Identity Myths in João Canijo
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Last year, director João Canijo released his new feature film. However, instead of his acclaimed fiction features – which have been made in the last decade and have been selected to the major film festivals (notably to Cannes and Venice Film Festivals) with critical success – Canijo directed a documentary: “Lusitanian Illusion” (2010). Moreover, this film was done exclusively with archival footage and deals, in general terms, with the Portuguese reality of the II World War, when Lisbon was considered a safe place for refugees of the war. The film was a kind of interruption in his career, but, at the same time, Canijo was preparing his next fiction feature (which is, now, in a post-production phase). And, even if the film was commissioned, it is important to the overall work and thinking of the director, who is especially interested in mapping a Portuguese identity.

Canijo is a director who has been entering in the Portuguese art cinema since he returned to film directing (after a period without filming), in 1998, when he released “Black Shoes” (1998). Since that film, he has been doing fiction feature films about specific places of Portugal, especially ones that are countryside and in unsightly locations, like a Trás-os-Montes village in “Misbegotten” (2007); a Portuguese community in a Paris’ bidonville in “Get a Life” (2001); a hostess bar in a nowhere place, in “In The Darkness of the Night” (2004); or the industrial village of Sines in the aforementioned “Black Shoes”. These films are often made with a strong purpose of tracing a Portuguese identity in the contemporary world. Canijo is always very clear in his statements about his works, and he has almost a political agenda for criticizing the public discourse of the Portuguese so called “easy going” (mostly in interviews done after the release of his films). We have been writing on this identity discourse in our last works (Ribas, 2010).

This paper aims to connect the historic view that Canijo takes with “Lusitanian Illusion” about the Salazaristic discourse on Portuguese identity and the strong statements made by Canijo’s feature films about the underground violence of contemporary Portugal. There is a trace of the fantasy dictatorial regime discourse in some of the layers of Canijo’s films that make this connection possible. We will try to
read these films with the aid of Portuguese main philosophers (Eduardo Lourenço and José Gil), but also with some academic studies on the Salazaristic discourse and national identity.

About “Lusitanian Illusion”

“Lusitanian Illusion” is a film about a strong discourse on national identity, made by Portuguese Prime-Minister and dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. The film deals with the timeframe of the II World War and particularly with the city of Lisbon, which was, at the time, a city of European refugees, who had fled war and who where waiting for a possible escape to the United States. The documentary, thus, deals with two different layers: for one hand, propaganda actualities which resonate all the regime’s discourse; and on the other, some images but mostly texts written by famous refugees when they passed by Lisbon (notably Antoine Saint-Exupery, but also Alfred Döblin and the actress Erika Mann, daughter of the writer Thomas Mann; in the film, these texts are read by three different actors). These two layers allow the spectator to confront the happy, neutral and essentialist discourse on “Being Portuguese” made by the dictatorship, and the sad reality of the refugees who saw in that happiness an illusion of actual political reality and a strong delusion of life in all Western Europe.

The documentary uses, for most part of its duration, archival footage directed for newsreels – o “Jornal Português” (Portuguese Journal) – mostly produced by the regime or, at least, censored by it. There are used several types of footage, mostly national manifestations of the regime (like the newsreel about the end of the war and the demonstration dedicated to Salazar). Curiously, “Lusitanian Illusion” uses a special frame in its projection – a square one – almost signifying an emulation of those previous newsreels. Also in that manner, Canijo doesn’t give any historical information (as text in the screen or as voice over). We see the newsreels almost as they were seen in those times, with a significant difference caused by the non-Portuguese voices, which read the different texts on the refugee view of the situation.

In the years covered by the documentary, because the II World War, these newsreels are, mostly, dedicated to “images of the national armed forces, and to the military security of the New State” (Paulo, 2000, 105). In that sense, “Lusitanian Illusion” deals, in its archive footage, with images of a youth body of athletes, military parades, but also with antagonistic diplomatic visits of international representatives
such as England, Germany or Spain). Moreover, the documentary uses also footage from the Portuguese World Exhibition, which took place in 1940 and which functions as a show-off about the Portugueseness of the different Portuguese regions, mostly focusing on the picaresque and ethnographic representation of those regions.

The overall tone of the documentary is also affected by the sound, which take two forms: the newsreel narrator (predominantly the voice of the regime’s film director António Lopes Ribeiro, who was also the writer of those texts); or the Godly voice of Salazar. This voice from the nation’s leader is almost always used with an echo (simulating the sound used in this newsreels when Salazar speaks at a demonstration), amplifying the importance of those speeches as ideas that remain a discursive element in nowadays views of Portuguese identity. The narrator, which also is predominant, uses a discourse of elevating the leader, using rhetoric devices in the speech, but also slowly changing the tone of voice when speaking about important matters. This narrator tries to create an empathy with the audience (like a father-figure) and guides the spectator within the frame, noting some special elements as the ones that must be seen. (cf. Piçarra, 2006, 175-177)

In this sense the first layer of analysis – the newsreel side – offers a condensed view on the politics of propaganda of the regime. These films where made to get “an idealized image of the country, which has also an idealized history, predominately with a rural life and with its habitants typified through regional costumes” (Paulo, 2000, 108). But mostly, these newsreels (with the aid of this new montage) offer “a myth figure of the leader, centred at Salazar” (Paulo, 2000, 108). This myth figure is always presented by the narrator as a guardian of the nation and some images portray this enunciation, as the excerpt of the film “The Courtyard of the Ballads” (“O Pátio das Cantigas”, 1942), done precisely during the war: some children are placed in a carousel-boat by Evaristo (the main character represented by the popular actor Vasco Santana) and he says “You are safe here”; then, with a zoom out, we see the name of the boat: “Salazar”. The inclusion of this excerpt supports that, even with feature fiction films, Salazar’s myth is always reinforced by Portuguese cinema. Moreover, some of the touristic images of the newsreels also portray a “notion of Portugueseness” (Paulo, 2000, 110).

We want to highlight, in this sense, the creation of a myth that, at its surface, is the myth of neutrality of the regime. However, as the film goes on, Canijo show us
clearly the myth of Salazar and his notion of Portugueseness. This is demonstrated, as we already noted, by his strong presence as the continuity voice of the documentary. He marks the pace and the ideas of national identity. Additionally, the images, as we stated, also construct a world of peace and tranquillity at the surface. Even the tone of comedy that is constructed throughout the film shows how these newsreels try to formulate an idea of familiarity: the Portuguese as an indestructible family with strong and old values.

Another element should be added here: in all of these newsreels is always stressed by the regime the importance of the Catholic values within Portuguese people, supported by sequences where religion is dominant in the regime’s speech. In this sense, it’s important to highlight the final sequence of the documentary, because Canijo decides to show the inauguration of the monument “Christ-King”, in Lisbon, a public tribute to the end of the war and the neutrality of Portugal. There is, in that sequence, a purposeful confusion between nation and religion: as if Portugal was protected by God.

The documentary “Lusitanian Illusion”, therefore, organizes the Salaristic myth of a Portuguese identity. This concept was also analyzed by Moisés de Lemos Martins, mainly by a reading of Salazar’s speeches (cf. Martins, 1990). That reading is also useful for analysing Canijo’s view on the issue, because this new montage reveals some of the tools to control the Portuguese society. This “technology of submission” (Martins, 1990, 67-69), in Martins words, is characterized by an “salazaristic disciplinar atomization” (Martins, 1990, 72-73), being this atomic nucleus the family, the basic unity of the nation: “What is wanted, in fact, is to make rational bodies (health requirement), to get obedient subjects (policy requirement), to create virtuous people (moral requirement)” (Martins, 1990, 86). Martins see in the Salazaristic discourse a theory of the national soul, a myth of Portuguese identity, reinforcing, by the regime’s tools, a disciplinary control over the bodies of the Portuguese people (cf. Martins, 1990, 93-94). The regime understands that the degeneration is also a mark of the Portuguese soul, which needs to be regenerated by the tools of the discipline (cf. Martins, 1990, 98). The documentary also shows, paradigmatically, the case of the vagabonds, which are only the product of the morally uneducated. But Canijo could only reveal the poor people by the use of photographs, because the regime didn’t allow the newsreels to portray the underprivileged of Portuguese society.
One of the strategies that Canijo uses is to allow the newsreels sequences to flow as they were seen. The fact that there is no voice-over contextualizing the history, permit to underline a certain humour of those sequences, which are in nowadays view profoundly tragic to be comic. That becomes also possible because the situation exposed by the newsreels is contrasted by the second layer of the film, which is done by the readings of key texts of some famous refugees in Lisbon. Therefore, there is a kind of historical re-reading of those newsreels, which are exposed to their illusion discourse. There are also some sequences that show German cities during the II World War. The juxtaposition of this new layer undermines, ethically, the discourse of Salazar exposed by the newsreels.

The readings of the refugees are always pointing, clearly, the contrast between a supposed joyful Lisbon with the sadness of the immigrants, who can’t support the depressing illusion of the Portuguese, completely out of the reality of their own Western Europe. Salazar’s discourses often mark Portugal as one of the biggest World nations and these refugees note the constant illusions of the Portuguese, who they characterize as illiterate and even dirty (one of the voices speaks of the act of spitting that they see everyday in Lisbon done by all social classes and all ages).

Antoine de Saint-Exupery speaks of Lisbon as “paradise clear and sad” and “Portugal clung to the illusion of happiness”. Erika Mann speaks of the thousands of refugees who came to Lisbon to run away from Hitler, and their anguish wait for another escape to somewhere else. She speaks of a melancholy of the refugees who could only wander through the city. The sequence when Erika Mann first speaks with her text is paradigmatic: she speaks over a brief footage of Lisbon that is not made by the regime, as well as some photos. These images are exemplary because they can also show a travelling through a dark Lisbon, full of people wandering. The sequence gets more power when contrasted with the following sequence that shows a première of a Portuguese film as a social event, full of “beautiful people” of the regime, completely away from the tough reality of the People.

In other words, Döblin tells his view of Portugal when he exited Lisbon by boat: he is telling that all refugees were almost pushing themselves to board and his last view from Portugal was the bright lights of the Portuguese World Exhibition, which “shone like a fairy tale”. In this sense, these foreigners’ texts strike violently in the fantasy world of Salazar’s Portugal. They expose the myth of the dictator: one of a big country,
rich and neutral. The hard reality of an illiterate, poor and sometimes hungry population is always deleted by the images and the discourse of the regime.

From Salazar’s Portugal to nowadays

We do think that “Lusitanian Illusion” is a documentary that fits perfectly in the artistic discourse of João Canijo, even in its fiction feature films of contemporary Portugal. This understanding is better assimilated if we also use the thinking of José Gil applied to the films of Canijo. It is well known the admiration of the director to the philosopher, mostly after the publication of the book “Portugal Today: the Fear to Exist” (cf. Gil, 2005), which has been widely quoted by Canijo, as is paradigmatic in the intention notes of “Misbegotten” where there is a direct quotation of the book. Therefore, it is possible to elaborate on a contemporary discourse – made by Canijo and Gil – about a certain Portuguese identity. Notably, Gil was a consultant for “Lusitanian Illusion”: he saw the first rough cuts and reinforced the idea of Canijo’s two layers of reality in the documentary.

In the four fiction films that Canijo released from 1998, it is clear, in our point of view, that Canijo extends his thoughts about Portuguese identity, creating the idea that these stories and these characters survive in contemporary Portugal with the same myth identities of Salazaristic discourse. We want to highlight, then, this underground connection of a national identity myth to a contemporary Portuguese discourse, or as we can put it: still a false illusion image that the Portuguese have of themselves. That is the main problem that Canijo and Gil point out.

In Canijo’s films this idea is constructed by a paradigm that underlines this proposal. And it is at the characters’ level, that Canijo reveals his positions on a certain Portuguese malaise. This stems from the particular circumstance of each character in the context of the narrative. And it is this way that deepens the observation that, in these four films, Canijo does the same stories. There is, in that sense, a macro scenario of narrative repetition that is embodied in the following way: there is a normalized context at the beginning, which is transformed by the presence of a female character that, for various circumstances, decides to break with the initial normality. This initial normality is also synonym of a latent passivity of the characters, which continue to live their life in an absolutely traditional form, tied with the dominant power structures.
Returning to the narrative logic, the various female characters take the story and obliged themselves to act to change the course of things. This requirement for action is usually triggered by an external reason, but is embodied in a female character's decision to confront power. Typically, this power is represented by a male power (father or husband), which, however, also proves to be a fragile power, built on the logic of physical advantage. We also find a power represented by institutions and a speech that the characters make on the issue of being Portuguese.

Interestingly, in a brief summary, we can see how this macro narrative unfolds in each of the films reviewed here:

- In "Black Shoes", the story develops through Dalila, a middle-aged woman with a dysfunctional family. Her desperate attempt to change her living situation is by ordering the death of her husband. Indeed, throughout the first part of the film demonstrates how the power of man stands with violence. Although Dalila can fulfil the death, the movie's ending suggests that she goes back to being under the yoke of another power (now a police detective);

- In "Get a Life", the protagonist is Cidália, a Portuguese immigrant in Paris. Her life is interrupted by the sudden murder of her eldest son. In a fit of courage (interpreted as madness), she reacts to this death by a confrontation against the French police; this affront is also reflected in the need to tinker with the normality of the Portuguese community in France (whose life is represented in the film as invisible). This community refuses action and the final is ambiguous, but suggest a family separation.

- In "In the Darkness of the Night", the protagonists are both daughters of the couple that owns a hostess bar. Due to an external event, a Russian mafia demands, as a "sign of respect", to take their youngest daughter to Spain. Throughout the narrative, Carla, the eldest daughter, tries to counteract the family's fate, but she is ultimately killed by the audacity. The whole family is, in the final scene, disintegrated and destroyed, while the prostitutes continue their work as if nothing had happened.

- In "Misbegotten", the narrative is absorbed by Lúcia, a woman that nurtures a hatred for her mother and stepfather (who subjugate her to humiliating punishment). She accuses them of having killed his father and she just waits for the arrival of her brother to seek revenge on both. That moment happens, but soon after the killings a new empty settles.
Given these examples, the family environment of all these protagonists is completely dysfunctional. It’s very curious the use of the family as the unity of these films, mainly because it explodes the unity of the Salazaristic family, the myth of the unity of values and the regeneration factor within Portuguese society. In the families of Canijo’s fiction films everything implodes and there is an evident hate between family members. Even if, at the surface, that hate wasn’t clear and public.

In addition, it is common to feel a latent malaise about Portugal, which is reflected in several lines of dialogue that explicit the disease in Portugal. To give just one typical example, in "In the Darkness of the Night", the father has just sold a false dream to her daughter and tells her: "You have great talent and Portugal is a country of shit. You don’t have future here. Spain is a good land, a land with a future. Not like this”.

This plotline - a character that tries to disrupt normality – gives support to the theoretical construction of the Portuguese philosopher José Gil. In the films and in Gil’s theory we find the characters in the states of passivity, a life of day to day that do not inscribes, and can not leave marks. Canijo’s world is a world of fear. A fear of a power that translates into a fear to exist. It’s interesting to note that this passivity clearly marks the continuity to “Lusitanian Illusion”, in the sense that the Salazaristic discourse promotes the passivity – named tranquillity or peaceful in its speech – which is highly criticized by the three texts of the refugees. The fiction films by Canijo are drowned by a tough and underground reality.

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

This violence is a result of internal power struggles of the characters. In this sense, we can close the circle, because this violence is also the result of a repressed desire. Reading José Gil: "The inscription is the condition of production of desire (or its
destruction). The non-inscription suspends the desire and will lead, sooner or later, to physical violence. Equals to a bad inscription." (Gil, 2005, 49) Almost transferring from statements also made by the director, José Gil exposes "the myth of the 'easy going' that reigns on the surface hiding a real underground violence" (Gil, 2005, 77). Canijo proposes a certain Portuguese type that Gil defines as stupid and ignorant. Therefore, Canijo cited in his notes about "Misbegotten" a José Gil-quote: "The rudeness results of the effort and the inability to give form to a visceral bottom without form. (...) The worst thing about rudeness is not the ruin of the form, but arrogance in trying to be form: violence characteristic of the stupid and the ignorant" (Gil, 2005, 105).

Also relevant is the awareness that the concentration within the family narrative triggers the conclusion that it is in this nucleus that there is the worst systematic violence (physical or psychological) that will inevitably end in death that these films show. That says a lot of how Canijo likes to address the sociological narrative - opting to tackle inner aspects and often hidden - and the belief that the director himself has expressed about the destructiveness of family relationships. This issue of the family is also revealed by José Gil when he relates the Portuguese actual situation with the Salazaristic "familiarism": "(...) the legacy of fear that the dictatorship has left to us not only covers the political level. Moreover, the difference with the past is that fear was kept in our body and spirit. " (Gil, 2005, 40). This fear implies, in this sense, "(...) the reverence, the awe, the passivity (...)" (Gil, 2005, 40). According to Gil this fear is reflected in a lack of a public space, a democratic stagnation, and a series of small, everyday events, such as complaining, resentment and envy.

Let us recall briefly that this concept of "passivity" is already included in the reflections of psychoanalytic myth held by Eduardo Lourenço: "The Portuguese were absent from themselves (...) during the four decades of a large minority called 'fascism', but that was for the people a long tradition of civic passivity only the "legal government" of the Nation" (Lourenço, 2010, 48).

In conclusion, Canijo explores in his fiction films Gil’s concept of non-inscription. Therefore, “Lusitanian Illusion” reinforces that concept, because it presents Salazar’s discourse of Portugal as a big nation and the Portuguese as an orderly people. The essencialistic discourse of Salazar is impregnated in Portuguese people minds. Again José Gil, relating the “non-inscription” to Salazar: "Nothing happens, I mean, nothing fits - in history or in individual life, social life (...)" (Gil, 2005, 15).
inscription on the other hand, "(...) implies action, assertion, decision with which the individual achieve autonomy and a meaning to existence. Salazar has taught us the irresponsibility - reducing us to children, grand children, childish adults. "(Gil, 2005, 17). Even if we can point out that Canijo and Gil also respond to Salazar’s essencialistic discourse with their own essencialism, it is in fact a political view of the dictatorship as creating an idea of a Portuguese world, framing Portuguese identity in a close and passive behaviour.
Bibliografia