings of chaos inherent in some of the scenes. For example, the camera tracks Rosa’s gaze, rather than her point of view, as she follows Mateus out of the shop where she works, so as to better emphasise the speed at which she perceives Mateus to leave, thus commenting on the anxiety she feels about when she will next see him. This anxiety is realised when he is later shot dead by the military police. Another example of this alternative indentificatory camera work is when Thiago begins to suspect Pedro of treachery. As he runs from one side of
the apartment to the other the camera at once follows behind him then immediately switches to point of view as he looks out of the window. We sometimes barely have time to focus as the camera zooms in and out of shaky focus, acting as Thiago’s paranoid eyes as he sees Pedro down below talking to the police. This style of film, which invites us into the uncertain world of these characters, to view in detail their emotions and feel their confusion, is perhaps the most effective way of conveying the horrors of the armed struggle. In terms of agency, the use of social realist traits also provides us with the opportunity to see the quotidian realities of these young people and in particular that of Rosa.

Close-ups also avoid the simple male/female binary that is presented in other films whose subject is the armed struggle and which serve to fragment the characters, therefore undermining narrative agency. In Cabra cega both Rosa and Thiago feature in the same frame but are shot side-on, subverting the normal shot/counter shot arrangement. Although our point of view is biased towards either Thiago or Rosa, depending on who is given the dialogue, the other is just visible in the shot. This helps to promote a shared experience and cement the relationship that builds between the two, making Rosa a co-character, even though much of the film concentrates on Thiago’s experience of clandestine living. When Rosa admits to Thiago ‘Estou com medo. Eu não suporto dor. Eu não vou agüentar’ revealing her fear of imprisonment and torture, she and Thiago are captured side-on via close-up. Their voices are fragile as they hold each others’ faces close together. Their relationship is made all the more convincing as we are invited to inspect the passionate exchange between the two of them at close range. Again, Rosa’s admission of fear does not serve to depoliticise her but endears us to her as a ‘Humaniser’ and a ‘total’ character, therefore complementing narrative agency.
Although Rosa has thus far demonstrated her practical and discursive awareness of the armed struggle, she is unfamiliar with and uncomfortable using, weapons. This is clear when she notices Thiago collecting together his arsenal of guns and appears offended by his apparently trivial acceptance of them. When Rosa awakes one day to find Thiago gone and the bedroom door locked she initially panics, however soon her ability to ‘go on’ reveals itself to us in perhaps its most overt manifestation yet. Silently and without discussion she searches under the bed for the rifle that she knows was placed there by Thiago. As the situation demands, she competently prepares herself for armed conflict, cocking the gun and pointing it towards the door. Again, however, her fear is emphasised by hand-held camera and by her almost foetal positioning on the bed. We see her perched near the headboard cradling the gun and resting wearily on the barrel. The camera then moves from this head-on medium shot featuring her petrified facial expressions, to a high-angle medium long-shot, which depicts the vulnerability she feels. It then returns to a medium close-up showing Rosa this time more alert and ready to shoot as she hears the key turn in the lock.

Another element that helps consolidate Rosa’s narrative agency in terms of character unity, is the conviction we have in her emotions. The total immersion of Duboc into her role is particularly clear in the scene when she hears of Mateus’ death. As she takes in the devastating news her face freezes and she holds back her sobs for fear they will be hysterical. As the tears simply fall out of her eyes, her throat can be seen vibrating as she holds back wracking sobs. In response to this devastating news Rosa and Thiago now unite into a dynamic and purposeful team, burning any incriminating evidence and ransacking the apartment. Their unification at this point is in total contrast to the gender division that characterises Barreto’s film when Maria is wheeled out alone and shamed onto the runway. Rosa now completes her journey as political agent as Thiago
reinforces the knowledge she earlier gained, by officially instructing her on how to aim and shoot the gun. As the film ends Thiago, Pedro and Rosa all run from the apartment together, guns poised, leaving a powerful and hopeful message about the actions of the armed resistance during the dictatorship in Brazil.  

**Zuzu Angel**

*Zuzu Angel* also successfully charts female narrative agency through the representation of practical consciousness and unity of character, providing plenty of opportunities wherein the main character confronts her cerned context. Furthermore, although the emotionally rendered mother-son bond certainly is one of the main narrative threads, it avoids overt sentimentality and is not prioritised over Zuzu’s other roles, thereby managing to subvert the patriarchal idea, particularly prevalent during the time of the dictatorship, that women’s only roles should be as wives and mothers. The film also goes further than this, exposing the myth of the passive *mater dolorosa*, and presenting motherhood as an effective political platform. As with *Cabra cega*, this film also illustrates a significant advancement in the representation of female narrative agency in *Retomada* cinema through the charting of its female character’s transition from practically to discursively asserting their political agency.

93 Two other marginal yet important female characters feature in this film. Thiago’s female companion Dora has already been mentioned. However, another female Humaniser who helps Thiago ‘come to terms’ with his own personal reality, is Dona Nenê, an old lady who lives in the apartment opposite Pedro’s. Her attempts to reach him are incessant. At first he ignores her offers of food and conversation, worried she may be unreliable or a security risk. She too however is not as politically naïve as Thiago initially assumes. Eventually his loneliness and curiosity get the better of him and he accepts an invitation to dinner. It soon becomes clear that the old lady is using Thiago as a way of dealing with the guilt she harbours about her own son, whom she abandoned when he asked for shelter from the Franco regime in Spain. Thiago also needs this further human contact, in its basic form of food, company and shared experience, as part of his psychological recovery. In this way their relationship is mutually beneficial. The realisation by Thaigo that not everyone is an enemy and that the people who surround him are part of his wider support network is again facilitated through the female characters, The fact that politically aware female characters illustrate this depth of character avoids the usual patronising assumption of women as politically unsophisticated, presenting a positive outcome for female narrative agency.
Fashion designer, mother and political activist Zuzu (Zuleika) Angel, was born in Curvelo in the interior of Minas Gerais in 1921, and was raised by an uncle in Belo Horizonte where she met her husband, an American, Norman Angel Jones. Having already broken with her traditional rural background by marrying a foreigner, and perhaps anticipating her future role as a non-conformist, Zuzu rejected her unhappy marriage and she and her husband separated. As a divorced single mother in 1960s Brazil, Zuzu was subject to the judgmental opinions of society, particularly as she chose to support her children by launching her own career. Her first job was working as a seamstress for the charity Pioneiras Sociais, where she not only made but also designed clothes using fabrics rejected by shops and businesses. Her innovative designs would eventually lead to the creation of her own label which would become internationally recognised. In 1971, although her highly innovative designs were regarded as a niche, Zuzu was at the vanguard of her profession. Her clothes were adorned with Brazilian flowers and birds, and reflected the rich folkloric tradition of Brazil, with the styles of the Afro-Brazilian Bahian woman and the rural bandits of the northeast. Her designs reached the catwalks of New York and her clothes were worn by famous Hollywood clients such as Liza Minnelli and Kim Novak.

At this time her son Stuart was participating in the student resistance movement, and was a prominent member of the MR-8 (the same organisation that kidnapped the Ambassador of the USA in 1969). This same year (1971) Stuart was captured and tortured to death at a military air base in Rio. His body was thrown in the sea. Zuzu was to spend the next six years trying to recover her son’s body and campaigning to uncover the grim reality of the dictatorship. Her angst and pain was reflected in her 1972 collection which featured childish designs of birds and images of the sun behind bars, guns, and a series of little black angels paying homage to her dead son. She also
crossed boundaries by forging international political connections, gathering damning evidence against the government with the help of the US authorities and Amnesty International. In April 1976 she was run off the road by a government agent and killed (Giannini and Gordinro 2006: 48 and production notes).

**Zuzu Angel: A ‘Total’ Character**

One of the most obvious manifestations of narrative agency comes out of Zuzu’s representation as a ‘total’ character. Within the *mise en scène*, as we shall now see, we are given access to her full range of emotions combined with other elements of her character’s experience, to present a full spectrum of behaviour, thus avoiding fragmentation. A combination of closely interlinked editing and soundtrack is one of the main ways we understand Zuzu as a ‘total’ character. However, this combination is episodic rather than continuous (despite the editing being seamless) provoking thought and reaction, rather than placation and sentimentality which would create passivity. Subtle sound effects are used rather than a constant interrupting motif which is characteristic of films such as *Olga*. Again, as with *Cabra cega* it also uses contemporary national artists, and music, particularly that of Chico Buarque de Hollanda, who, as mentioned, was an outspoken opponent of the regime and was also a great friend of Zuzu’s.

The provocative juxtaposition of image and sound begins as the opening credits run. The opening titles are again images of documentary footage but this time featuring superimposed animated line sketches. At first the drawings are used to embellish the images, then they manipulate and erase them. This implants the notions of change, destruction and rebirth into the minds of the audience. A significant number of the images used feature women of the 1960s. One still in particular shows women wearing
bikinis, the garment that, as the mini-skirt in Europe, symbolised sexual liberation in Brazil. The images also show women participating in marches and fully engaging with that defining political moment. This lays the foundations for a film that is to expand on the idea of female agency. The music of the opening titles is *Dê um rolê* written by Moraes and Galvão and sung by Gal Costa (a prominent member of the *Tropicália* movement) on her record *Fa-Tal*- which was released in 1971. This music (which combines bluesy rock with politically pertinent lyrics, sung by *Pedro Luís e A Parede* and contemporary female singer Roberta Sá), bursts onto the screen and, in combination with the previous images of women engaging in the political struggle, also contributes to establishing the film as a portrait of a notable woman.94

The film then begins where the story ends, just before Zuzu is run off the road by government agents and killed. At this point she has uncovered evidence concerning her son that would be damning to the regime and has compiled a dossier to give to the American authorities. As she writes a letter to Chico Buarque, stating that she fears for her life, a piano motif entitled ‘medo de morrer suíte’ begins, comprising four notes that continue in a loop, helping to build and maintain the tension. The introduction of stark sound to comment on the action also begins here in the manner in which Zuzu wields her pen (used to write the letter that lays the blame of her possible death, which later becomes a reality, with the government authorities). Her manner of scratching the

94 Lyrics from *Dê um rolê*:
Não se assuste pessoa
Se eu lhe disser que a vida é boa
Não se assuste pessoa
Se eu lhe disser que a vida é boa
Enquanto eles se batem dê um rolê
E você vai ouvir
Apenas quem já dizia
Eu não tenho nada
Antes de você ser
Eu sou, eu sou,
Eu sou amor da cabeça aos pés
words - the sounds produced and the empathetic underlining of the title ‘declaraçao’, combine to penetrate the audience consciousness.

This is the daring act of a woman who will not be silenced by the regime. The act of writing at this point (at the beginning of the film, but at the end of the story), illustrates the inception of discursive consciousness. This political agency is further illustrated by her decision to leave the letter with Chico Buarque, whom she knows will try to make her declaration public. The piano motif then accompanies Zuzu as she drives from her apartment in Rio, delivers the letter, receives the missing part of her dossier and arrives at a motel in Minas Gerais where she begins to relay her story into a tape recorder: another example of discursive consciousness and so political agency. This resets the chronology of the film and we are transported back to 1971 when Zuzu is at the height of her career.

The juxtaposition of sound and image not only contributes to depicting Zuzu as an emotionally mature, ‘total’ character, but also helps to unite the initially disconnected narratives of Zuzu and Stuart. This device eventually results in one single narrative shared by both mother and son, therefore joining their political agencies. For example, when Zuzu discovers her son has been arrested she hurriedly prepares a bag of clothes to take to the Military Police department where she believes Stuart is being held. In her panic to pack she traps her fingers in the drawer. As she does so she cries out in pain and the film immediately cuts to scenes of horses hooves pounding the streets, accompanied by the title music. As marbles are thrown to unsteady the horses, we see the chaos and fury of the street demonstrations in which Stuart and his girlfriend Sonia, are involved.

The news of her son’s death, which is relayed through a letter from a fellow prisoner who was captured and tortured alongside Stuart, is dealt with somewhat differently:
not via a jump-cut edit but a sequence which exhibits greater continuity. When the prisoner character reads the letter out via a voice-over, this provides us with the information needed to understand the reactions that follow. As Zuzu reaches the part where it reads ‘a morte de seu filho’ the camera zooms away from her as she collapses in shock against the wall. This is an inversion of the classic zoom-in traditionally used to convey terror and suspense. The scenes of his arrest, torture and death are then played out in images and sounds as the voice-over continues. All this is seamlessly edited together and interwoven with scenes of Zuzu’s reaction in order to synchronise her and Stuart’s pain and suffering, thereby positioning the two of them on the same political and emotional plane.

The sequence begins as the rear windscreen of Stuart’s car is smashed by a military police ambush. As he turns around in disbelief, the next image is of Zuzu frantically throwing open the doors of her wardrobe. As the voiceover then details what happens next (him being taken to the Galeão air-base) the image that appears is of Zuzu in her apartment, the same scene with which the sequence began. This time the camera zooms in on her as she sits in a heap on the floor. Scenes of Stuart’s torture then ensue. He is shown as being tied to a chair and having salt rubbed into his face. As he screams and then begins to sob, a blurred image of Zuzu appears as she is seen fighting to remove her clothes. The action then returns to Stuarts’s torture which is punctuated all the time by wretched screaming. Again a blurred image of Zuzu is shown as she is seen desperately trying to gather together the pages of the letter she has received. More graphic scenes of torture are then shown of both Stuart and his companion. This time the image that follows is of Zuzu continuing to frantically undress. Seen by the audience from the other side of her windows, she appears as a silhouette, as if fading from reality. As the letter describes how Stuart is heard coughing, an image is shown
of a garage filled with exhaust fumes accompanied by one of Zuzu immersed in a hot bath. In this case it appears to be the steam that is suffocating her. Stuart’s asphyxiation is then intimated as we see Zuzu immersed under the water and suddenly gasping for air. Finally, when Stuart’s death is described, we see a lifeless hand hanging over the side of the bath with water trickling down to the floor.

Clearly, the mixing of different temporal images, spliced together with sound-effects to create one sequence, sets up a correlation between Zuzu and her son’s physical and mental reactions, suggesting their strong connection. When Zuzu plunges herself into getting justice for her son, which involves actively facing the military regime, her cerned context, we see how this sequence has been used as a tool with which to reinforce their shared political values, despite, as some of the flashbacks reveal, previous disagreements between the pair. As the film continues Zuzu is revealed, through glimpses at the independent and principled education of her children, to indirectly be the source of Stuart’s militarism, rather than, as is initially suggested, Zuzu and Stuart acting independently of one another. Rather than sentimentalise the mother-son relationship, the detailing of the strong connection between the two also helps us to understand Zuzu’s development into a discursive political agitator, which eventually sees her embody the same role as her son. In this way their co-development facilitates an understanding of their political as well as emotional journey.

Reactionary discourses, such as those perpetuated by the military regime in Brazil, see mothers as apolitical, passive, self-effacing and silent. This film, in its representation of Zuzu Angel as a mother who is also a political agent, belies this characterization and also challenges the idea of women as oppressed victims. In fact this film is careful not to suggest motherhood as a passive vocation, and Zuzu is never presented as a mater dolorosa but as an active fighter against the injustices to which her son has been
subjected. Furthermore, it gives narrative space, not only to the joys, but also the difficulties that motherhood presents, particularly those facing a single career-woman in 1960s’ Brazil. One of the flashback sequences in the film illustrates this well. The scene in question shows Stuart as a young child falling victim to bullying from his friends, who call his mother a ‘tramp’ because she does not live with his father. The film also never accepts motherhood as woman’s correct or spiritual calling, and denies the binary of the good/bad mother. At no point during the film is Zuzu’s role as a mother criticised, evaluated or revered. In fact the film emphasises the tensions inherent within the relationship between Zuzu and Stuart whilst at the same time making political comment. Further snippets of their former life together – practically rendered examples of their individual quotidian survival strategies, help us to understand them as characters who share the bond of mother and son but, initially at least, also with seemingly differing political priorities. For example, in terms of attitudes to the dictatorship, the film balances the perceived naiveté/idealism of the students, the political laissez-faire attitude of the middle-classes, and the practical reality of the majority of the population. For example, when Zuzu takes issue with Stuart’s participation in student demonstrations which leads to a photograph in a newspaper, a discussion regarding the political situation then ensues:

**Stuart:** Os artistas estão sendo perseguidos. Fascistas espanaram atores de cinco peças de teatro. Mas o povo vai dar um basta em tudo isso, mãe.

**Zuzu:** Vocês estão enganados. Gente, eu vejo as minhas costureiras. Elas viajam que nem sardinhas em lata, tomam condução de madrugada. Não tem tempo nem cabeça pra ficar atrás de vocês.

**Stuart:** Minha mãe, está defendendo a ditadura?!

**Zuzu:** Foi isso que eu falei? Foi isso que eu falei, Tuti? Você sabe que não. Só que todo mundo está lutando para sobreviver. Ninguém tem tempo para política.
After further argument, Sonia then closes the conversation by stating ‘Nós escolhemos não fechar os olhos para as injustiças do mundo’. This perhaps symbolises the inherent tension between Stuart who feels his mother is guilty by default of complicity with the regime, and Zuzu, who believes Stuart’s activities to be dangerous and ultimately futile.

Another tense moment of political comment comes when Stuart criticises Zuzu for making clothes for the wives of the generals. Zuzu jokes that after Stuart wins the revolution she will make the clothes for the women of the ‘Comitê Central’. This points to the way in which different generations view authority and the establishment and injects humour into a relationship that whilst tense, is also loving. These scenes, which contextualise Stuart’s political background, are all seen through a variety of flashbacks and are interspersed with the scenes in which Zuzu is confronting her context and constantly coming up against resistance from the armed forces. This illustrates how she slowly begins to understand the reasons for her son’s actions and in this way subtly comments upon her transformation from practically ‘surviving’ the dictatorship to discursively fighting it, as did her son.

Clues of Zuzu’s future actions are visible when she first hears of Stuart’s imprisonment. Upon hearing this news she drives immediately with her two daughters to the army base where she believes Stuart is being held. Upon arrival she is faced with a group of men who appear to have been out socialising and seem a little drunk. As she enquires after her son, the men adopt a threatening, patronising and accusatory position. Zuzu’s reactions to their behaviour, polite yet firm, subtly convey her as adept at dealing with authority and, when necessary, being able to manipulate it. Although at this point Zuzu is unsure of what to do, she is also confident, knowing she has the right and more important, the skills, to gain information regarding the
whereabouts of her son. In fact the acting style of Patricia Pilar (who plays Zuzu), at this point effectively portrays the spectrum of emotions a woman such as Zuzu would experience during this type of encounter. She knows how to express herself, she is well-educated, yet is still subject to judgment from the patriarchal social order. She will continue to balance femininity, confidence, intelligence, fear and anger in similar encounters in the future. For example, when she visits an army general in order to try to gain access to the prison where she believes her son may be being held, she feigns humility and ignorance as the general discusses the political situation. Again this is an example of how she can effectively manipulate authority for her own ends. When this proves ineffective and she realises the prison is merely a façade to frustrate discovery of the whereabouts of those arrested, Zuzu begins to show her internal thoughts to other characters via discursive consciousness, shaking off this humble persona and adopting a fighting stance, shouting and reprimanding those in the military and pushing the boundaries the dictatorship has imposed. This is indicative of the kind of behaviour that will become more prominent in the second half of the film, showing that not only does she display an inherent politics in ‘going on’ with her life in the context of Stuart’s disappearance, but that she can also give her actions ‘direct discursive expression’. Of course her vocal stance against the general is also further evidence of what Paul Smith describes as ‘dis-cerning the subject’, that is exceeding her putative passive role as a woman in a patriarchal society. Zuzu Angel’s agency in this film is therefore revealed to be manifold.

After she learns of her son’s death, Zuzu’s political commitment increases and the tone of the film changes. She begins to dress more demurely and in darker shades, sometimes entirely in black. She begins to look physically strained and appears older. However, this mourning demeanour is not, as is traditionally rendered, accompanied
by passivity, but by action, by Zuzu’s own agency which is a consequence of her having confronted the regime. Again the film is showing motherhood as a political spring-board, not as a helpless or inescapable state.

In this section of the film Zuzu completes her transition from practically to discursively asserting her agency. One of the discursive gestures she makes, and one of her many public denunciations, is the writing of hundreds of letters to influential figures in Brazil, informing them of the cruel realities of the military regime. This section of the film also begins to more overtly illustrate how Zuzu subverts a traditionally feminine vocation, that of dressmaking, transforming it into a political act. As Zuzu finds it increasingly impossible to reconcile her personal situation with that of her profession she orders that the shipment of her next collection (featuring ‘birds and flowers’) bound for the USA, to be cancelled. The results of this decisive action are seen later in the film.

Zuzu’s transition from practical to discursive consciousness is epitomised in the trial scene where she makes a daring speech condemning the military government. The trial against Stuart, in which Zuzu’s lawyer Fraga asserts that he has no doubt he is defending a corpse, ironically clears Stuart of any charges due to lack of evidence. To this pointless ruling Zuzu reacts with passionate anger, accusing the judges of being murderers. At this point she appears as the embodiment of the political mother. As she is reprimanded by the judge and threatened with contempt, her eloquent and emotional words echo around the courtroom:

Desacato foi não terem cumprido a lei na hora em que prenderam Stuart. Desacato foi não terem cumprido a lei na hora de interrogá-lo. Desacato é torturar e matar. Desacato é impedir o direito sagrado de uma mãe enterrar seu filho


161
This episode is the culmination of her grief as a mother and of her anger as a political agent and the two are completely interchangeable, not only illustrating political motherhood but also presenting the unity of character that narrative agency requires.

During the trial, we also continue to have access to Zuzu’s internal (practical) musings and the strong link she has to her son. As Stuart’s name is read out, the camera focuses on her troubled and angry face and there is a cut to a scene featuring him with his mother. This scene obviously charts one of the last encounters the pair had before her son went underground, and the pale sand reflecting off the white wall gives the sequence a dream-like quality. In this scene, Stuart explains to her that, for security reasons, he will no longer be known by that name. This disturbs Zuzu but she is comforts by the fact that he agrees to continue to be Stuart ‘just for her’. Another memory that features during the courtroom scene is that of Stuart as a young child who thoughtfully brings his mother a cup of coffee whilst she is sewing. This again points to her dual role as career woman and mother. These flashbacks, as well as being a way of illustrating the mother-son relationship in the name of character development, also reaffirm Zuzu’s understanding of why Stuart chose the path of militancy, therefore giving substance to her own political agency.

As Rosa is shown to manipulate her initial role as cleaner and carer, turning it into a political platform, so Zuzu Angel politicises dressmaking, subverting a woman’s traditional role in the private sphere. After the trial, Zuzu begins to develop a revolutionary and politically motivated fashion collection to be exhibited in the USA. Its inspiration is a cabaret performance, given by German cabaret singer Liezelotte. The character is played by one of Zuzu’s models, Elke Maravilha, performing in a cameo role. Maravilha performs In den kasernen, a political song telling of the heartache of war and of the human cost. It is the experience of this performance that
acts as the catalyst for Zuzu’s new collection. As she listens to the song she begins to sketch out new designs on her napkin which include, as detailed in Zuzu's biography, images of the sun and birds behind bars and childlike images of war and suffering.

The film then charts another example of discursive consciousness which use these new designs to publicise the disappearance of her son and the criminality of the Brazilian government. The film chooses to detail a particularly poignant moment during the American debut of her clothes, set in the exact location of her first fashion show in 1971 which featured brightly coloured materials and bold prints. The contrast is stark and instead of bright reds and oranges, birds and flowers and the accompaniment of the jolly Tico-tico no fubá (made internationally famous by the fruit laden ‘Brazilian Bombshell’ Carmen Miranda), the sinister tune of In den kasernen played on electric guitar, accompanies the models as they walk down the catwalks in the more bellicose designs. The show ends as Zuzu enters wearing black clothes of mourning and a veil, holding a photograph of her son. Again the symbol of feminine piety and mourning is manipulated to make a political point. This image recalls the actions of the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who themselves wore their domestic headscarves and carried photos of their lost children in order to politicise their roles as mothers. Choosing to turn this episode of Zuzu’s life into a key scene in the film, which shows her to be not only a mother, a fashion designer and a political agitator but all three, significantly contributes to her representation as a ‘total’ character and so a narrative agent. Other (public) discursive episodes at this point also confirm Zuzu’s political agency. An example is the commandeering of the PA system on a flight into Rio, where she denounces the horrors of the military regime, revealing that it has murdered her son.
The transition from practical to discursive assertion of agency is crystallised as the film nears the end, in the dossier she compiles for Amnesty International. This sees her having to collaborate with an ex-military policeman, involved in the torture of her son, as well as having to avoid US security in order to gain access to the US foreign minister Henry Kissinger, who is visiting Brazil. This is also exemplified in the various phone calls and meetings she has with Amnesty International representatives in America. All this effort, which continually endangers her life, is directed at gaining the information necessary to publicly and internationally denounce the actions of the military government in Brazil. As the film nears the end, the narrative begins to re-connect with the beginning scene in which Zuzu relays her story into a tape recorder, another measure, along with the decision to write a declaration to Chico Buarque, which will ensure her political campaign will continue to be heard after her death. That so much emphasis and narrative space is devoted to Zuzu’s discursive as well as her practical consciousness and that this transition is sufficiently illustrated, provides the lasting impression of her political and narrative agency.

In conclusion, this film, along with *Cabra cega*, presents a significant advance in the successful presentation of female narrative agency. It presents characters centrally, autonomously, and with access to their specific histories, not only practically but also discursively. This reveals a profundity of agency not reached in the other films examined in this study. Presenting these two women as actively manipulating symbols of assumed feminine passivity also reveals yet another layer to their representation. Finally, the successful combination, which avoids binary representation or fragmentation of character, of a range of human traits and emotions presents these women as ‘total’ characters, yet another important manifestation of narrative agency.
Chapter Six

Suggestions for a Critical Discussion: Olga, Agency and the telenovela

Introduction

Chosen to be Brazil’s 2005 entry to the Oscars, Olga (Jaime Monjardim, 2004) presents another example of how potential narrative agency in the form of militant woman is compromised through particular narrative techniques. As in O que é isso, loss of agency is primarily manifested through a fragmentation of character which posits a simplistic representation of the militant woman as torn between the masculine and the feminine. A comparison with the eponymous novel upon which the film is based, read along with other accounts of her life, illustrates how the film’s reliance on the production values of the telenovela (in particular the intrusive non-diegetic soundtrack, the sentimental and melodramatic dialogue, dramatic lighting, incessant close-ups, and constant shot/counter shot exchanges), results in a representation of Olga as unable to balance her personal and political lives. In addition, there are few opportunities for the main character to confront her cerned context, and an elliptical narrative structure also contributes to the way in which access to Olga’s practical consciousness is precluded, which of course has consequences for narrative agency.

Olga’s role as a mother is particularly celebrated, ironically via more access to practical consciousness, as her most ‘successful’ state. This comes from a combination of the emotional and melodramatic production style, and screen writer and producer Rita Buzzar’s clear exaltation of motherhood as a redemptory state for Olga. This then satisfies the expectations of an audience primed for the telenovela, in which the love story/emotional climax is often the central focus. Whilst this is not initially problematic, the lack of narrative concentration on her other roles, as a woman and a soldier, denies agency overall. As the story resonates strongly with Brazil’s recent
political history (a country that only recently returned to democracy in 1985) another argument then arises: that the adaptation overlooks the logical demand that it be told responsibly and with relevance, not only to the historical period of the original events (Brazil’s *Estado Novo* and Hitler’s Germany), but also to the political moment in which the film was produced, during the much celebrated and critically acclaimed *Retomada*.

It appears that the production choice of the *telenovela* was favoured due to long-running financial and logistical difficulties that plagued the realisation of this epic story, and in an attempt to condense an extremely complex narrative into a commercial success with almost ready-made audiences. This is not to dismiss the *telenovela* as an inferior art form, or to deny the tight cultural relationship that exists between genre and viewers, spectator and society. Indeed the very point is that whilst it uses some of the genre’s technical elements to ensure entertainment value and a strong suture between text and spectator, what the film does not do is engage and comment upon either the historical relevance of its subject or the social and political contexts of the day, as *telenovelas* consistently do.

Despite this film being celebrated as a national success, the lack of critical concentration on Olga’s misrepresentation is worrying. Although this could be accounted for by the film’s relatively recent release, its gender-specific analysis is something ripe for exploration. This chapter hopes to begin this process.95

**Who was Olga?**96

It is not appropriate here to retell the story of Olga Benario or attempt to uncover the real ‘truth’ about her life. From what is published about her we know that she was born

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95 It is worth pointing out that in a recent top ten ranking of films with the most audiences, *Olga* came 7th with 3,078,030 spectators (*Guia da Folha* March 2007: 9).

to Jewish-German parents Eugenie and Leo Benario on 12 February 1908 in Munich. Her father was a Social Democrat and a lawyer who voluntarily represented the working classes who were struggling to survive Germany’s post-war economic crises. Her father’s social conscience was something that profoundly affected Olga and was a contributing factor to her later, radical, Communist beliefs. She joined the Communist Youth at age fifteen, and at age eighteen was imprisoned for her ‘subversive’ activities. Wishing to escape the suffocating bourgeois atmosphere of her parents’ house and having a volatile relationship with her mother, she and her then boyfriend Otto Braun, himself a prominent Communist, left Munich to continue their mission in a working class district of Berlin. Her most radical step came when she participated in the liberation of Otto from Moabit Prison in April 1928, where he was undergoing trial for crimes against the state. Wanted by the German authorities Olga and Otto fled to Moscow, where Olga was elected to the Central Committee of the Communist Youth International. After the successful completion of her first European mission in France, Olga returned to discover that she had been elected a member of the Presidium, the highest honour in the Communist organisation. She then underwent military training, including piloting aeroplanes and parachuting.

In 1934, aged just twenty-six, she was chosen by the Comintern to ensure the safe passage of Luis Carlos Prestes, leader of the famous Coluna Prestes, back to Brazil where he would begin to organise a possible Communist uprising. The two fell in

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97 During the 1920s the repressive authoritarian regime of President Artur da Silva Bernardes had led to a series of uprisings within the army in São Paulo. As the rebellion worsened, Luis Carlos Prestes, at that time an engineer in a small battalion serving in Rio Grande do Sul, felt inspired to join the opposition. Prestes would eventually come to lead the eponymous Coluna, an anti-government arm of the military that managed to successfully outwit government forces despite odds against them. Together with Miguel Costa, Prestes led his small battalion of 1,500 soldiers through 12 states over nearly 25,000 kilometres of Brazilian landscape. The size of the battalion grew as they were joined by more and more sympathisers along the way. The poverty and social deprivation Prestes witnessed on his journey was to affect him profoundly. The march ended two and half years later when Prestes renounced his weapons and entered a period of self-imposed exile in Buenos Aires. It was here that his articulation of Communism would begin and would see him become affiliated with the Communist Party, on and off,
love on the journey but the attempted revolution of 27 November 1935 failed. Olga and Prestes were eventually caught and imprisoned on the 5 March 1936, and by this time Olga had become pregnant by Prestes. In September of 1936 Olga was deported back to Hitler’s Germany, then seven months pregnant, on the orders of then President Getúlio Vargas, whose sympathies at that time lay with European fascism.

Olga gave birth to daughter Anita Leocádia in Barnimstrasse prison on 27 November 1936 and was able to keep the child as long as she could produce milk. At fourteen months old Anita was taken from her mother by Nazi medical authorities. Incredibly, and due to tireless campaigning, Prestes’ mother (Leocádia) was able to rescue the child and take her to Mexico where both she and her eldest daughter Lydia, would care for her. Olga however, would never see her baby again. Olga was kept in various Nazi prisons and concentration camps, including Ravensbrück, for a further six years where she was treated abominably and suffered constant torture and beatings. In 1942 she was sent to Bernburg death camp and gassed. Prestes was to hear of her death only after he was released from prison in July 1945.

**Olga’s Story: By All Accounts**

Fernando Morais’ best selling account of Olga’s life, first published in 1985, is one of Brazil’s most successful publications selling near to six hundred million copies at home and being published in over twenty countries (Bezerra 2004: 26). In 2002 it was adapted for the Cinema by Television producer Rita Buzzar and directed by telenovela veteran Jayme Monjardim. With the multinational Globo empire behind it, it secured over three million viewers and made Olga’s previously little known life story available to many more Brazilians.

until the mid 1980s (Morais 2005: 15-20). See also As noites das grandes fogueiras: uma história da Coluna Prestes (Meirelles, 1995), and more recently Os órfãos da revolução (Meirelles, 2005).
Morais used a variety of sources for his book: interviews, documentary evidence, and information acquired during various trips to Germany, Russia and the USA to build a coherent picture of Olga’s tragically short yet significant life. He also spent many afternoons talking to Luis Carlos Prestes (Morais 2005: 9). Although we must be wary of anything that claims to be the ‘truth’ or present the ‘real’ facts, Morais’ novel is the only text that brings together the scattered information about Olga into one coherent volume and which gives equal weight to her various roles as mother, lover and political agitator. Morais attests in his foreword:

Este livro não é a minha versão sobre a vida de Olga Benario ou sobre a revolta comunista de 1935, mas aquela que acredito ser a versão real desses episódios. Não vai impressa aqui uma só informação que não tenha sido submetida ao crivo possível da confirmação. Qualquer incorreção que for localizada ao longo desta história, entretanto, deve ser debitada exclusivamente à minha impossibilidade de confrontá-la com versões diferentes (2005: 13-14).

Whilst it remains important to avoid ‘fidelity criticism’ which Brian McFarlane explains as dependent ‘on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct “meaning” which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with’ (1996: 8), we can analyse the way in which the life of this heroine, an important example of female political agency, appears on screen. In fact Morais is used as a reference in many academic texts that mention Olga, Prestes and the Communist Uprising of 1935, and features personally and prominently as the voice of Olga’s life in the film on Prestes O velho, directed by Toni Venturi (1997). The style of the book is somewhere between journalism, political thriller, and historical document. Most important it shows Olga as the powerful political force she was but does not isolate her from the world of human emotions.

98 See also Comaradas e companheiros, memória e historia do PCB (Pandolfi 1995:128).
Olga Bénario – die geschichte eines tapferen lebens (1961) by Ruth Werner, is another biographical novel written by a former colleague of Olga’s from her days in the German Communist Youth. The book has been translated into Portuguese as Olga Benario: a história de uma mulher corajosa (1989) and aspires to be a work written to educate the German youth about Olga’s heroism, but not with any intended moral or political motivation. It presents an alternative, though more dramatised, version of Olga’s life.\footnote{There is also a documentary film of her life Olga Benario - ein leben für die revolution/ Olga Benario - A Life for the Revolution (Galip Iyitanir, 2004), which also features interviews with William Waack, Morais and other prominent biographers of her and Prestes’ life (Internet Movie Database, from here on referenced as IMDB). Although it has been shown around the European festival circuit it is not available on general release and so could not feature in this chapter. See bibliography.}

Brazilian journalist William Waack’s Camaradas: nos arquivos de Moscou, originally published in 1993, analyses the secret files of various Soviet institutions held in Moscow, which, until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, were unavailable to outside investigators. Following a tip from Prestes’ youngest son, Iuri Ribeiro, Waack discovered that some of these files contained previously unexploited information concerning the 1935 attempted Communist take-over in Brazil. As such they also contained more detailed information on Olga’s role in Russia and Brazil during the inter-war years (Waack 2004: 9). The tone of the book is highly conspiratorial, and this is unsurprising since Waack is a well-known journalist and the book concentrates on one of the most politically sensitive periods of twentieth century history. Waack is also mildly critical of the two biographies of Olga, claiming they romanticise her life and have elected to leave out the specific details of her professional profile, some of which, in any case, have remained unknown for some years, ‘enquanto não se abriram os arquivos em Moscou’ (Waack 2004: 94). Above all Waack specifically categorises Olga as a Soviet spy and her experiences are cited as less to do with her own free will and more to do with the designs that the Communist party had for her: ‘Desde que
Ingressou em 1923 num movimento organizado [...] Olga não fez outra coisa do que trabalhar nos aparatos ilegais e clandestinos do partido [...] Essas seções clandestinas do PC alemão eram diretamente controlados pelos “órgãos competentes” soviéticos’ (95).

He also tries to address some issues found in the novels about Olga which he believes contradict the historical facts: ‘É essencial ressaltar […] que a afirmação, encontrada nas biografias de Olga, de que a justiça alemã da época era “fascista” e mantinha em seu poder “milhares de prisioneiros políticos”, tornando de saída uma farsa o processo contra Otto Braun, não corresponde aos fatos históricos’ (98). Furthermore, he is keen to redress a version of events whose principal promoter is commonly cited as Olga, that is, Otto Braun’s liberation from Moabit prison. It was, in fact, he argues, something masterminded by a man named Hans Kippenberger and the Komintern in Russia (98). He also reveals a controversial and ‘well guarded secret’, that after Otto Braun, and before Prestes, Olga was in fact married to a Russian named B.P. Nikitin. Prestes apparently knew of this and told only his second wife, Maria Prestes (99-100).

Waack also suggests that Olga’s political and theoretical knowledge is overstated, using the rarely cited source of one of Olga’s good friends Mishka Slavutska, whose comments both biographers chose to omit from their versions. Describing her thus, ‘Seu negócio era muita ação e pouca política’, Olga is credited with an enthusiastic rather than a great political mind (103).100 Waack does, however, concede that Olga’s work for the German Communist party and later for the military espionage services of the Soviet Union, was exceptional amongst her contemporaries suggesting she does deserve the recognition she has achieved, independently of being Prestes’ lover.

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100 He also questions the political autonomy of Prestes citing greater influence from Russia (219, 228). Furthermore he is scathing of the attempted uprising, citing the many, avoidable, security risks that the group took: ‘Prosseguir nos planos nessas condições não era heroísmo. Era burrice’ (228).
Although Waack’s research suggests that Morais’ and Werner’s representations of Olga’s life are romanticised and reveal other ‘facts’ not mentioned in the two literary versions, these various readings only add to the very enigma she embodies. They illustrate her varied political profile and that she has rightly earned her place as an important example of militant womanhood. It is also clear that she was an effective political agent discursively and practically confronting her concerned contexts on many levels. For example, she was a committed Communist and she left her home and family to fight for a cause she believed in (whether considered a spy or not). All accounts of her life and information held in her ‘files’ state how she reached the higher echelons of the Communist Youth, received military training, was a fearless and strong-willed person, a political agitator, a wife and mother. Her survival inevitably depended on her balancing all these roles. Furthermore, the epistolatory evidence between Olga and Prestes and Olga and Prestes’ mother, Dona Leocádia, during her time in prison confirms she did indeed achieve this balance. (Morais 2005: 190, 195-196, 206-207, 211, 212-13, 219). That she resisted death in such adverse conditions and kept her political resolve until the final moment is further testament to this and evidenced particularly in the last letter she ever wrote.101

Taking into account these various representations of Olga’s multifaceted character, along with evidence from Morais’ book, as well as comments given by screen writer and producer Rita Buzzar, I will aim to show major discrepancies between what literary accounts suggest of Olga’s agency and how this is transposed onto the screen.

101 This letter is reproduced on the last page of Morais’ novel (2005: 240).
Fundamentally Olga’s role was not so straightforward as depicted in the film. Her position was complex and ultimately she was the victim of the German, Brazilian and Russian states. It was these patriarchal conditions that she clearly confronted, and it is evidence of this that is omitted from the film.

A Brazilian ‘Super Production’ and a Telenovela

‘As well as working very fast, he knows how to communicate to the public the emotional content of each scene’ (Rita Buzzar on Monjardim 2004: 23-24).102

Since its launch in October 1985, Fernando Morais’ novel has been an attractive choice for cinematic adaptation.103 In 1986 Rita Buzzar was also captivated by Olga’s story and had visions of its transformation for the Cinema. Ten years later a chance meeting with Morais in a São Paulo bar, in which he encouraged Buzzar to adapt the book for the Cinema, began the long process of securing funds for this ambitious project. Having bought the rights to the book in 1995, Buzzar began her own investigation into Olga’s life, facilitated by a grant from the Goethe Institute. Having conducted a research trip to Olga’s native country of Germany she began writing the script. A controversial historical epic such as Olga initially proved unpopular with production companies. The large number of characters involved as well as the necessity for international location shooting dissuaded potential investors. It took nearly another ten years for the project to be realised and initially Buzzar began to try and secure resources herself. In 2002 Globofilmes, the film arm of the media giant Organizações Globo, joined with Buzzar’s production company Nexus and eventually

102 Taken from a review article of Olga in Screen International, cited in bibliography.
103 A newspaper article charting the various ‘wars’ between Morais’ publishing company Alpha Omega, film director Silvio Tendler and a Hollywood contingent keen to buy the rights, documents this fact. Details of the Hollywood deal include the budget (20 million dollars), ideas for the director (including Francis Ford Coppola, Roman Polanski and, interestingly, Hector Babenco), as well choices for the parts of Olga and Prestes: Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman (Schild, 1986). An interview with Morais in weekly news magazine Veja confirms these details (Conti, 1987).
the film became a co-production between Nexus, Globofilmes, Europa filmes and Lumiere, the film’s Brazilian distributors. Olga was also supported commercially by the incentive laws and received a significant amount from private companies. TV Globo even offered prime-time advertising slots in exchange for its share (Screen International 2004: 23-24, Bezerra 2004: 26-28).104

Due to the logistic and financial restrictions on the project, Buzzar, who had never directed a commercial film that wasn’t for Television, felt herself unsuitable for the job. A director used to dealing with huge casts and generating material fast was the most practical and financially viable option. For this reason Buzzar would end up enlisting the help of one of TV Globo’s greatest assets, Jayme Monjardim, who had worked with Buzzar on Ana raio e Zé trovão in the early 1990s and who was behind the channel’s smash hit telenovela A casa das sete mulheres, which also starred Camilla Morgado, the actress chosen to play Olga (IMDB, production notes).105

The very existence of Olga as a successful commercial product is perhaps due to the decision to make it using the production values of Television, and no doubt Globo’s access to talent and experience was indispensable to finishing the project on time and on budget. In fact technically the film is to be praised, it is extremely well accomplished and the production is glossy and tight. The need for any location shooting was obviated by filming all one hundred and eighty-four scenes in Rio, including recreating the concentration camps in an old textile factory in the district of Bangu. Scenes in Munich, Moscow and Berlin were all recreated using lighting effects and artificial snow generated by sea salt, shampoo and polystyrene. Parachute material was used to block out the Rio sun during one of the hottest periods of the year and an almost monochrome colour wash was used to give the grey appearance of the Northern

104 Also see production notes found on the Nexus Cinema website. See bibliography.
105 See bibliography. More recently Monjardim has been involved in prime time telenovela Páginas de vida (2006/7).

Although the film is extremely powerful emotionally, technically impressive and acknowledging that, in order to be commercially successful, it had to be subject to some constraints, it appears that a film based on Morais’ book, at this time, appears to be viable only through the telenovela style which I consider to be an inappropriate lens through which to view the life of Olga Benario, and an approach that compromises her role as a narrative and political agent.

The dramatic potential of Olga’s tragic life has always laid it open to the risks of sentimentality and disingenuousness which are borne out in this production. Director Monajardim’s comments concerning his motivations in making this film are illuminating: ‘I was not interested in making a political film about Prestes or revolutionaries […] I was interested in the human story. The film is the story of emotions’ (Screen International 2004: 23). It is interesting to see that in this comment Jardim not only admits to wanting to avoid the political angle but also confirms his belief that Olga can be considered neither political nor a revolutionary, in fact it is Prestes (Olga’s lover) he mentions in this capacity. This attitude of wanting to tell a ‘human’ story totally removed from its political context (similar to how Bruno Barreto viewed his motivation for O que é isso), is a worrying one in film adaptations of key historical events involving real people, and, as we have seen so far, seems to have particular consequences for female narrative agency.

**Olga: Rejecting the Woman**

As is the case with Maria in Barreto’s film, the cinematic emphasis on Olga’s difficulty of combining her various roles present her as both an ineffectual militant
force and a failed woman. The result it that Olga comes across as a fragmented character rather than the unified example of female agency she actually was. However for Olga, as for many women in her position (as we have seen through the analysis of women of the leftwing resistance during the 60s and 70s) and to use a cliché, ‘the personal was the political’. On this point the director’s comments are revealing. Describing how he wanted to show Olga ‘vista em quatro, a líder, a apaixonada, a realizada e a mãe’, Monjardim suggests a multi-faceted woman who successfully combines these elements to form a unified whole (Bezerra 2004: 27). However, the reality is that Olga’s personality is shown to be split between two excluding binaries and she is shown either to be a hard-nosed, cold militant, or as emotionally crippled, and having to ‘come to terms with’ emotions unfamiliar to her, such as love and tenderness.

A further problem is that the ‘private’ personas of Olga, that is when she is portrayed as a mother and a lover, are more celebrated (via lighting and camera work) than her public personas, which are hyperbolised and unsympathetically shot. Olga is celebrated by the *mise-en-scène* when she allows her emotions to overcome her and castigated when she denies them in the context of her work as a militant. As an audience we are almost willing her hard exterior to ‘crack’ and this tension is soon soothed by the influx of heart-rending music, characteristic of the Brazilian soap opera.

The first issue that becomes apparent and that compromises Olga’s narrative agency is how the film represents her rejection of the traditional female role and does not pay sufficient attention to the reasoning behind this. In Morais’ book there are subtle suggestions of Olga’s physical rejection of femininity: ‘A cada dia Olga tornava-se mais atraente. Até o jeito meio desengonçado de andar dava-lhe um encanto especial [...] Em doses homeopáticas, Otto Braun convenceu Olga de que uma militante não
precisava ser descuidada e mal vestida’ (2005: 35-36). However, this is supplemented by the background information as to why Olga rejects the feminine traits deemed appropriate to her gender, including why she rejects the idea of marriage, that is, her personal and political convictions:

De um sentimento, entretanto, nem mesmo os conselhos de Otto conseguiram livrá-la: o horror ao casamento formal, sacramentado em cartório. Ela associava a ideia do casamento ao que considerava a pior deformação burguesa: a dependência econômica da mulher, o sexo obrigatório, a convivência forçada. Quando alguém indagava por que não se casava com Otto, já que aparentemente viviam tão bem, ela tinha a resposta pronta:


Rita Buzzar also explains that she rejected overt femininity because she was trying to re-discover her own womanhood, one that was not associated with the bourgeois values of her mother, which she found unpalatable: ‘Ela foi se descobrindo. Primeiro teve que negar um lado feminino, que era o lado feminino da mãe dela que era uma burguesona fútil, pegar uma coisa de ser um soldado mesmo, [...] ela tirava, ela lutava, ela soltava de paraquedas, para encontrar de novo uma outra mulher’. Explanation of why Olga appears to reject her womanhood, through insights into her practical consciousness to illustrate how such behaviour is an intrinsic part of her quotidian survival strategy, and how this is evidence of her confronting her cerned condition within her bourgeois German family, is absent from the film. This therefore represents Olga as a dysfunctional character, rather than as a narrative agent.

What exacerbates this lack of insight into Olga’s practical consciousness and how her personal beliefs are intrinsic to her political beliefs, is the way in which the narrative is structured. The story is told in an elliptical way through a series of unordered flashbacks. This means that important information regarding Olga’s background (that she rejects marriage and femininity because it is a bourgeois ideal) is virtually ignored,
although her motivation for the rejection of her background eventually appears, it is convoluted and unclear. Although Morais’ novel initially follows a similar, elliptical, structure, detailing her journey to Moscow before setting out her background, by the third chapter the combination of concentration on Olga’s internal thoughts, her actions and experiences, combine to make a coherent whole.

For example in the film the opening sequence shows Olga as a child of around twelve years, daring herself to jump over a bonfire. She promises her father that if she falls over she will not cry. An image of her mid-air then dissolves into an image of her in adulthood, head shaven and face covered in cuts, nearing the end of her life in a Nazi concentration camp. In turn, this scene then dissolves to show Olga storming the courtroom where Otto Braun’s trial is being heard. Immediately after this episode we see Otto and Olga in a first-class carriage bound for Moscow posing as a bourgeois couple. The following conversation then ensues:

**Otto**: Fiquei preso muitos meses, senti tanto a tua falta

**Olga**: Filhos, família, não é para nós, Otto.

**Otto**: Você sabe que pode lutar ao meu lado

**Olga**: Eu luto ao lado da Revolução. Não de um homem

This conversation obviously follows on from a previous one (which, as we have just seen is detailed in the book) which gives the reasons for her beliefs regarding marriage and family: her difficult relationship with her mother and her expected role as a woman. However, to launch into this conversation in the film, without the context that is provided in the book, omits important evidence of her practical consciousness. This gives the impression that Olga is devoid of emotion and cold-hearted. The reaction her words are designed to have on us is confirmed in Otto’s expression as he looks worried.
and disappointed. Combined with the almost playful, light-hearted attitude she has when she jokes that her disguise as a middle-class traveller would ‘make her mother proud’, and her sarcastic remarks to Otto regarding his comments that he has never met her parents (‘Naõ sabia que você gostava tanto de reuniões familiares’), suggest she has a frivolous attitude to family life. The truth may be that Olga’s decision to leave her family and disown her mother was probably much harder than is portrayed, even in the book where it is briefly broached (Morais 2005: 29-30).

The next scene shows Olga in the street leading a demonstration in which she physically attacks Nazi soldiers. As she returns home we are introduced to her parents, Leo, who is handing out money to the poor, and Eugenie, who is shown draped in jewels and other finery. When Eugenie sees Olga’s dishevelled hair and bloody face, she makes a speech about her duties and rights as the daughter of a ‘decent’ family. Her closing comment ‘mal parece uma mulher’ cuts through the narrative on various levels, including its abrupt delivery. Olga and her father, as well as the audience, slowly recognise the cruelty of this comment: that Olga’s own mother does not consider her to be a woman is a harsh blow for her daughter. But this shocking comment could also be considered fitting from what we have seen thus far of Olga’s representation, that she is indeed someone who rejects womanhood. However, that Olga is carving out an alternative existence for herself, as a woman who rejects a bourgeois idea of femininity in favour of a more emancipatory articulation of gender, is foreclosed because of the narrative structure. If this scene had been shown first and perhaps developed, to provide a background to the scene in which she talks in a derogatory manner about her mother and her family, it would have adequately explained both the reason for her political convictions and why she rejects the bourgeois femininity of her mother. It would also explain why she wished to avoid
long discussions about her family. Whilst acknowledging that the audience must be credited with enough intelligence to correctly order the narrative itself, the melodramatic *telenovela* style of the film which scrutinises Olga’s anti-family, anti-feminine ideals by lacing her dialogue with sarcasm, and failing to show how she is working through these difficult emotions and experiences (using evidence of practical consciousness) obscures the real reasons behind her behaviour and thus compromises Olga’s narrative agency.

Another element that the film’s structure eschews is the intricate detail of Olga’s relationship with Otto, which, as described in the book, ends by mutual consent, not because Olga rejects her womanhood, as is implicit in the film. Morais points to the slow breakdown of their relationship being due to Olga’s workload and Otto’s jealousy (2005: 28-51). In the film this breakdown is approached from a different angle, being explained after she has delivered a rousing speech to party members. After the speech Otto approaches Olga and comments: ‘Entre um discurso e um salto de pára-quedas, vai te restar mesmo pouco tempo para ser mulher’. To this Olga makes no comment, and we do not see her face as this line is delivered to her. We do however see her head drop, as if ashamed. As we follow her gaze to where Otto is standing with another woman, who views her with suspicion and disdain, it confirms that she is being punished for putting her political beliefs before her perceived ‘duties’ as a woman. By being denied the opportunity to confront her treatment within this *cerned* context (which could be facilitated through access to her practical consciousness, in this case her ability to override these hurtful yet ultimately harmless comments), through a bodily expression of visible sadness and determination for the benefit of the audience, she is relegated to a submissive position that we do not expect of the ‘strong’ yet sensitive character posited in the books on her life.
As if to reassure us that her hard exterior has not been penetrated, following this scene we see Olga completing her military training. This is another device that confirms how the film fragments Olga’s multifaceted character, showing her to be in constant denial of her emotions. This is done via a montage of contrived shots set to drill-style music which lasts around thirty seconds. The compression of Olga’s military prowess into a mini-montage, in comparison with the amount of narrative space allotted to questioning her ‘womanhood’, de-emphasises her political skills and highlights her inability to reconcile these with her personal life. This significantly compromises the representation of her narrative agency.

**Olga and Prestes**

The representation of Olga as not a ‘real’ woman, or as one who is denying her emotional womanhood, is finally emphatically confirmed when she meets Prestes, and the narrative of the film requires her to finally surrender to her emotions. It is during this part of the film also that the *telenovela* production values of intrusive non-diegetic music, close-ups, sentimental dialogue and long takes between shots, are most pronounced. When Olga meets Prestes for the first time, their eyes lock as if to confirm the ‘love at first sight’ narrative. As Prestes smiles at Olga and then continues to stare at her, Olga looks away and then casts her eyes down, as if she does not have the courage to return the gaze. We fail to hear the words of Manuilski explaining the details of their mission as his voice is faded out and emotive Jewish-style string music begins. This music reoccurs at subsequent emotional peaks during the film and is one of the main markers of the film’s *telenovela* roots. In contrast, Morais writes in his account of their first meeting:

> Quando Dmitri Manuilski mandou que trouxessem até eles o Cavaleiro da Esperança, Olga, embora impassível, decepcionou-se um pouco. Pelo que ouvira,
esperava ver um gigante latino. Ela emocionou-se ao cumprimentar, em francês, o revolucionário brasileiro, mas achou-o um pouco franzino para alguém que comandara um exército por 25 mil quilômetros (2005: 56).

The slow undoing of her hard, emotionless exterior is completed by Prestes during their journey from Moscow to Brazil. Given that this is Olga’s story, Prestes comes across as more of a rounded, experienced politician than she. For example, he does not seem to possess the same difficulty combining political duty and family life. He is visibly moved by the farewell to his mother and sister. Olga’s emotional ineptitude is again highlighted during this exchange after Prestes has said goodbye to his family:

**Prestes:** Despedidas são sempre difíceis.

**Olga:** Por isso prefiro não ter ninguém para me despedir, ou esperando por mim

**Prestes:** E tua família?

**Olga:** Há muito tempo não os vejo. Prefiro assim, sentimentos e fraquezas não combinam com nenhuma missão.

At this Prestes looks at her with disbelief. As with her earlier rejection of family life to Otto, the lack of insight into the real reasons Olga finds it hard to connect emotionally with her family are not addressed other than through Olga looking uncomfortable. This insufficient illustration of practical consciousness does not aid in the representation of narrative agency. Although Olga’s feelings about leaving her family are not significantly elaborated upon in the book, the contrived, hardened façade Olga adopts when asked about her family in the film is not present in Morais’ work. Furthermore, Morais does explain, to some extent, her difficult relationship with her mother.¹⁰⁶

Posing as a rich Portuguese couple on their honeymoon, Olga is depicted as finding her role as Prestes chaperone impossible, due to an apparent inability to combine her dual roles as human being and Communist party member. As they board a ship

¹⁰⁶ See chapter one of Morais’ book.
sailing for the USA Olga becomes visibly lost, confused and weakened and the camera emphasises these difficulties. In fact the dancing scenes visibly humiliate and infantilise Olga. As she struggles with the dancing, she also struggles with the intimacy that is brought through music into the scene, which is a variation on the violin theme that reoccurs at other moments of high melodrama. As the music begins she casts her eyes down as if shamed. This is not just Olga shying away from emerging love in an inappropriate situation, or fear of discovery, but a manifestation of the film’s narrative plan to ‘undo’ Olga so that the union between her and Prestes can be all the more celebrated by the *mise-en-scène* of the *telenovela*.

In contrast to how it is portrayed in the film, Olga would not have found the role as Prestes’ wife so difficult a disguise to maintain. Up until her mid-teens Olga had lived with her parents in a middle-class area of Munich and had been educated both formally and socially with the corresponding values of her lawyer-father and high-society mother. As Eugenie comments to Olga during their argument: ‘Você não precisa trabalhar. É minha única filha. Nasceu pra ser servida’. Though she may have eventually rejected them, these values had been part of her conditioning for half of her life. It would therefore be unlikely that she would find the social situation of being at a dinner-dance so hard to bear or that she would need the guidance of Prestes, who had no such kind of upbringing, to physically take her around the dance floor.

All of this behaviour seems to greatly contradict Prestes’ next comment when they stand on deck to see in the New Year: ‘Você é tão parecida com a minha mãe, a mesma franqueza, o mesmo jeito de falar de mulher decidida, senhora do próprio destino’. To which Olga answers, ‘e ela dança bem?’ drawing attention to her own awkwardness. This conversation, featuring incessant shot/counter-shot exchanges, then continues, with Olga further contradicting Prestes’ remarks. As he compliments Olga
and comments that it must be hard for her to be in the position of protecting a man, she replies ‘fui treinada para isso’. However, during this scene her body language, folded arms, fingers fiddling with her hands and clothes, suggests that she has been trained for nothing of the sort.

As the fireworks explode, indicating it has turned midnight, the camera shoots them from a low angle to emphasise how their faces ‘light up’ with wonder at the romanticism of the moment, and when the violins again invade, the camera zooms into an extreme close-up, shot/counter-shot exchange. Then a man approaches (advocator of the Nazi Regime, Herr Fischer, who later suspects Olga of being a Jew) bringing champagne ‘on the Captain’s insistence’. He asks them ‘aren’t you going to kiss?’ The violin motif that accompanies Olga throughout the film then reappears, this time with a haunting vocal in order to enrich the sentimentality. The take in-between when they are urged to kiss and when they actually do is painfully long (fifteen seconds) and as the soundtrack is filled with extra-diegetic music, we are comfortably in telenovela territory. Furthermore, the extreme close-up that charts the kiss and the lingering, cloying look they give each other afterwards is also reminiscent of the sentimental historical epics of TV Globo.

Next Olga is seen entering her cabin and appears to visibly swoon, touching her lips as if trying to preserve the mark Prestes has made on her. Then we see Olga blushing in shame as Prestes catches her looking at herself in the mirror. It is almost as if Prestes has awakened in her a dormant sexuality with which she cannot cope. After each moment of tenderness the couple share Olga seems to feel the need to reassert her political credentials. For example after they recite a poem together, Prestes comments ‘Essa poesia se parece com você’ to which she replies after a significant pause, ‘Em breve, você estará em segurança no Brasil e nossa pequena farsa chegará ao fim’. 
Olga also becomes agitated when Prestes suggests that the captain is ‘interested’ in her, and she reasserts herself by replying ‘Mas o que é isso? O Sr. e a Sra. Vilar não existem. É uma ficção, uma mentira’. However, Olga was no stranger to male attention and had already had an intense relationship with Otto Braun. In fact it was Prestes who was sexually inexperienced. To suggest that somehow she could not cope with male attention or that she was confusing fiction with reality is patronising and has consequences for her agency, suggesting she had no idea about how to ‘go on’ with her life and this particularly difficult task for which she has been specifically trained.

Furthermore, Olga also makes it known that she is very uncomfortable with the disguise she inhabits, commenting: ‘essas roupas caras chegam a me escandalizar’. That Olga would draw so much attention to her discomfort is also unlikely due to her role as a Communist spy/militant. Such excessive and egregious silences, looks of uncertainty, casting down of eyes and hesitation in intimacy would have seriously compromised the validity of the disguise and thus Prestes’ safety. He surely would not have arrived safely in Brazil if this is how Olga had conducted herself throughout the journey.

In contrast, Morais describes how Olga planned their disguises thoroughly, and went to special pains to validate their false identities by making an unplanned stop in New York, just to get their passports stamped.107 Whilst on their travels they always adhered to the behaviour their disguise demanded, even if it meant wearing expensive clothes:

Para tornar consistente a fachada de récem-casados, era necessário acrescentar novos detalhes ao cenário, e para isto Paris era a cidade ideal. O comerciante

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107 Waack also describes Olga’s rigorous attention to detail: ‘Olga levava rigorosamente à risca as instruções para proteger Prestes, deixando-o exposto o menos possível. Da mesma maneira que em outras cidades, quando o casal chegou a Buenos Aires, foi ela a encarregada de estabelecer os contatos iniciais com a rede local. Encontrou-se várias vezes com o cônsul brasileiro, conhecido de Prestes de sua permanência anterior na Argentina, com o qual conseguiu os vistos de entrada para o Brasil’ (1993: 111).
Antônio Vilar era um homem rico e saía da França em lua-de-mel com sua esposa Maria. Como gente rica veste-se ricamente, Prestes e Olga gastaram mais alguns dias percorrendo afamados costureiros parisienses para montar um guarda-roupa à altura das personagens que representavam. Prestes a acompanhava às elegantes casas da alta moda e, para dar mais realismo à farsa, fazia o tipo ciumento. Dava palpites na escolha dos vestidos, reclamava dos decotes e do comprimento das saias [...] Para que o êxito da missão fosse assegurado, dinheiro não foi problema para eles (2005: 59-60).

He also puts emphasis on the couple’s enjoyment of their disguises, detailing how by the time they arrived in New York they were as good as married anyway and were enjoying a honeymoon of their own. He describes how they went for walks, to the theatre and the cinema and thoroughly took advantage of their alter egos (57-62).

**Olga as Prestes’ Lover**

After Olga and Prestes begin their relationship in earnest narrative agency is compromised particularly through the film’s dialogue. When she arrives in Brazil, Olga’s friend Elise Ewert, ‘Sabo’, comments that the disguise, which consists of smart, expensive clothes and make-up, does her ‘no harm’. Again this makes her visibly uncomfortable and she laughs it off.

*Sabo:* Você está tão bem com esta roupa. Teus cabelos, um pouco de batom nos lábios.

*Olga:* Faz parte do disfarce.

*Sabo:* Mas parece que este disfarce não está te fazendo nenhum mal.

As Olga begins to relax into her life in Brazil, she is shown swimming in the sea and going to the beach. She seems shocked and surprised when she admits to Sabo that she

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never thought she would have time to go to the beach.\textsuperscript{109} At this point Sabo is used as a tool with which to undermine Olga’s unity of character, and appears to be trying to get Olga (and the audience) to see that she is foolish to reject a traditional lifestyle.

\textit{Sabo}: Olga, eu poderia morar aqui, perto desse sol, desse mar. Eu e meu Ewert, viver os dias tranqüilos, em paz.

\textit{Olga}: Dias tranqüilos? Como se nada estivesse errado? E o nosso dever de mudar o mundo? Esse é o nosso sonho de felicidade.

\textit{Sabo}: Eu acredito na Revolução, Olga. Mas às vezes eu gostaria de pensar que eu vou envelhecer ao lado de Arthur, ter filhos. Eu não quero morrer com uma bala na cabeça. Por que você não pode ter uma vida inteira ao lado de quem você ama?

\textit{Olga}: Meu dever era proteger a vida dele. Com a minha se fosse preciso.

\textit{Sabo}: O sol desse país, esse calor, já que aqueceu também teu coração, Olga.

\textit{Olga}: Os sentimentos, eles sempre escapam de nosso controle.

As Sabo expresses her wish to live a ‘normal’ life, Olga looks uncomfortable, as if she too is ‘weakening’. Although Olga questions Sabo’s bourgeois slips-of-the-tongue, the suggestion that Olga’s heart was somehow frozen, and is now thawing, is celebrated by a close-up on Olga’s guilty, worried face. As Sabo tenderly but firmly grabs Olga’s wrists as a mother berating a child might, we are willing her to surrender to her emotions and not to ‘go on’ with the difficult task ahead of her. There is absolutely no suggestion that she can and in fact is, managing to balance both. There is nothing in the book or elsewhere however, to suggest that this was ever the attitude of Sabo, and Olga’s battle with her conscience and emotions is never mentioned anywhere explicitly. We can therefore conclude that this is another example of a narrative device

\textsuperscript{109} Morais describes how Olga embraced her leisure time, going to see Hollywood films and to the theatre with Sabo. Sometimes she also went out walking along the beach with Prestes or enjoyed a swim (2005: 82-83). William Waack also suggests in his account of Olga and Prestes ‘private’ life, based on interviews with Prestes himself, that the couple enjoyed life in Rio before their arrest; of course this also aided their disguise: ‘Ambos tratavam de aparentar a vida despreocupada de um casal bem situado. Prestes tinha um bonito cachorro em casa, Olga encontrou tempo para ir a uma costureira, a mesma que atendia a duas amigas suas: Sabo e Lena’ (1993:179).
designed to separate Olga from her political context, in order to heighten the tension, maximise the melodrama and thus create suitable pathos for the moment when Prestes and Olga are torn apart from each other and, of course, for the tragic concentration camp climax. These are yet more narrative devices reminiscent of Television, which foreclose Olga's agency.

As she falls deeper in love with Prestes, she finds it harder and harder to stay in Brazil. Due to an inability to cope with her feelings, Olga requests to be sent back to Russia so as not to ‘confuse emotions with duties’. To try and further win the battle with her emotions, a dramatic scene between Prestes and Olga is then played out. As she addresses Prestes, her lover, she stands as if addressing a military superior, hands behind her back and head bowed. This again suggests Olga has no idea how to behave in a social situation. The night-time setting, with what seems like the moon lighting their faces, and again the violin music, accompanies this scene to its melodramatic climax.

**Prestes:** Eu preciso de você

**Olga:** Deixe eu ir embora. Eu tento, mas não consigo lidar com essa alegria, com essa dor. Eu mal me reconheço quando estou com você.

**Prestes:** Eu te amo

**Olga:** Eu não consigo lidar com isso.

Prestes then agrees to her leaving because he would ‘do anything for her’. Furthermore, the fact that Olga does ‘not recognise herself’ when she is with Prestes, is an admission within the dialogue itself that her character is fragmented by this melodramatic love story. As William Waack points out, it was not her mission to fall in love with Prestes and her job was simply to ensure the safe passage of Prestes back to Brazil, a mission for which she was trained. Waack attributes Olga’s desire to leave
as being due to her role as a military spy and her continuing work in Russia, of which
Prestes was not aware. He also points out that, when she desired to leave, Manuilski
ordered her to stay for a further two months, so indispensable had she become in the
Olga’s emotional sterility is made more prominent as it is counterbalanced by Prestes’
sensitivity. In contrast to Olga, he seems to easily be able to handle his emotions along
with his political work. Portrayed as a man perfectly balanced and composed both
loving and gentle yet also a revered political hero, Olga and Prestes are portrayed as
polar opposites. Prestes was a physically small man in real life and Olga was a tall
woman. However, the difference in height is clearly exaggerated in the film in order to
emphasise Olga’s rejection of womanhood and therefore justify her sterile,
unemotional reactions. One example which shows Prestes’ comparative sensitivity in
the film is when he makes a dress for Olga. This episode is charted in Morais’ novel,
but in this account Prestes designs and cuts it yet someone else actually sews it: ‘Uma
peça de linho comprada por dona Júlia […] acabou se transformando num elegante
vestido para Olga – desenhado e cortado por Prestes e costurado por ela’ (Morais
2005: 128). That the dress was necessary because their entire Parisian wardrobe had
been left at their hideout in Ipanema, which they were required to flee, is left out of the
film version. Subtle changes like these, in this case overstating Prestes’ glowing
sensitivity, serve to add an even harder exterior to Olga and make the eventual melting
of her heart all the more gratifying for the spectator.

110 Prestes is a major figure in Brazil and his impact on Brazilian politics was notable, therefore
historical proximity to the facts may of course have added to the, perhaps unintentionally, favourable
way in which he comes across in this film. However Prestes was himself an awkward character and
often surrounded by controversy. Perhaps most controversial was his decision to support the newly
reformed Vargas regime after his release from prison, even though it was this government that had sent
Olga to her death (Morais 2005: 233-237).
Clearly, as spectators we are denied access to Olga’s practical consciousness in this film due to an over-reliance on a *telenovela* production style which forecloses the realisation of such subtleties. Olga is therefore not shown, unlike her real-life counterpart, to face up to her various *cerned* contexts. Such insights would however explain the various personal and political elements of her character and rebuff the bipolar representation of her as it appears in the film.

**Pregnancy and Agency**

Despite Olga’s filmic realisation at times contradicting the idea, Rita Buzzar clearly sees her as a good example of a female agent, both in terms of her ability to ‘go on’ and her unity of character. This is exemplified in a long reflection on Olga’s capacity to deal with her various emotional and political challenges:

Ela foi uma mulher muito burguesa que teve uma criação excelente [...] e, de repente, para romper com tudo isso, ela começou a se vestir com roupas muito largas, começou a usar o sabonete de lavar roupa para tomar banho, para tentar sair disso [...] Saiu na rua, brigava com as pessoas, levava soco [...] foi assim um soldado da Revolução na União Soviética [...] E, de repente, essa mulher vai ser guarda-costas de um homem, o que é uma inversão completa [...] Como guarda-costas, ela se apaixona por esse homem e fica grávida dele e aí ela se depara com sua condição feminina. Porque é a mulher que fica grávida, isso faz parte da condição feminina. Ficar grávida, ter um filho, ou não ter um filho, ou escolher não ter um filho, isso [...] faz parte de uma condição que só uma mulher se depara [...] Num primeiro momento, fez com que ela ficasse frágil, mas depois ela ficou mais forte.

She goes on to describe Olga as:

Uma mulher profundamente forte, profundamente objetiva, pragmática nas coisas que ela queria, que ela queria fazer. Em nenhum momento ela negou, ela ficou “meu Deus no céu não sei o que fazer?” Não. Dentro de uma atuação feminina ela não negou a maternidade dela. Ela teve a filha, perdeu a filha. Ela não negou que ela era apaixonada por aquele homem, que ela queria aquele homem, que ela sofria de saudades dele, mais continuou uma [...] mulher.

In this long statement Buzzar clearly explains Olga’s triple role as soldier, lover and
mother and her ability to simultaneously deal with all these roles whilst remaining a unified example of womanhood. This therefore presents Olga as a clear example of female agency. However, in terms of the transposition of this agency into the film, there are clearly contradictions. Firstly, as we have seen, Olga does appear to deny her feelings for Prestes because she fears the political consequences, and although this is ill-disguised by her character, evidence of how she is working through these emotions through practical consciousness, is precluded. In this way her roles as soldier and lover are seen as mutually exclusive. Also important is Buzzar’s clear admiration of Olga’s role in motherhood, as suggested in the above comments, which perhaps explains how it becomes Olga’s most important role in the film. However, this role simultaneously bestows and removes narrative agency and a paradox emerges.

The first issue to discuss is that the discovery of Olga’s pregnancy is consistent with the poor representation of agency in the rest of the film because it highlights Olga’s emotional naïveté and inability to reconcile the personal with the political. However, after she discovers she is pregnant, more access to her practical consciousness reveals more elements of narrative agency. Further complicating this argument however, is that whilst motherhood provides Olga with access to narrative agency, Buzzar’s belief in motherhood as one of the fundamental characteristics of Olga’s agency, combined with the telenovela aesthetics, means that its importance is over-emphasised, both in terms of undermining Olga’s other roles and because it is suggested to be a woman’s rightful calling.

In Morais’s book, he begins the telling of Olga’s pregnancy as follows: ‘Nos primeiros dias de abril, Olga começou a desconfiar que estivesse grávida (2005: 153), and later: ‘Um mês depois de ter sido transferida para a rua Frei Caneca, Olga anunciou às companheiras de cela que não tinha mais dúvidas: estava esperando um filho de
Prestes’ (155). However, in the film pregnancy is dealt with as if it were a concept totally alien to Olga. This builds the basis for the ‘rediscovery’ of womanhood Olga experiences when pregnant. After fainting on the prison floor, Olga’s friend Maria enlightens her:

Maria: O que é que você está sentindo, Olga?

Olga: Muito enjôo, tonturas. Nunca me senti assim. Eu não sei o que está acontecendo comigo.

Maria: Eu não quero me intrometer mas você não está grávida, está?

Olga: Grávida?

Maria: Grávida. As tuas regras?

Olga: Estão atrasadas, mas eu nem me lembrava. Grávida.

Next she is shown knitting baby clothes and ‘coming to terms with’ her changing role. Olga is shown in subsequent scenes embracing her pregnancy: a shower scene in which she caresses her naked, swollen stomach set to haunting chorale music all shot in shadowy excess, exalts the sanctity of motherhood. When asked by Maria if she had ever imagined herself as a mother, Olga replies ‘nem como mãe, nem como esposa. São tantos sentimentos que eu não conhecia. Eu sempre desconfia das palavras de amor’. After the discovery of her pregnancy Olga is also miraculously able to talk more openly about her feelings for Prestes: Às vezes me surpreendo dizendo baixinho o nome dele. Ele que me fez sentir tão forte e ao mesmo tempo tão frágil’.

**Buzzar’s original film ‘argument’ shows where this scene originated: ‘Numa prisão brasileira, junto com mais dez mulheres e em meio a infindáveis interrogatórios, Olga descobriu que estava grávida. Nunca pensou que um dia seu ventre cresceria e daria à luz. Era tão estranho! Será que se tornaria frágil como sua mãe? Não teria mais coragem de saltar de pár-a- quedas, andar à cavalo. Teria medo? Naquele momento em que tinha que ser forte e dura, algo a tornava mais terna e também confusa’** However it also shows how the screen play, which truly engages with Olga’s internal thought processes, practical consciousness, differs from the filmic realisation in which Olga’s discovery of her pregnancy is dealt with on a one dimensional level (Buzzar 1995: 26).
In the book, as in the film, Olga embroiders cardigans and knits baby clothes. However, in Morais’ account she asks one of her cell mates, José Gay da Cunha, a former lieutenant who had taken part in the uprising at the School of Aviation, also a talented draughtsman, to sketch the model of planes then in use in the Brazilian Air Force so she could embroider them onto her child’s clothes. This further illustrates that for Olga, motherhood was a part of her militancy and that the clashing of Olga’s personal and political life as seen in the film is again perhaps something manufactured to ensure the right level of emotional involvement for the spectator. Furthermore, in the section that follows the discovery of Olga’s pregnancy, Morais also documents her role as a political teacher in the prison, lecturing in Marxism and giving the inmates ‘homework’. This detail does not appear in the film (Morais 2005: 156-157, 163-164).

Although we cannot deny that Olga must have felt overwhelmed emotionally when she discovered her pregnancy, other emotional milestones in her life, like when she left her parents, and when she fell in love with Prestes, must also have sparked similar reactions, all of which are glossed over or eclipsed by her portrayal at other moments during the film. The idea that she had never felt love or elation and that motherhood some how ‘unlocks’ Olga’s emotions, over emphasises its importance and precludes her other personas. In fact we have no way of knowing Olga’s internal thoughts regarding her pregnancy. To assume such sentimentality compromises her emotional maturity. It is likely that Olga felt scared, confused and elated on discovering her pregnancy, and this deserves to be handled with more subtlety in order to avoid equating Olga’s sense of herself, and thus her agency, solely with her ability to bear children.

In contrast to this initial naiveté, after she discovers she is pregnant Olga makes a bold declaration to Brazil’s waiting press: ‘Preciso que todos saibam. Eu estou grávida.'
Grávida de Luís Carlos Prestes. Preciso de um advogado e de um médico. Sou esposa de um brasileiro, e quero ter meu bebê aqui no Brasil. Esse bilhete é para meu marido. É meu direito que ele saiba de minha gravidez’. Although accompanied by a crescendo of melodramatic violins, this impassioned speech by Olga is the first glimpse we see of her intimate, personal desires. Although her voice is deep and her expression fixed as a military façade demands, her eyes are wet with tears, and her voice trembles as she shouts at the awaiting press. For the first time we see all three layers of her character united together and balanced. This evidence of practical consciousness, her suffering as well as the strong resolve that enables her to ‘go on’ is a clear example of narrative agency.

Although the aforementioned shower scene also fits in with the melodramatic style of the film, at the same time it also shows us the internal workings of Olga’s character, and is the first time we have seen her cry during all her difficult and emotional experiences. As she is transferred to Bernistrasse prison in Germany, glimpses of her practical consciousness (such as the moment when she smiles to herself whilst Nazi authorities are humiliating her and the other women by shaving their heads), continue to aid in the representation of narrative agency. The scene where she gives birth unaided, reciting words of encouragement to herself whilst Nazi doctors stand around silently, also illustrates practical consciousness. That we are able to see her whole body shaking as she tries to deliver her baby alone, is important in revealing both her outer and her inner strength. Agency is also included from this point onwards by the overlaying of the letters between Prestes, Olga and Prestes’ mother, which again reveal Olga as a unified character. Furthermore, when Anita is forcibly taken from Olga at just over a year old, she is allowed by the narrative to completely ‘let go’ of her
emotions and the result is an extremely convincing and disturbing account of Olga’s last minutes with her daughter.

At the same time however motherhood is, in general, melodramatically rendered and this has consequences for narrative agency. As mentioned, Olga’s time with Anita in the film is related, via voice-over, through letters to Leocádia and Prestes. The letters are edited from a combination of the real letters sent to Prestes and his mother some of which are reproduced in Morais’ account. In the scenes which show Olga playing with her daughter, the following is heard:

Faço tudo para cuidar da nossa pequena Anita. De certo modo, nossas vidas estão refletidas nesse pequeno ser. É tão maravilhoso que ela se alimento de mim. É como se eu pudesse passar minha história, meu amor por Carlos, através desse leite. Esse leite que é tão oposto a todo esse sangue que corre pelo mundo

The corresponding section in Morais, from a letter to Prestes, reads as follows:

Sabes, minha própria vida está de certo modo refletida na desse pequeno ser. Diariamente há nela novas maravilhas para serem descobertas e a cada dia ela penetra mais firmemente no meu coração. É tão belo que a menina se alimente em mim, que eu posso dar-lhe o melhor da minha força vital, da força que eu posso.

Despite the similarities between book and film, these letters are more melodramatically rendered in the film, not only because of the slightly more emotive language but also due to the *mise-en-scène* of the *telenovela*. For example, the prison ward where Olga is permitted to remain with Anita is clean and brightly lit, and the baby chosen to play her particularly attractive. The voice-over is also interspersed with close-ups of Olga breastfeeding and playing with Anita, accompanied by haunting voices. This has the dual role of exalting the sanctity of motherhood and providing the audience-pleasing scenes that are characteristic of much of this film. At this moment, Olga as anything but a mother is inconceivable.
Fernando Morais’ book does indeed show Olga to be a hard, committed and competent political force, and at times shows her rejection of traditional female traits and her preference of her work over her emotional life. However, it also gives ample attention to Olga’s other roles as Prestes’ lover, and mother to Anita Leocádia and presents her as a unified example of political womanhood. Most important it provides evidence of why Olga behaves as she does by providing insights to her practical consciousness.

In the film Olga is presented as continually in turmoil, flitting between a hard, cold soldier and an emotionally compromised woman. This fragments her character and so denies her narrative agency. Although her role as a mother gives her more access to practical consciousness, the over-emphasis on its redemptory role simultaneously undoes this agency.

It is the *telenovela* style however, employed to produce the film on-time, on-budget and with a high chance of commercial success, that contributes to much of this. The choice of production however, is understandable given the problems that plagued the project and the amount of time from its conception to its realisation. As Buzzar explains: ‘Eu li o livro em ‘85 e fiquei muito tempo com esta ideia do filme na cabeça. Achei que nunca poderei fazer o filme e acabei fazendo filme’. Although Buzzar appears happy with the film, it is a shame that Olga’s character has to some extent been simplified in order to fit in with the time-frame, cost and spectatorial expectations that a *Globo* audience demands. Furthermore, the failure of the production team to demonstrate Olga’s agency through practical consciousness is damaging for the representation of women in Brazilian cinema and particularly for the representation of militant women who are yet to find a critical voice in *Retomada* criticism.
Chapter Seven

Another Critical Angle: As três Marias and the Revenge Genre as Compromising Agency

Introduction

Aluizio Abranches’ *As três Marias* (2002) offers a more ambiguous representation of narrative agency in *Retomada* cinema. Whilst examples of agency exist in this film, the use of the revenge genre (which frequently posits gender-polarised conflict as its main tenet, and which is historically steeped in representations of women agents as a threat to the moral order), as the platform from which to launch such agency ultimately compromises these potentially emancipatory female characters. This issue is exacerbated because, although they can on some level be seen to provide examples of women who are capable of independent thought and subvert their perceived status as pious symbols of the Catholic tradition, the film provides little access to their practical consciousness.

Although the film’s ‘feminist’ credentials are highlighted by the director, as will be illustrated during the following pages, detailed analysis reveals his narrative choice to unwittingly betray an inherently patriarchal story. Made in 2002, this film is also crying out for a critical analysis that digs below the surface of this apparently emancipatory story. Perhaps because of its promotion by the production team as an example of strong female-led story, this does not appear to have happened so far. Although different from the other films in that it is not directly related to the militant woman within the context of an authoritarian regime, it is nonetheless relevant to the idea of a *cerned* context, in this case the patriarchal family, and therefore requires analysis from the point of view of agency. It was chosen, as the other films, for its portrayal of notable female characters in prominent narrative positions.
“The Essential Subversiveness of Women”

In her analysis of women’s political exclusion in civil society, Carol Pateman explains: ‘The belief in the essential subversiveness of women is of extremely ancient origin and is deeply embedded in our mythological and religious heritage’ (1989: 17). For example, the subordination of women in religious orders has historically sought to rein in women’s perceived sexual subversiveness and particularly in Christianity the myth of original sin exposes Eve’s curiosity as the root of man’s earthly struggle. The related myth of Pandora’s Box, a metaphor for women’s sexual curiosity, is also a powerful cultural indicator.

The eighteenth century thinker, philosopher and proposer of the social contract Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), wrote widely on the ‘disorder of women’, particularly in terms of their suitability for participation in politics. In fact many other theorists including Hegel (1770-1831) and Freud (1856-1939), expressed their belief in the incompatibility of women with political life. Carole Pateman describes how both believed that a sense of justice was fundamental to public order but that women were naturally incapable of developing this sense due to their biological destiny and ‘boundless sexual passion’ (Pateman 1989: 21). This desire, although putatively contained to some extent by confinement to the domestic sphere, was a constant underlying threat to the moral order (17-32). C Kaplan confirms this analysis: ‘Women’s desire is seen by Rousseau as both regressive and disruptive of the new liberal social order he proposed; women’s emancipation would mean a step backward for rational and egalitarian progress. It is important to remember that the notion of woman as politically enabled and independent is fatally linked to the unrestrained and vicious exercise of her sexuality’ (1986: 33). Although the views of Freud and
Rousseau, as well as the ancient myths surrounding women’s inherent subversiveness have been subjected to critical examination by feminists and political theorists, we cannot afford to dismiss the extent to which such views have shaped perceptions regarding women who actively participate in civil society: ‘Although women have now been granted citizenship in the liberal democracies, it is still widely believed that they are unfitted for political life and that it would be dangerous if the state were in their hands’ (Pateman 1989: 17). I believe the substance of this observation is deeply ingrained in our consciousness, and is therefore still of great relevance to the perception of women in today’s society. Theorists are only just beginning the work of addressing this tendentious viewpoint. Kaplan points out that when feminists began to adapt the ideas of liberal humanism to fit in with their own gendered position they had to contend with a ‘double standard’:

While most feminisms have recognised that the regulation of female sexuality and the ideological mobilization of its threat to order are part of women’s subordination, it is not surprising that they have too often accepted the paradigm that insists that desire is a regressive force in women’s lives, and have called for a sublimation of women’s sexual pleasure to meet a passionless and rational ideal (1986: 33-34).

In answer to this and to adapt Kaplan’s ideas on female sexuality to the idea of agency in this film, I believe that women’s desire (agency) can be celebrated as a force for emancipation and should not be reined in either by political thought or feminism. However, I believe that to show this desire without reference to practical consciousness risks confirming society’s view of women as inherently disruptive. A woman acting must be celebrated but behind it we must see evidence of their quotidian survival strategies in order to provide a ready answer to paternalistic views of the active woman as a threat to the moral order. It is the lack of access to practical consciousness in this film which again forecloses full access to narrative agency, despite the female characters presenting active, autonomous and independent accounts.
of female subjectivity.

Despite this however, these women do challenge, to some extent, their cerned environments, and their capacity for decision-making and action, means it is too simplistic to situate this film within the category of representing unsuccessful narrative agency. The positioning of the Marias as inhabiting a space somewhere between progression and regression further complicates their representation. The film’s timeless feel, together with the sisters’ costumes, which simultaneously suggest the conservative and modern, the chaste and sexualised, are also highly ambiguous. Furthermore, the sophistication of the decision by the director to consciously address narrative gender inequality by placing women as the protagonists of a revenge tragedy, and his attempt to convey the complexities of women embodying such a position, must also be recognised.

This film presents an alternative version of a classic patriarchal family revenge tragedy. Aluizio Abranches describes how the film’s narrative was based on a ‘dream’ the script writer, Heitor Dhalia, had about a rural family in northeastern Brazil.¹¹² This is explained in more detail in the production notes that accompany the film where it is described how Dhalia, although brought up in Rio, would spend the school holidays with his grandmother in the northeastern state of Pernambuco. He grew up surrounded by oral accounts of local family feuds and violent deaths.¹¹³ On Abranches’ request that he ‘wanted to talk about women’ Dhalia decided to rewrite a revenge narrative using women as the protagonists. With the help of poet and author Wilson Freire, he began to develop the story based on the cordel tradition.

The cordel poem is a type of popular/folkloric literature sold in pamphlet form.

¹¹² This information was gleaned from an interview I conducted with Abranches in Rio in March 2007. Unless otherwise stated, all comments by Aluizio Abranches come from this interview.
¹¹³ Production notes available from the internet site Webcine. See bibliography.
Although brought to Brazil during Portuguese colonisation, it has its origins in a
variety of literary forms. Originally popular with the lower classes of the northeast,
cordeis have been embraced by the middle-classes all over Brazil and have
increasingly been the subject of academic study. The term Literatura de cordel is,
according to Candace Slater, a primarily Portuguese term originating from the way in
which these stories were sold, that is strung together on a cord at fairs and markets.
Folhetos or folhetes on the other hand are terms traditionally used by popular poets in
Brazil (1982: xiii-xv). The folheto/cordel takes inspiration from a number of sources:
European oral balladry, the Portuguese ballad chapbook, Brazilian improvised vocal
contests termed desafios or pelejas, as well as religious and Brazilian folkloric
(including African and indigenous) influences (Slater 1982: 3).114 The implications of
this narrative choice on gender, in terms of the ambiguity surrounding the
representation of women in this film, will later be revealed as an interesting topic for
investigation.

Although Abranches specifies the cordel, the film’s narrative, with its bases in ‘stories’
passed down through the scriptwriters’ family, is perhaps more related to its oral
predecessor embodied in the figure of the cantador in Brazil: ‘The cantador is
associated with the oral tradition particularly of the rural North-East and North of
Brazil: this versatile artist who writes verses and composes music would go around
rural areas singing, playing and telling stories in order to impart news and events by
word of mouth and in order to recount through verse the history and deeds of famous
men in the region’ (Vieira 2007: xxxii). In her description of the important cultural act
the Mística, Else Vieira states that the cantador can be a man or a woman. This is

114 For more detailed information on the cordel tradition see Candace Slater Stories on String (1982),
distinct from the earlier, rural tradition where ‘the cantador is usually a man, given the itinerant nature of his work and requirement of literacy, not common among rural women’ (xxxiii). Interesting to note is that this film positions women as both the cantador (Dhalia’s grandmother) and, unusually, as the subject of the narrative.\footnote{Firmino Santos Guerra (Carlos Vereza), a rich landowner, is rejected by his ex-lover Filomena Capadocio (Marieta Severo). In an act of vengeance he orders his three sons to murder her husband and male children. With no male members left to settle this family feud, Filomena explains to her three daughters (all named Maria) they must hire killers to avenge the murders of their father and brothers. When the hired killers fail in their assigned duties, the three sisters carry out the killings themselves.}

Although the cantador is not present in this film, as in Deus e Diabo na terra do sol for example, Abranches’ choice of women as the main characters of this tale of feuding families in northeastern Brazil is notable.

\textbf{The Brazilian Patriarchal Family: A Fundamental Force}\footnote{The following analysis concentrates on the role of Brazilian colonial societies’ white members. This is not to negate the fundamental contribution made by Africans, the indigenous people of Brazil, and other racial minorities. However, this is not a study of race but of gender and class, in an instance where it is not appropriate or useful to intersect all three. The terms ‘woman’, ‘man’ and ‘family’ will therefore pertain to the colony’s white aristocracy. Furthermore, this investigation is not intended to provide a total historical/sociological overview of colonisation or family dynamics in the country during this time. This task is beyond the scope of this thesis and has already been completed with some expertise by other scholars. See particularly Gilberto Freyre (1933), Lynn Smith, (1952), Oliveira Vianna (1955, 1956), Leslie Bethell (1984) Boris Fausto (1999, 2002).}

It is clear by looking at the historiography that the patriarchal Brazilian family is a complex entity whose development varied according to epoch, class, race and geographical location. However, due to the indelible mark it left on rural Brazilian society, colonial family history is fundamental to this analysis. As Luiz de Aguiar Costa Pinto explains, the patriarchal family ‘deixou vestígios, patentes na psicologia do brasileiro, bem visíveis até hoje; o que não foi resultado de outro fator, senão das relações de produção aqui engendradas pelo sistema de colonização do europeu nos trópicos’ (1980: 27).

Brazil was originally a trading post for the Portuguese and intended as a staging post for other important trading destinations. Continuing threats from other imperial
countries, particularly France (who did not recognise the papal bulls that gave the Portuguese the ‘right’ to propagate the Catholic faith on newly discovered land), convinced those in Lisbon it would be necessary to colonise the new found country in order to reaffirm their claim (Johnson 1984: 253-261). Trying to organise Brazil’s vast land mass for colonisation was a daunting and almost impossible task, the difficulties of which are still clear today. However, around 1530 Dom João III of Portugal resolved the issue by dividing Brazil into 15 hereditary captaincies and donating each one as a royal ‘gift’ (Fausto 1999: 11).

Although these captaincies were ultimately answerable to the crown, the donataries wielded a significant amount of power themselves. One such entitlement was the right to distribute sections of land to settlers (Williamson 1992:168). These areas, known as sesmarias, were often vast, badly administered and gave rise to latifúndios, large unproductive estates. Although most captaincies were eventually repurchased by the crown, the trend for large estate farming (particularly sugar production which had flourished on the rich Atlantic coast) had already established itself as a lucrative way of financing the colony, satisfying as it did a huge European export demand (Fausto 1999: 12-15).

The large sugar farms, or engenhos, that came to characterise much of the economic activity in Brazil during colonial times, relied heavily upon a strict hierarchical system whereby the senhor de engenho, or landlord, presided over a vast economic machine that utilised a huge network of people and services. As such he wielded a significant amount of juridical and social power. As Darcy Ribeiro explains:

Thus the power of the plantation owner within his own domain extended over the whole society. Placed in that dominating position, he gained authority that the nobility itself had never held in the kingdom. Bowing before him submissively

117 For more details on how the captaincies were administered see Johnson (1984: 261-264).
118 This situation remains to this day and contributes to Brazil having one of the most unequal land distribution systems in the world.
were the clergy and the administration from the mother country, all integrated into a single system that governed the economic, political, religious, and moral order. In that sense the system constituted an oligarchy that operated at the governing summit of the power structure of colonial society (2000: 199-200).

The vast family networks or *parentela*, that characterised the *engenhos* were a key factor in the development of Brazilian society as principally patrimonial and patriarchal. Indeed Gilberto Freyre, arguably Brazil’s most notable social historian, states in his seminal *Casa grande e senzala* (1933) that, ‘A família, não o indivíduo, nem tampouco o estado, nem nenhuma companhia do comércio, é desde o século XVI o grande fator colonizador no Brasil […] A força social que se desdobra em política, constituindo-se na aristocracia colonial mais poderosa da America’ (1966: 25). Freyre also confirms that a major part of the rural family’s sphere of influence was an overarching political mandate that extended to almost all institutions (30).119

Cattle farming was another important activity for land-owners that developed during this time, which was arguably more stable and politically autonomous than sugar cultivation. In fact the *engenhos* came to rely upon the cattle farmers for oxen (to pull the great grinding machines), hides and meat. During the second half of the sixteenth century, the jurisdiction of these farmers increased after the promulgation of a law that required cattle farms to be kept a certain distance from the lucrative sugar plantations of the littoral (Burns 1993: 71-75). As a consequence, farmers were pushed further back into the interior, away from the control of government and other social institutions:

Landholding in the sertão was truly extensive. Although there was legislation limiting the size of *sesmarias* to three square leagues, this restriction was simply disregarded. The *sesmarias* on which cattle ranches […] were established sometimes exceeded hundreds of thousands of acres […] Farther from the

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119 Although a key historian of Brazil we must use Freyre’s work with caution due to his tendency to gloss over the racial tensions that existed and continue to exist in the country.
centres of royal government, less constrained by municipal institutions, and controlling vast tracks of land, the cattle ranchers wielded more unrestrained power than did the sugar planters (Schwartz 1984: 460-1).

Whilst the influence and unity of the patriarchal family unit began to wane towards the end of the 19th century due to an ever-changing political and economic landscape (Besse 1996: 14-18), the social and political influence of the rural family made an indelible impression on colonial, and consequently contemporary, Brazilian society.

**Women and the Patriarchal Family**

Within these vast economic and social networks, the women were to play a submissive yet fundamental role. Restricted to the private sphere, they were primarily responsible for producing heirs, domestic work, and were excluded from institutional politics. The chastity of the white woman was greatly protected and she was to be carefully sheltered from the temptations of the outside world. As we have seen, this view of women’s propensity for sexual excess of course has untraceable roots but was a belief imported to Brazil from Portugal and reaffirmed by the Catholic Church (Teles 1993: 19-20). Marriage therefore was the only option for a woman if she wanted to protect her reputation and avoid social exclusion. If women were not married even at twenty they could be considered spinsters, and fathers who suspected their daughters of improper conduct would have no qualms about sending them to a convent. Consequently women were married at a very young age, sometimes as young as thirteen. As such women were under the perpetual control of a patriarch, either their father, or their husband (Saffioti 1976: 168-169). Unsurprisingly, women were also entirely excluded from participation in institutional politics and decision-making, unable to occupy official positions in government or the church and therefore politically unrepresented (Del Priore 2000: 9). Women of powerful northeastern
families, even those of nobility were also seldom offered access to education and many remained illiterate. This also seriously compromised their participation in public life and resulted in their almost total relegation to the domestic sphere (Knox-Falci 1997: 251-252). As Susan Besse points out, more extreme accounts of the white woman have portrayed her as ignorant, passive, dull, and fragile; even fat, lazy and unhealthy, resulting from numerous pregnancies and a sedentary lifestyle (1996: 13). A. J. R. Russell-Wood also acknowledges this stereotype: ‘Of the white woman, it was said, during her life-time she left her home on only three occasions: to be baptised, to be married, and to be buried’ (1977: 1).

Although women were of course treated as second-class citizens, and to a large extent inadvertently perpetuated their own subordinate roles by reinforcing the tenets of patriarchal society, it is important to employ historiography with caution (Teles 1993: 20). To ignore the fundamental contribution these women made to Brazilian colonial life risks compromising the history of its entire evolution. Although women did indeed spend much of their time inside the casa grande, the work they carried out therein was fundamental. Despite their lack of juridical and institutional power, these women ran huge, complex households and, while their husbands were responsible for organizing a vast amount of slaves and workers, this necessitated their managing an intricate system of domestic production. They were also responsible for providing education and healthcare, for socialising their children and organising the various parties and religious festivals that were fundamental to social cohesion. In some cases, the death of the patriarch would also mean a wife becoming solely responsible for running the family business and taking on the same political and social role as their late husband, when they would wield ‘formidable political and social power’ (Besse 1996: 13). It is also important to recognise that as always, there were exceptions to any belief that
women were seen and not heard. Indeed it was the stories of these women, the women who administered on their husband’s land, that inspired Dhalia’s subversive rendering of the revenge tragedy and he admits to incorporating into these characters ‘sutilezas de uma ou outra história e referências a matriarcas “coronelas”, que mandavam e desmandavam’ Women in the colony, despite spending much of their time hidden from public view, also created crucial social networks that worked to establish and reinforce their individual and collective strength (Del Priore 2000: 9-10). Women were also fundamental to the continuance of the patriarchal family; used as the pins with which to hold together the fragile yet fundamental kinship network or parentela, that existed to protect economic and social interests. By accepting strategic marriages, women contributed to forming profitable alliances which were of fundamental importance to the establishment of family honour and land ownership (Fausto 2002: 268).

**Kinship and Revenge**

As should now be clear, the way in which colonial patriarchal families conducted themselves in Brazil was through what can be described as extended family, clans or kinship networks. However, kinship theory is an extremely complex, and to some extent outdated concept that risks confusing the myriad geographical and cultural differences within human social arrangements, indeed, ‘anthropology cannot, even if it wished, arrive at a universal definition of kinship’ (Overing and Rapport 2000: 22). The notion of ‘kinship’ used here therefore is based purely upon the parentela model

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120 Both Maria Amélia de Almeida Teles and Miridan Knox-Falci point to examples of women who bucked the submissive trend of the colonial white woman. For example Ana Pimentel who took over the political and administrative running of her husband’s captaincy, introducing some measures that she knew to be against her husband’s wishes (Teles 1993: 22-23). Also Amélia de Freitas who was the first woman to run for a chair at the Brazilian Academy of Letters, as well as others who became poets and writers (Knox-Falci 1997: 251-252).

121 See production notes.
of the patriarchal plantation families of colonial Brazil previously described. Revenge is also a complex notion that defies a unique or precise characterization, relying upon a complex mix of both empirical and mythological material. For this reason my investigation of revenge will be based upon how families of the nature described above would be likely to avenge a slur against them by a rival family or individual.122

In *Lutas de famílias no Brasil*, Luiz de Aguiar Costa Pinto explains that in the pre-industrial, pre-capitalist era, before institutions such as the Church, and ultimately the State became social service ‘providers’, societies organised themselves into large, localised communities of common interest. These of course included family groups which were the most politically significant. Whilst I would not like to be so unequivocal as Pinto, his belief that private vengeance became the enforcement mechanism of these ‘blood-tied’ families is convincing (1980: 3-4). The notion that this came about because of the absence of any other form of social policing is a view supported by many introductory analyses of revenge.123 In Brazilian terms, Pinto describes how the phenomena ‘reappeared’ during colonisation due to an excessive growth of private wealth and the dispersion and increasing fragmentation of State power (22). Given the historical contextualisation above, this should already be clear, and as Freyre comments at the outset of his study, the patriarchal family in Brazil developed defending its various interests ‘menos pela ação oficial do que pelo braço e pela espada particular’ (1966: 5).

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122 For more on revenge see Martha C. Nussbaum ‘Equity and Mercy’ (1999: 154-183). For revenge in Greek literature and beyond see John Kerrigan ‘On Aristotle and Revenge Tragedy’ (1997: 3-29). Amongst the most important modern examples of Revenge Tragedies are those of Elizabethan and Jacobean England; *The Spanish Tragedy* (Thomas Kyd), *The Revenger’s Tragedy, The Duchess of Malfi* (Webster), *The White Devil* and *‘Tis Pity she’s a Whore* (Ford) are to name but a few. Authors such as John Middleton, Thomas Kyd, Webster, Ford, Turner, Shakespeare and Marlowe, often took as their influence the Roman playwright Seneca, whose work derives from that of the Greek Dramatists; Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus. The list is far from exhaustive (Simkin 2000: 1-23).

123 Simkin (2001), Maus (1995) and Bowers (1940) all discuss this in their introductions to studies of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedies.
Pinto also explains the difference between individual and collective vengeance. Individual-bound *talião* or retaliation required the punishment to exactly fit the crime (i.e. ‘an eye for an eye’). Bowers develops this point, emphasising that, in early forms of revenge, ‘the injured person alone was concerned with the return of injury. There was no question of right or duty but merely one of strength. If he were weak, he remained without vengeance and no one would procure it for him’ (1940: 3). Pinto differentiates this type of individual retaliation from ‘private vengeance’, or the revenge of the collective, which he believes is ‘radical’ and ‘without limits’ (1980: 5). (This corresponds to the type of revenge sought in the film, as Filomena explicitly requests ‘nós temos que ser piores que eles’.) More pertinent, private vengeance stipulates that any member of the family is duty bound to avenge a slur, either against himself or his family. Effectively both are equivalent in this respect - as part of the collective you represent and are represented by your family, any crime against you is a crime against your family, and vice versa.

This notion of family duty is intrinsically linked to questions of honour, which Julian Pitt-Rivers describes as the value a person attributes to himself based on the value society places on him; not only something which a person represents but which must also be represented. Honour is also a quality which comes from status and if status is bestowed upon an individual by birth, honour therefore depends on antecedence (1965: 21-23).\(^{124}\) In the case of the patriarchal family, a single person symbolises the collective honour of the group: ‘In both the family and the monarchy the members owe obedience and respect of a kind which commits their individual honour without redress’ (36). Therefore to not enact revenge (defend a slur made against the family honour) is to dishonour the entire family and to compromise its very existence as a

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\(^{124}\) Although these analyses are mostly specific to Andalusian societies and Pitt-Rivers later goes into much more detail about specifically ’Andalusian’ traits, some of the most important points ring true for Iberian society in general and consequently early colonial Brazil and beyond.
social force: ‘Ao desencadear a vingança, a família luta por seus interesses, sua honra, seu culto, pela integridade de seus membros – tudo sem o que não conseguiria sobreviver’ (Pinto 1980: 5-6). (Again with particular reference to the film, this perhaps goes some way to explaining the unquestioning obedience of the Marias to the wishes of their mother.) Another salient comment by Pitt-Rivers is the assertion that honour is bound up with the physical person and in this case, because of its familial context, particularly entwined with notions of blood-revenge.\textsuperscript{125}

**Women and Revenge: A Subversive Position?**

Honour is an inherently male characteristic which has its female counterpart in shame. Returning to Pitt-Rivers’ chapter regarding honour and social status he explains that, ‘while certain virtues are common to both sexes, such as honesty, loyalty, a concern for reputation which involves moral turpitude in general, they are not all so […] A woman is dishonoured, loses her vergüenza, with the tainting of her sexual purity, but a man does not’. He goes on, ‘it obliges a man to defend his honour and that of his family, a woman to conserve her purity’ (42). Pitt-Rivers illustrates that the evidence for this social code is reflected in the division of labour and the active male/passive female dichotomy (45). For example, men should not display traits of shame, such as shyness, blushing or timidity and similarly a woman should not display traits of honour: ‘a woman who takes to physical violence or attempts to usurp the male prerogative of authority, or very much more so, sexual freedom, forfeits her shame’ (42). Again this points to the notion of women’s sexuality as being a threat to the moral order and is evidenced in the position Brazilian women were required to maintain within the patriarchal family.

\textsuperscript{125}Pitt-Rivers states ‘La lessive de l’honneur ne se coule qu’au sang’, or, ‘the laundry of honour is only bleached with blood’ (1965: 25).
When discussing a notorious feud between two rival Paulista families, Pinto confirms the view that a woman being called upon to enact revenge was a rare occurrence (Pinto 1980: 46). Clearly the code of honour and shame perpetuated by the traditional division of labour prevented the woman from taking up the position of active avenger in patriarchal societies. What role, then, did women have during a familial blood feud in Brazil? In keeping with their ‘private’ status women had the task of stimulating and maintaining hate within the home, keeping the spirit of revenge alive by perpetuating a permanent state of mourning:

Para estimular a luta, usam de todos os recursos visando transformar a família de comunidade em comunhão. Se a vingança é de sangue, expõem na casa as vestes ensangüentadas do defunto: vivem de luto permanente, não vão à rua, são desgraçadas, lamentam noite e dia o morto, lembrando e exagerando suas boas qualidades, excitando saudades, remorsos e desejos de vindita (Pinto 1980: 47).

Furthermore, in the absence of adults to avenge the family name, women had the pivotal role of fuelling the anger and hate of the young, reminding them of their duty to protect the honour of their elders when they came of age (46).

Considering the historical role of women in rural Iberian/Brazilian society, the Marias’ positions as prominent, active members of the household who defend their ‘honour’ with blood revenge, in other words as characters who have a clear ability to direct the narrative, appears extremely subversive, and strongly suggests narrative agency. It

Whilst it is acknowledged that Brazil is a country of continental size where great regional variations exist, Pinto’s example of feuds between rival families in São Paulo continues to be useful when we take into account the difficulty of collecting empirical data on revenge. Although historically and geographically specific, as is clear from my analysis, revenge also shares characteristics which can be found in vastly differing locations. For example, Pinto’s work (along with an Albanian revenge story, Broken April by Ismail Kadare) serves as inspiration for another filmic example of family blood feuds in Brazil Abril despedaçado (Walter Salles, 2002), which also has its own regional/historical specificities linked to the rural northeast after the abolition of slavery. Having used Pinto’s work, the role of the woman within the context of revenge is particularly clear in this film, highlighting as it does their fundamental yet passive role. For example, the mother has the duty of hanging out the bloodied shirt of the victim, and then of washing it after the blood has been avenged. In terms of mourning, one scene in particular shows how women must create an atmosphere of revenge. In this scene we see the wake of one of the dead men, the room is filled mostly with veiled women, moaning, crying, wailing and praying, creating an almost feverish environment There is no anger from these women, just a passive resignation of their ‘duty’ to maintain the sadness and thus fuel the fires of revenge.

126
perhaps also re-affirms that the only acceptable circumstances for women wielding social and political power was during their husband’s indisposition. The daughters in fact exhibit an air of independence unheard of during colonial times. This more progressive and ‘modern’ ideology is evident in various elements of the production. For example, all three sisters live independently of their mother. This is evidenced in their departure from the family ranch in individual cars and trucks when they are instructed to go in search of the three assassins. They also appear at all times unprotected by a patriarch. Obviously their father and brothers are dead, but at no point on their individual missions are they accompanied by a male figure, and we never see a male chaperone, relative or a lover.

To some extent the women also reject the submissive, passive and perpetual state of mourning that society demands of them. In contrast to staying indoors, not going out onto the street and acting as if ‘disgraced’, the Marias, and Filomena, go about their duties in an extremely public, almost flamboyant, manner. Again this strongly suggests narrative autonomy and so agency. Furthermore, Filomena does not allow mourning of the accepted form, demanding anger rather than tears, action rather than passivity and public presence rather than absence. She explains to her daughters ‘Ninguém aqui vai chorar, a tristeza tem paciência, ela espera’ and hands each of them the opportunity to demonstrate male activity over female passivity, sending each one out in search of an assassin to avenge the deaths of their men-folk. When viewed within the context of women’s traditional place within the patriarchal family and female roles during familial blood-revenge in Brazil, Filomena’s actions, and consequently those of her daughters, can be seen to be extremely progressive and provide an important opportunity for narrative agency.
Progressive Vs Archaic: The Marias as Contradiction

Despite in many ways presenting examples of potential narrative agency, complicating analysis of this film, is its ‘timeless’ context. Nowhere are we given any clues about when this rural revenge tragedy may be set. On the back of the British DVD release the blurb begins ‘It is the 1970s’, but nowhere in the film is this alluded to. However, during one of the scenes where Filomena rebuffs Firmino’s advances she states ‘it has been over for thirty years’. With this in mind, it is possible to situate the film somewhere in the 1990s. However, this is never confirmed and the point is perhaps that the film is, as Abranches describes in the production notes ‘uma fábula dark, descolada no tempo e no espaço’.127 Costume in particular has a powerful role to play in the uneasy juxtaposition of progressive vs. archaic. Overwhelmingly the costumes of most of the characters, although hard to place, are definitely more characteristic of recent decades. Furthermore these clothes, whilst taking into account differing global and local trends and timeframes, speak more of the 1990s than perhaps any other decade. Their neutrality is in contrast to the brightness of 1960s clothes, the decadence of 1970s clothes and the brashness of 1980s clothes. The economic lull of the 1990s comes across in these costumes and with particular reference to Brazilian cinema, it is logical that the fashions of this decade are adhered to, taking into account the period during which the film was probably conceived. It is particularly the costume of Maria

127 See Bibliography. This also fits in with the film’s literary roots, the *cordel* being something of a timeless genre. Developing this point, a further consideration is the role gender plays in *cordel* literature. Although little studied, one brief insight by Candace Slater is enlightening. In her article she explains that, although female roles within *cordeis* are almost always stereotypes (‘the usual cast of lovely maidens, wicked stepmothers, and compassionate angels’), *some folhetos* unearth useful contradictions concerning gender relations (1985: 168-169). Slater concentrates on the story of the Valiant Vilela as a particular site of multifaceted interpretation. Her summing up of the wife’s role in the story can be easily adjusted to fit around the story of the three Marias, in that it is impossible to categorise her as presented in either a positive or negative light: ‘Apparently clear-cut, it actually reveals two quite different story lines. Most *cordel* readers see the Vilela tale as a funny story, a purposely exaggerated confrontation between one outlaw and an ill-matched State. And yet, although it is Vilela who occupies centre stage in this *folheto*, the story’s meaning ultimately depends on one’s interpretation of the relationship between the back lands rebel and his wife. At first glance the wife would appear to be a variation on the faithful-aide stereotype […] It is not certain, however, that the role she plays is wholly positive’ (174).
Pia that situates As três Marias within the last 15 years. She has the more casual semi-tailored, yet still structured, style of the 1990s that was the cross-over from the highly tailored look of the 1980s. She wears straight-cut, block colour black jeans, a waistcoat and a gothic-style choker bearing a cross. Her clothes cling to her body showing its outline and her breast cleavage, pointing to the juxtaposition of the archaic woman in mourning, with the modern ‘liberated’ woman who is able to unselfconsciously bare her flesh. Maria Francisca also wears a more contemporary light-weight bottom/top combination with a pleated skirt that fits in well with the decade in question. Although a conservative costume, she also allows her body to be seen at various points within the film, and her costume is layered with chiffon material that at times is see-through. She wears sheer tights and high heels, which again suggests a modern, sexually liberated image of woman. Filomena’s costume is also of a modern style, but is more flamboyant than the clothes of her daughters.

In fact, although all four women are initially well covered in their black funeral costumes, their clothes become increasingly sexually suggestive as the film proceeds. Indeed, soon after the funeral we see that all the Marias are dressed in layers which they shed, to varying degrees, during the film. Pia begins wearing a jacket over her jeans, but after the funeral she is pictured wearing just the matching waistcoat with nothing underneath so that her cleavage is clearly visible. Her jeans are tight and high heels make her legs look long and lean. Francisca wakes up in the morning after enlisting the help of her chosen assassin Zé das Cobras, wearing only a maroon slip through which her underwear is clearly visible, and again her cleavage is deliberately on show. As the samba music of the village draws her outside, she does not bother to dress further. This leads the already female-fearful das Cobras to immediately leave when he sets eyes on her, afraid of her overt sexuality, comparing her, as he does for
all women, with the seductive biblical Eve. Filomena also is now in a very seductive mourning costume, having changed from her shirt into an almost vampirical *femme-fatale* style outfit, consisting of a black lace dress with cut-outs around the chest.

Whilst the costumes of Maria Pia, Maria Francisca and even the dramatic Filomena seem clearly situated within the 1990s, the clothes of Maria Rosa do not seem consistent with this, and again serve to undermine any assumption that the film is set in any particular time or place, or that it portrays a ‘modern’ image of woman. Rosa wears a suit of heavy black material comprising a long skirt with petticoats underneath, gathered at the waist, with the appearance of a small bustle. On top, she wears a long-sleeved black garment with a waistcoat. Although the waistcoat is secured with a modern zip fastening, it closes right up to the neck and tapers at the bottom: a Gothic/Victorian style. She also appears to wear thick black stockings and ankle boots which betray no sign of bare flesh. Maria Rosa’s conservative costume belongs to another age, and in this instance it is she who is most suggestive and representative of a pious, mourning woman. This appearance is both melodramatic and visually striking, and leaves the most memorable impression of the women’s clothes. However, any unambiguous interpretation and characterisation of the women is at least temporarily frustrated, because even Rosa, who begins wearing the most conservative outfit, strips off her neck-hugging waistcoat to reveal a transparent under-shirt and the line of her breasts. In fact it is Rosa’s behaviour that is the most overtly sexual as she nurses her assassin, the rabies-ridden Tenório, back to health. She spends the night washing and caressing his sweating body, her eyes wide and her lips pouting. The symbolism of fondling his huge knife, whilst lying semi-naked in his bed, with her black stockings and milk-white thighs clearly on display, is highly suggestive.

Despite the existence of some progressive traits, modern costumes, prominent
positions within the patriarchal family and the possession of a certain amount of narrative autonomy, the Marias’ representation is heavily tainted by the traditional tenets of gender stratification that historically governed *sertão* life and it is the image of the traditional Catholic woman in mourning, as epitomised by Maria Rosa, which prevails in this film. This is seen in the overwhelming presence of black (the universal colour of mourning) particularly evidenced during the funeral scene which depicts all three sisters leaving church with veils covering their faces. The tolling of the single church bell and the voices of the choir boys who follow the funeral procession evoke a time when this would begin an almost interminable period of mourning for women. The scene represents the idea of keeping the past alive, of not forgetting; it symbolises a denial of the self, the woman, in honour of the memory of another: a man. The whitewashed glare of the colonial-style church contrasts sharply with the three veiled black figures who are seen departing from its doors. The result is that some elements of the film have more in common with the rural tragedies associated with regressive attitudes to women found in such works as Lorca’s *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, rather than with a progressive representation of female agency.

Furthermore, despite some differences in the mourning costumes, the sisters’ identities coalesce, as we are given no evidence of individual practical consciousness; no dialogue, no close-up to reveal a facial expression or any other narrative device which would allow them personal expression. As Paul Julian Smith describes in his review in *Sight and Sound* magazine, ‘the back-story of each sister is set out in the press notes (Francisca is sophisticated, Rosa devout, Pia impulsive). But in the film itself the women, shrouded in black, are sometimes difficult to tell apart’ (2004: 63). Had the Marias exhibited examples of individual defining character traits, agency could have emerged, even if these defining traits were associated with more questionable
representations of female characters, such as their sexual allure, which is briefly
intimated in their costumes, and to some extent, their behaviour. As Janey Place says
of the woman of film noir, ‘It is not their inevitable demise we remember but rather
their strong, dangerous and, above all, exciting sexuality […] The style of these films
thus overwhelms their conventional narrative content, or interacts with it to produce a
remarkably potent image of woman’ (2000: 48). However, in this film it is the male
characters that provide the most ‘potent’ image. Even though they fail in their tasks as
killers, the director affords the male assassins more defining character traits and
striking dialogue thereby providing us with filmic access to their practical
consciousness. For example Zé das Cobras speaks in biblical riddles, has a striking
relationship with snakes and wears an elaborate suit made from snake skin. Jesuíno
Cruz who has a deep scar down the middle of his face, is given lines such as ‘I relieve
God of carnage and give the devil something to eat’:

If the viewer does not forget The Three Marias it will be because it features
some of the craziest eccentrics since El Topo (1971) […] the feral Zé eats
snakes, washed down with carefully chosen liqueurs; noble Tenório suffers
Christ-like wounds; Jesuíno boasts a huge scar which cuts his face in two, the
sign of a belief in ‘duality’ (Smith 2004: 63).

Therefore, despite on some levels hinting at a more potent image of woman, illustrated
through their layered costumes, the Marias are not allowed access to agency through
this route. They are neither overtly sexual nor provided with melodramatic dialogue;
neither over confident nor belligerent, neither over-emotional nor volatile. Maria
Francisca’s attempts to use her feminine wiles to persuade Zé das Cobras are
unconvincing. Maria Rosa uses her sexuality with limited effect to seduce Tenório and
Maria Pia although attractive and enigmatic, has limited access to dialogue and
therefore, to some extent, agency.
**Women and Revenge: An Empowering Position?**

Although familial revenge tends to be protagonised by men (particularly in the Jacobean and Greek literary traditions) there are in fact a whole range of texts that protagonise the woman as avenger and which illustrate how difficult it is to use the genre to illustrate female narrative agency. When discussing the most famous female revenge story of Greek Tragedy, John Kerrigan asks the fundamental question:

Should female revenge be celebrated to stop men assuming that they are as superior to women in the art of murder as they claim to be in the art of motor mechanics? Or would defending Medea’s guile discourage us from recognising that the typical female reaction to ill-treatment – at least in our own time – is slow burning anger, the battered wife syndrome, not patient resourceful revenge? For Medea to act against her enemies is for her (the imagery suggests) to act like a man. Should feminism base its ethical claims on equivalence or on difference? Must the former produce a politics which can be tarred with the brush of vengeance? (1997: 315).

Should feminism base its ethical claims on equivalence or on difference? This is perhaps one of the fundamental questions for feminist critics, as we shall see, and is also a necessary consideration for analysing female narrative agency and revenge in this film. Kerrigan rightly goes on to describe Euripides’ Medea as a complex character who defies simplistic binary descriptions of her as either a feminist *tour de force*, or as simply ‘acting like a man’. He argues that Brendan Kennelley’s version of the play exaggerates Medea’s brazen anger and bitterness to such a point that the guile and cunning she is most famous for becomes obscured.\(^{128}\) Additionally such exaggeration begins to cloud the original justification for such anger. Essentially, Kerrigan seems to suggest that artificially heightening female anger for dramatic effect or incautiously celebrating female violence without sufficient attention to the reasons and pain behind it, that is practical consciousness, serves to compromise the validity of

\(^{128}\) Kerrigan suggests this particular rendering of the myth is a direct consequence of Kennelley’s experiences of angry, embittered female patients whom he met in a Psychiatric hospital where he spent some time for Alcoholism (Kerrigan 1997: 317).
the potentially more ‘ingenious’ traits of female revenge, the very qualities such portrayals seek to celebrate.

Kerrigan also takes issue with Kate Saunders’ views on revenge (Kerrigan 1997: 318-320). Saunders writes in her introduction to Revenge: Short Stories by Women Writers that ‘for women revenge is an art form: fine, delicate precision engineering, largely beyond male capabilities. The feminine combination of intense imagination and unlimited patience can transform the whole concept of returning injury for injury into a thing of beauty and a joy for ever’ (Saunders 1991: vii). Saunders’ approach, argues Kerrigan, and ‘the stories which she enjoys’ risk totally compromising the feminist angle it seeks to reveal, ‘for while Saunders can find enough female-authored stories to support her claim that women enjoy images of this kind, she could find many more by men which misogynistically play up feminine guile’ (Kerrigan 1997: 318-320).

However, as Kerrigan posits, perhaps female revenge, its alleged cunning and guile, can be celebrated in texts that relish the ‘ingenious’ elements ‘without overlooking the pain and confusion behind it’, and whilst they may indeed point out patient and imaginative elements, they should problematise the emotional complexity of such alleged ‘joys’ (320). Kerrigan is suggesting, as am I, that a degree of agency is possible in revenge narratives which chart women’s practical consciousness and allow insights into their ‘specific histories’. Kerrigan uses Margaret Atwood’s Hairball and Fay Weldon’s Life and Loves of a She Devil, as examples of this. He explains how these texts problematise female revenge by viewing it as extremely complex, not necessarily as an empowering experience but something produced through hurt and anguish. In particular he seems to applaud Weldon’s attempts to challenge ‘the ethos of gender polarised conflict’ which posits a simple ‘woman versus patriarchy’.

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129 My parenthesis.
dialectic as a way of gaining female emancipation from revenge. In this respect he cites radical feminist Andrea Dworkin’s *Mercy* (1990) in which a woman is repeatedly raped and abused and consequently begins a campaign of bloody retribution against men, not only those who have done her harm, but men as representatives of an all powerful patriarchy. Kerrigan believes that Dworkin’s work is the ‘aesthetic consequence’ of feminist authors such as Catherine MacKinnon (Kerrigan 1997: 327). The introduction of these two authors into Kerrigan’s chapter illustrates how the problematic relationship between revenge and women’s agency also raises the issue of gender ‘equality’ in this debate, because often, as Kerrigan points out, women’s revenge is exacted against men (319).

Christina Hughes devotes a whole chapter to the thorny issue of ‘equality’ in her *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* (2002). She begins by pointing out three main issues surrounding the feminist debate regarding equality, based on Evan’s (1994) writing. First is that equality is almost universally accepted as meaning ‘the same’. As such feminists have argued that women and men should be treated as equals. Hughes then asks the necessary question ‘Equal to what’? She goes on: ‘The measure, or the normative standard, of that equality has been men’s lives’ (2002: 33). As men hold and continue to hold higher positions in employment for example, one of the focuses of feminism has been to provide women with the same access to these higher positions. Following on from this, another issue is that attention to equality has mostly been in terms of entry into paid labour, and has not liberated women from their family responsibilities. ‘Indeed, it is evident that women either have to manage as best they

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130 MacKinnon, put simply, challenges the idea that conceptions of equality in American law, formed as either sameness or difference, can be in any way helpful to women because they are both founded upon a masculine norm. As cited by Kerrigan, see MacKinnon’s *Feminism Unmodified* (1987) and *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989). Both MacKinnon and Dworkin attempted, in the Anti-Pornography Ordinance in Minneapolis to ‘connect in law women’s unequal civil rights with our unequal sexual rights’ arguing ‘that if pornography is designated as a civil offence […] then the chance for alterations in the legal reproductive/sexual objectification of women could occur’ (Humm 1992: 54, 82).
can the two greedy spheres of paid work and family and/or take part-time, flexible employment with its associated lower economic and social value’ (34). As such, claims have been made to address these issues for example, campaigning for more child-care provisions. Lastly, Hughes points to the fact that although the term still has currency, it has been increasingly criticised by feminists. Particularly, the notion that equality means ‘the same’ has been under attack because it equates the masculine with the norm. Hughes then goes on to explain the different types of feminist approach to equality, from those who subscribe to the idea that equality means sameness, to those who argue that ‘women’s difference is the root of their equality’. Within this school of thought are those who argue ‘women are equal but different’ and those who argue ‘women are equal and different’ (35).

However, there is danger of getting lost in a theoretical maze if we continue to use Kerrigan’s cross referencing of MacKinnon and Dworkin (together with his introduction of Drucilla Cornell into the debate), in order to argue the best way to approach the ethical quandary of gender ‘equality’ in terms of revenge narratives. This inevitably broaches the complex sameness/difference dialectic of feminist theory.131Whilst acknowledging the importance of such debates, to expand on them here is far beyond the scope of this study and would only serve to confuse the argument. In fact citing Kerrigan’s research simply serves to indicate how to use ‘revenge’, when it is inherently connected to conceptions of gender equality, as a position of empowerment for women, is an ethical minefield. Since we are discussing the practical nature of female agency in film rather than the discursive theories of ‘feminism’, it is possible to explain, using an analysis of the film’s mise-en-scène, how Abranches, in his attempts

131 Cornell, who sees ‘difference’ as a necessary part of feminist articulation, argues directly against MacKinnon. Most pertinently to this analysis of women and revenge, Kerrigan points out how Cornell, following Luce Irigaray, argues MacKinnon’s theories have a ‘tragic flaw’: by ignoring feminine sexual difference she ignores ‘the capacity of feminine sexuality to free as well as be freed’ (Kerrigan 1996: 325-326). See Drucilla Cornell’s Beyond Accommodation (1991).
to bestow agency on his female characters, to some extent finds himself in the middle of this minefield.

Although never explicitly named as such, by placing women in the traditional positions of men, it is clear Abranches was seeking some form of narrative equality in this film. His interest in turning a traditionally male centred narrative on its head in order to enfranchise women had begun three years earlier with his adaptation of Raduan Nassar’s novel *Um copo de cólera* (1978). In this adaptation he moved the female character from her more marginal position in the novel to a more central one in the film. As we have seen in *As três Marias*, not only does this film place women in prominent narrative positions but does this emphatically so by using them as the main pillars of the patriarchal family. In fact Abranches sees female avengers as particularly relevant tools with which to ‘talk about women’ because they present the opportunity to redress the narrative balance imposed by patriarchy, and consequently popular culture, which has traditionally viewed women as inferior in terms of holding political mandate within the family. As Abranches points out: ‘Usually the head of the family here [Brazil] is a man. In Italy, the head of the Mafia is a man, there is no film in which the head of the Mafia is a woman. *The Godmother*? No. There’s *The Godfather*, there’s not *The Godmother*. *The Godmother* is a good idea’.

In fact Abranches views his patriarch in less than positive terms. Although Firmino is ‘a man who thinks he is totally in charge of the situation’ and arrogantly assumes Filomena will reignite their old affair, despite her husband and five children, he is in fact, in Abranches’ opinion, a weak character. By murdering Filomena’s men folk he demonstrates that he is unable to rationalise Filomena’s rejection of him and allows his macho attitude to dominate. He is also naïve because he undermines her capability for violent revenge and does not take into account the age-old dictum ‘hell hath no fury
like a woman scorned’. Abranches explains: ‘He’s so unstable. I think women are stronger in this sense […] Women can control and manipulate much more than men’. He develops this point further by describing how only a woman can utter the words ‘sadness has patience, it waits’ reaffirming that ‘a man can never think like that’. He also believes women to be ‘more strategic’ and ‘more calculated’. Therefore it appears that Abranches wants to address issues of narrative inequality (seeing men as the main characters and sole perpetrators of revenge) by arguing that even though men have physical strength, and are often posited as the head of the family in revenge tragedies, women are far from powerless. Ultimately he wants to show women’s cunning and guile can eclipse men’s macho attitude and physical strength: ‘I wanted to make a point that women can do it and they can do it much better than men’.

The idea that women ‘can do it better’ is revealed to some extent in the film. Despite the notoriety of the male killers, as discussed earlier, they are represented as inferior killers and the women end up doing the job themselves. This does, as planned by Abranches, break with any perception that male characters possess superior narrative autonomy in revenge stories. Indeed the male avengers are in many ways represented as positively ‘weak’ when compared to the women, although initially all are built up to be terrifying killers. Maria Francisca is instructed to find ‘Zé das Cobras’, a notorious misogynist who refuses to talk directly to women and who has an obsession with snakes. Rosa is instructed to find Cabo Tenório, a formidable police chief with a penchant for large knives and rabid dogs, and finally Pia’s mission is to find Jesuíno Cruz, or ‘The Devil’s Horse’, ‘the most terrible of them all’ who is in prison. Despite the emphasis on the murderous tendencies and virility of these men, their failure to prove themselves as assassins seems to compromise their masculinities. The phallic symbols of the snake and the knife become flaccid and useless when the time comes to
carry out the murders, and the ‘Devil’s Horse’ despite all his affirmations of bloody retribution, loses his nerve at the crucial moment. Furthermore, these men are social outcasts and criminals who occupy a subaltern place. Abranches therefore not only posits the failure of men but the failure of dysfunctional men. From whichever angle it is approached Abranches’ idea about moving women into more prominent narrative positions in order to gain agency, is clear. In fact despite being a violent cultural practice with its roots deep-set in patriarchy, it is possible to gain narrative agency from revenge in this case if the supposed particular characteristics that Abranches outlines as central to ‘female’ revenge, are illustrated to us. However, despite the Marias taking on the more prominent narrative positions of the male killers and proving themselves as successful murderers, again we are provided with few clues as to how they may feel about having to take on this enormous responsibility. This is mostly due to the narrative structure, which presents the sisters’ actions via a flashback that contains little dialogue and minimal concentration on their individual experiences. Although all three sisters are shown as shocked by their cruel destiny, both Maria Francisca and Maria Pia cry out after they have committed the murder, the opportunity for each sister to explain her trauma to her sibling or her mother is precluded by this narrative device. Therefore limited access to practical consciousness significantly circumscribes narrative agency.

Through a rejection or reworking of revenge on some level however, the sisters could have begun to question or challenge the concept, therefore ‘facing up’ to a part of their concerned context. However, the women in this film are seen as simply imitating the men rather than creating for themselves a new subjectivity from within the concerned context of the revenge narrative. The revenge the Marias are forced to exact in fact appears not self-motivated but facilitated by their hired assassins and inspired by their patriarchal-
substitute mother. In handing over the knife to Rosa, with the words ‘with a blade like this one, you don’t need my help’, Tenório effectively hands over his tool, penetrating her with his masculine agenda. As Cruz falters in the church with his handgun, Pia emerges behind holding an almost exact copy. It is only really Francisca, who mostly relies on the drunken hallucinations of Firmino who mistakes her for her mother, who strays from the planned method of death by killing him with a broken bottle. Unfortunately in this film the sisters simply step into the shoes of the male killers. With little insight into their practical consciousness, evident through narrative devices, it is questionable whether they really do display the cunning and guile which Abranches suggests gives them their narrative edge.

Another matter which further complicates the straightforward reading of female agency in this film, are the comments made by Abranches later on in his interview. Perhaps aware that the belief women ‘can do it better than men’, is a paradox in terms of his goal of narrative equality he was also keen to explain: ‘The point was that I wanted to show that women can do it […] I don’t want to say that they are better or they are stronger. I wanted show they could do it as well as men, right and wrong […] Women are not better, women are not worse, they are different’. Taking this further Abranches explains that ‘no one ends well’ in this film. Therefore in making Filomena The Godmother, Abranches is not only wanting to redress the representational imbalance but is also trying to address the complexities of equality (as earlier suggested) illustrating that it is not always a liberating position for women because it means them entering into the patriarchal world. Although the female members of the family now hold political mandate and are reaping the benefits of such, they must also suffer the consequences of having access to the same destiny as men: ‘I wanted to show that in a way they had to do exactly what the men did’, that is commit murder.
Therefore, whilst Abranches to some extent compromises the agency of the Marias by entering them unquestioningly into the patriarchal world, he is also adding yet another layer to this film by exposing the complexity and contradictions of the ideas surrounding ‘equality’ and familial revenge.

If we return to Kerrigan’s question, ‘Should feminism base its ethical claims on equivalence or on difference’ perhaps substituting the word ‘feminism’ for the word ‘agency’ in order to fit in with the theoretical framework of this study, the answer must surely be, either is problematic when practical consciousness is not revealed. When equivalence is viewed as imitative rather than creative, without insight into the quotidian survival strategies of the individual, this risks the simplistic notion of gender polarised conflict; of positing women against patriarchy without the necessary insight or explanation into their particular motivations. Similarly, when difference is viewed and celebrated as women having a particular aptitude for murder and when it is accompanied by adjectives such as ‘cunning’ and ‘calculated’, again without recourse to practical consciousness, it risks supporting the archaic view of the active female as somehow dangerous or a threat to an established moral order.

Whilst it is worth remembering that Abranches does present a wide spectrum of female behaviour in his film, showing women who break with stereotypes, who have a great capacity for action and decision making and who function successfully outside of the home, Abranches’ comments, and his film, highlight the basic fact that the very use of revenge as a genre in which to represent female narrative agency is a project plagued with difficulties, particularly when it is accompanied by insufficient filmic detailing of practical consciousness.

The following section will explore how, to a limited extent, agency has been achieved by female avengers in Hollywood film but only because clear evidence of practical
consciousness is provided by the narratives. Overall, it becomes clear that the very use of the revenge genre as a platform from which to launch female narrative agency is questionable and perhaps best avoided, due to a misogynistic agenda that historically, culturally and, particularly cinematically, has been associated with the avenging woman.
The Marias and the *Deadly Dolls*

Modern day revenge tragedies are often reflected in film, particularly in Gangster films, Westerns and Horror movies. The potentially violent spectacle of revenge is something that transfers particularly well to the visual medium of mainstream cinema, the same way as it did to the theatres of Sixteenth and Seventeenth century Europe (Simkin 2001: 2). With reference to this study, the violent woman of cinema has various faces ‘from the vamps of early silent cinema, to the countless femmes fatales of film noir’ (Jermyn 1996: 251). However, it is the genre of the rape-revenge movie which specifically protagonises the female avenger and it is this woman, amongst other more recent incarnations, who has sparked a number of important studies by feminist film critics.

It is possible to argue that some of these films, despite not always providing clear-cut examples of narrative agency, illustrate behaviour that ‘faces up’ to the cerned context within which the characters are placed. Although not all critics agree, there are some who show the deadly woman as occupying an alternative and at times revolutionary space. As Hilary Radner explains of the modern psycho-femme: ‘New Hollywood’s New Women often hold paradoxical positions, in which their stories, while confirming the dominant model, “catch” at some moment or another, unravelling this narrative, if only sporadically and temporarily’ (1998: 248).

Although the rape-revenge film has traversed a variety of genres over the years and entered into the mainstream through films such as *Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, 1983), *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1990) and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), the most notorious and notable examples are the B movie cult classics such as *I*

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132 In fact the link between revenge tragedy and its modern incarnation in film is something which Kerrigan (1997: 25), Simkin (2001: 5, 9, 10, 18, and 19) and Katherine Eisaman Maus (1995: ix) all mention in their analyses of Jacobean Revenge Tragedies.

Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978), Ms. 45 (Abel Ferrara, 1981) and Alley Cat (Eduardo Palmos, 1984). These films tell the story of women who hunt down and kill the men who have raped them (Lehman 1993: 103). Often featuring graphic violence by beautiful women, these films must, on some level, be viewed as a backlash to the burgeoning women’s movement at its height during the 70s and 80s, symbolising society's fear about the possible social, economic and cultural emancipation of women. The unsavoury mise-en-scène of these films, which portray sexually attractive women wreaking bloody vengeance upon objectionable men, mean they have always enjoyed a controversial relationship with critics, and particularly feminists. However, this incarnation of the deadly woman has also been claimed by some as an example of female agency. In particular it has been argued that some films featuring the rape revenger pay particular filmic attention to the emotional and psychological reasons behind violent female conduct. In narrative terms at least, women in these films are defending issues relevant to their gendered roles and identities and primarily avenging a violation upon their own bodies in the form of the very female-orientated crime of rape. They therefore, in contrast to the Marias who defend the patriarchal family, turn the tools of patriarchy, namely bodily violence, back against men in a move designed not to bolster, but undermine the patriarchal world. In this instance, women embodying male roles seems justifiable and agency is elicited, particularly, as we shall see, because their quotidian survival strategies are made manifest.

For example, in the seminal Men, Women, and Chainsaws, Carol Clover explains: ‘Female killers are few and their reasons for killing significantly different from men’s […] their anger derives in most cases […] from specific moments in their adult lives when they have been abandoned or cheated on by men’ (1992: 29). Although the idea is still about ‘getting back’ at men, the reason stems from a desire to confront rather
than perpetuate patriarchy. Supporting this opinion is Judith Franco. Whilst seeing the psycho-femme narratives as ultimately presenting women who fail to change the patriarchal order, she argues that the controversial film *Baise Moi* and Madonna’s music video accompanying the song *What it Feels Like For a Girl*, offer an alternative view of the female killer that, at least on one level, achieves some confrontation of the cerned context of patriarchy (2004: 1-10). Furthermore, as Clover describes in her analysis of perhaps the most famous, yet controversial, rape revenge film, *I spit on Your Grave*, the representation of the female lead in such films often affords the opportunity to the audience for emotional investment in and identification with the character. She attests ‘The female victim-hero is the one with a back-story and the one whose experience structures the action from beginning to end. Every narrative and cinematic device is deployed to draw us into her perceptions’ (1992: 152). In contrast there is little documenting of the specific experience of being a female killer in Abranches’ film.

In his analysis of *I spit on Your Grave*, which investigates the complex position for the male spectator of rape revenge films, Peter Lehman makes an interesting observation when arguing against Roger Ebert’s, now notorious, review of the film:

He [Ebert] thus presumes, in a manner which I will argue is mistaken, that the pleasure of watching these films for men lies in identification with the rapists and their assault on the woman. Indeed, the unusually long, graphic, and ugly nature of the two rapes in the film are free of conventional ways of eroticizing such scenes [...] Neither of the rapes contains fetishised close-ups of the woman’s face or of fragmented body parts. [...] Watching these despicable men engage in this atavistic brutality allows the audience to feel what follows is justified. Male spectators are positioned to be disgusted by the rape and identify with the avenging woman (1993: 104).

This perception of identification however is not straightforward and Lehman eventually suggests, using Freudian psychoanalysis, that in rape revenge films identification lies with baser male desires of eroticised women, masochism and
homoeroticism. Despite this however, such comments also have important implications for a re-reading of these films which bestows some level of agency on the female characters. For example, the lack of erotizing or fetishizing camera shots means that, in some of the films at least, it is identification with, not objectification of, the woman that prevails, suggesting filmic access to practical consciousness. Furthermore, in *Rereading the Bitches from Hell* Deborah Jermyn wishes to show that, whilst manifestations of the female psychopath are essentially reactionary, the feminist tool of appropriation can illustrate such films to provide alternative readings that may create oppositional spaces for female spectators. Using Kristeva’s notion of the abject (‘all those things that threaten society’s established boundaries’) as her critical outline, Jermyn suggests that whilst the women in her three chosen films, *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992) and *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992), embody their roles as monsters and therefore are the ‘abject’ of the films, they also fulfil another function that the abject suggests: ‘Firstly, there is a fairly traditional representation of woman as monstrous-feminine, embodying male fears. But there is also a more ‘topical’ border being explored: the border between female psychopath and her positive inverse, problematizing female identity, in an exploration brought about by the changes in gender roles and what constitutes acceptable female behaviour’ (Jermyn 1996: 254-255). What Jermyn does in this article therefore is to recover the ‘hidden’ female plot that has been ignored by other critics in order to present the *psychofemme* to the female spectator as an example of alternative behaviour. One could say that Jermyn is revealing to us these women’s ‘specific histories’, and although this hidden plot is not obvious, the fact remains it can be discovered though a detailed filmic analysis. Unfortunately there is no such hidden plot available for reappraisal in *As três Marias*. 
Another characteristic of the dangerous woman of Hollywood is that she has no trouble using violent methods, normally associated with men, in order to purge herself of patriarchy, and this violence is often graphically portrayed. In his study of Elizabethan revenge tragedy Stevie Simkin describes how one of its staples is extreme and stylised violence. He states: ‘There is a general tendency in the invention and representation of such acts of violence to accentuate the grotesque, the macabre, and the horrific […] Nowhere is the fragility of the body more evident than in revenge tragedy’ (2001: 9). Bodily fragility and the grotesque are clearly visible in As três Marias. Some of the very first scenes show the mutilated bodies of the murdered Capadócio family: the husband who has been disembowelled and hung by his own intestines and the brother who has had his eyeballs torn out, are seen quite clearly though close-ups. We are also witnesses to the brutal burning alive of the final Capadócio brother.

It is interesting to note that, whilst the Marias also subvert the idea that violence is the sole domain of men, we are not given access to the details of the murders which they carry out. Of course we know the Marias are the perpetrators of the killings, but we are given none of the ‘gory’ details associated with revenge tragedy and rape revenge. The camera does not linger on the shooting of Jesuíno Cruz and Arcanjo Santos Guerra but takes a step back to focus from a long shot. It does not enter the bathroom where Maria Rosa beheads José Tranqüilo, and it is dark and the camera remains at head height when Maria Francisca stabs Firmino Santos Guerra with a broken bottle. That we are denied visual access to the murders the Marias carry out is significant. As female avengers they should have the potential to do bloody murder as well, if not better, than the ‘next man’. By censoring the acts of the women, where the acts of their corresponding male offenders are explicitly shown, the Marias are not validated as
‘real’ killers and Abranches appears to be betraying his own intentions to show women can do it ‘as well’ as men. In summary, it seems the redemptory strands on offer to the controversial figure of the female killer, evidenced through access to practical consciousness, in particular their ability to direct and hold the narrative through violence, cannot be applied to Abranches’ incarnation of the deadly woman.

The problems associated with holding dangerous women up as examples of narrative agency are clear and it is acknowledged that it may be problematic for some critics to see the deadly women of Hollywood as agents. However, narrative insight into these women’s practical consciousness, as has been revealed by the above scholars, illustrates how to some extent narrative agency can be bestowed upon some female avengers. However, despite at times wresting a new subjectivity for herself, and indeed confronting her cerned context of patriarchy (evident in the fact that access to her practical consciousness is available upon closer analysis), ultimately the female avenger (even as seen in Hollywood film) is too ambiguous a figure to be considered as a straightforward incarnation of agency. This is due to the cultural weight of patriarchy which views the active woman as inherently subversive. Therefore Abranches’ use of the female avenger as a proponent of agency with limited access to practical consciousness becomes even more problematic.

Furthermore, despite the seemingly independent, ‘modern’ status of the women in this rural revenge tragedy, it is clear that they continue to be tied to the traditions and beliefs of colonial Brazil and patriarchy, which would see them defend the loss of their kin through blood-revenge, revealing anachronisms such as private justice to be motivating sources. This is confirmed by their mourning status, which dominates the mise-en-scène, and exacerbated by the lack of insight into their quotidian survival strategies. Furthermore, although the sisters display alternative behaviour, such as
embodying positions traditionally occupied by men, this is ultimately grounded in
gender polarised conflict; women occupying the same spaces as men, not in order to
effect change but to demonstrate superiority. Therefore, the particular form of ‘female’
revenge that Abranches argues gives them their narrative edge, does not materialise.
Chapter Eight

Conclusion - Women in Brazilian Cinema: Hope for the Future

Review

By studying notable female characters in prominent narrative positions during the *Retomada* and beyond, and initiating a discussion on female directors, this study proposed to address the critical neglect of women in *Retomada* cinema. The validity of this agenda was confirmed as the research progressed, since few studies of women and no book-length studies of female characters or directors in *Retomada* film were uncovered. The study also proposed to address the paucity of critical attention to militant women in film whose experiences are socially and politically foundational to contemporary Brazilian politics. Despite their portrayal in a number of films, it was found that the issue was not substantially broached. Moving away from the traditional emphasis on class, this study also proposed to use the activities of the women’s movement in Brazil as its socio-political critical contextualisation.

During the research it became clear that ‘feminism’ was too general a term to describe the specificities of the Brazilian woman’s political situation or experience. This was partly due to its association with the Anglo-American and European academy but also because it was seen as generally anachronistic or irrelevant to many Brazilian women. The concept of agency, political, narrative and professional, as understood by Paul Smith and Anthony Giddens, has been productive as the theoretical idiom that better describes the Brazilian situation. Although it is acknowledged that discussions surrounding feminism in the Anglo-American and European academy are ever-changing and adapting to encompass women’s varied experiences, simply transplanting these debates on feminism to a markedly different historical context had inadequacies. Therefore a concept that described the specificity of the Brazilian
situation, which often addresses women’s issues pragmatically rather than discursively, was needed.

Giddens’ explanation that much human activity is constituted by practical consciousness is especially pertinent. This idea of practical consciousness, or in my rendering of it, a subject’s quotidian survival strategy, has been useful both in narrative, political and professional terms. Crucially, it avoids the binary humanist/structuralist conception of the subject which saw human beings either as functioning independently of their social contexts or as constructed through a form of subjectification to a system. This restricted the opportunity for autonomous action, particularly in terms of women. This concept has therefore facilitated the analysis of female characters and directors within their particular socio-political context.

**Findings**

In order to address the situation of the militant woman, four out of the five films studied dealt with this issue and uncovered a wealth of hitherto unexplored details about the filmic portrayal of this fascinating element of womanhood. Analysing both successful and unsuccessful manifestations of narrative agency in the militant woman has highlighted how despite her strong presence in Brazilian politics and the discipline of Social Science her representation in film has been glossed over. This is in contrast to how male militants in film and their real-life stories, the character of Jonas in *O que é isso?* for example, have been afforded critical priority.

Additionally, in both *Olga* and *O que é isso?* it was noted how the militant woman’s agency is represented with more subtlety in literary accounts of her life. This perhaps points to how financial production constraints or other restrictions appear to particularly affect the representation of women. For example, the representation of
Vera Sílvia Magalhães, whose story is complex and multidimensional, has suffered due to pressure on the film’s production company to streamline the story in order to appeal to wider audiences. The result presented her as split between the simple dialectic Maria/Renée. In terms of Olga the complexities and costs of adapting Morais’ book seem to have necessitated a way of story-telling, using the production values of the telenovela, which gloss over the main character’s ability to embody and successfully combine a variety of life roles.

Zuzu Angel in contrast shows how these issues of representation can be resolved in a big-budget film as it manages to present Zuzu as a ‘total’ character whilst also satisfying the requirements of a large production company such as Globofilmes. Although this production may not have had the aim of engendering women’s filmic agency, it nonetheless presents its main female character as a viable narrative agent. Cabra cega is an example of how films with no pressure for international success or mass audiences, but with the aim to simply tell a story, also perhaps adventitiously, represent women’s agency well. Using the model of agency from a different point of view, an analysis of As três Marias shows how even in films which discursively propose female emancipation, underlying patriarchal elements must be vigorously teased out in order to illustrate how often female issues are glossed over or simplified in film criticism.

Looking to the Future

This study inevitably poses questions to be more fully answered in the future. Whilst the term ‘feminism’ was to be avoided in this study, it is proposed that the existence of a useful ‘label’ specific to women, such as female agency, is fundamental to fully acknowledging the important role women have and continue to play in Retomada film.
The achievement of this study is to have successfully transferred, from the Social Sciences, a relevant label, giving visibility to the growing presence of women and gender-specific experience in film, therefore addressing a major gap in the criticism of Brazilian *Retomada* films. I further propose that critics should recognise this label and use it in order to avoid subsuming women’s issues into a wider class-based angle that has predominated since the time of *Cinema Novo* and which is relevant to many films but excludes women’s gender-specific experiences.

The critical framework of agency should be investigated further to analyse women characters, within their socio-political context, in the future and also during other epochs such as *Cinema Novo* and the 1980s. From within this model, alternative women’s issues, such as those from the black/lesbian communities, could also begin to gain a greater visibility in film criticism, acknowledging women as a varied and complex community playing a part in the wider social context. My argument is again therefore not that these women have been absent from roles in Brazil, or that they have not made an important contribution to female agency, but that this contribution has not been sufficiently acknowledged in criticism.

In terms of female directors, much more work needs to be done. An up-to-date catalogue of female directors and their films would be useful, but more important an in-depth study should be conducted into what extent their films reflect their specific gendered experience, again within the context of activities of the women’s movement. Also, women’s roles in Television, where, as Rita Buzzar has mentioned, many work as producers, could be analysed using the professional agency model. Indeed, as is suggested by my work on all five films, to what extent female agency is affected by production values or financial constraints is something to consider in the future. Perhaps inspired by my work on *Olga*, part of this could indeed extend into Television,
particularly the interplay between film and *telenovela* in terms of women’s representation.

Although my work can be linked to statistical studies of female authorship, character studies, *Retomada* criticism, and Social Science, it is unique in its adoption of the critical idiom of agency. In film this has revealed, through detailed analysis of *mise-en-scène*, hitherto unexplored critical angles in *Retomada* films and in terms of socio-political contextualisation has described how the varied experiences of women in both quotidian and militant capacities led them to connect with a gender-specific discourse which contributed to political change in Brazil. Most important it has acted as a much needed bridge between the two. Using this framework in the future within the wider context of Brazilian film criticism, would aid women to establish their proper place as critical subjects beyond that of just being described or observed.
Glossary of Terms

Agency
Agency in this study is a general term which encompasses narrative agency, political agency, and professional agency. It generally accounts for women in Brazil both in society and film who work towards engendering rights and opportunities for women through confronting their restrictive positioning within a patriarchal (cerned) context, for example the military regime.

Cerned Environment/Context
This, in Paul Smith’s words, is ‘the product of the structuralist ‘encircling’ and the humanist ‘acceptance of a patrimony’. It is that environment which both defines and restricts a person. For the Brazilian woman, patriarchy is the cerned context. By confronting her cerned context, evident through practical consciousness (the inherently political nature of a person’s quotidian survival strategy), agency emerges.

Discursive Consciousness
As Giddens explains: this is ‘what actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action: awareness which has a discursive form’ (Giddens 1984: 374). In film this is seen in female characters discursively confronting their cerned context, for example through a verbal declaration or through the act of writing, but not necessarily in terms of their gender-specific oppression. With reference to the women’s movement in Brazil, it relates to women engaging in (discursive) gender-specific political action. Although discursive agency does not always indicate feminism, feminism is a form of discursive
agency as it is most often disseminated in an academic/institutional capacity; an inherently discursive context.

**Narrative Agent**

This is a character in a film who finds the capacity to confront their *earned environment*, even if ultimately they will not dissolve or change it. This is evident through *practical consciousness*, in film illustrated through dialogue, ‘identificatory’ camera-work, and other narrative devices and elements of the *mise-en-scène*. It is also manifested in our access to characters’ narrative autonomy, that is their positioning and treatment by other characters and their ability to direct the narrative. These characters can also be described as ‘total’ characters, that is, they are multifaceted yet unified, able to simultaneously hold multiple positions whilst surviving and fighting within a political context. Although these elements are not necessarily perceptible to the character herself, or co-characters, these elements must be visible to the audience. The most successful narrative agents are those who make the transition during the course of the narrative from *practical* to *discursive consciousness*, in order to become a *political agent*. This does not mean engaging with their gender specificity as women.

**Political Agency**

This is seen in the transition from *practical* to *discursive consciousness*. Political *agency* is seen in the actions of the Brazilian women’s movement, many elements of which make the transition from acting within unspoken quotidian survival strategies to discursively acknowledging a gender-specific political project. In film it is seen in those characters that most successfully represent narrative agency (who do not
discursively acknowledge gender-specificity but illustrate a profound knowledge of their *cerned* contexts, (evident through narrative devices).

**Practical Consciousness**

In the words of Anthony Giddens: ‘Practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to ‘go on’ in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression’(1984: xxiii) Or, ‘the capability to “go on” within the routines of social life’ (1984: 4). In my interpretation practical consciousness is the unspoken quotidian survival strategy of an individual which reveals a latent ‘politicism’. It covers all instances of human activity which is unspoken. However, speech can be an element of practical consciousness when agents simply go about their daily lives without offering reasons or explaining intentions for why they are doing what they are doing.

**Professional Agency**

This is how female film directors confront, through their films, their approach to filmmaking and their characters, the *cerned* context of the Brazilian film industry during the *Retomada* and beyond.

**Specific History**

This is Paul Smith’s terminology and relates to how a human subject must be read within its own specific socio-political context, rather than in purely theoretical terms. In my interpretation it is the element of **practical consciousness** which relates to a subject’s internal monologue and thought processes. In film, narrative agents must also display their **specific history**, for example internal thoughts and feelings, evident
through narrative devices.
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