Women in cinema: an analysis of the cinetographic narratives of Laís Bodanzky

Mulheres no cinema: uma análise das narrativas cinetográficas de Laís Bodanzky

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ABSTRACT
he proposal of this paper is to observe how the Brazilian cinematographic narratives have been dedicated to depicting the issue of the feminine. The objective is to comprehend the specificities of the feminine representations from the work of the filmmaker Laís Bodanzky (1969). In order to achieve this objective, this paper uses the narrative analysis (GANCHO, 1991) and the filmic analysis (VANOYE and GOLIOT-LÉTÉ, 2012), with theoretical support from Flusser (2007) about communication and culture; Benjamin (1994) and Silva and Santos (2015) about narratives; Silva (2009) to understand poetical narratives; and Beauvoir (2009) and Butler (2017) with contributions regarding gender. The results point to poetical narratives that approach possible feminine.

Keywords: feminine, narrative, cinema, poetic, Laís Bodanzky.

RESUMO

Palavras-chave: feminino, narrativa, cinema, poética, Laís Bodanzky.
1 ABOUT THE WHYS

The thoughts and discussions here performed have an origin in debates, classes and meetings during the Communication and Culture Post-graduation Program in University of Sorocaba (UNISO). The consequences of this research started with the following question: How the feminine and the poetic are expressed in Lais Bodanzky’s cinematographic narratives?

To answer this question, there was a thorough analysis of the filmmaker work, taking four important feature films produced by her as a sample, seeking to observe narrative aspects as the plot, characters, environment and the storyteller (GANCHO, 1991), besides the visual and sound characteristics present in the movies. We are seeing a feminist explosion (term created by Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda which is the title of the 2018 book). In all social spheres, from the elite to the popular, the discussion about what is being a woman has emerged. In this period of intense debates about gender equality, cinema, as well as other media, became a fertile ground, collaborating for the progress of the discussions.

The cinematographic narrative is comprehended as a communicational possibility of questioning and transformation. And a medium that brings light to the image perception, that in our society has great importance, symbolizing and attributing meaning to things and people (FLUSSE, 2007). Therefore, if cinema tells us something, then it is a way to narrate the world and this possibility of interaction, makes us think that cinematographic language is an experience and a possibility of sharing knowledge and customs (BENJAMIN, 1994).

We start from the perception that we are narrative beings and that we exercise subjectivity when being crossed by what they tell or hear. The attitude of narration has a transforming, critical and experimental character; it is a cultural and communication phenomenon: “once more the experience itself, inciting a kind of conversation. In any case, being it oral, written or shared by social networks, the narrative is acting as a bridge between persons that fraternize,
providing part of the reality, criticizing it and creating other possible worlds (SILVA; SANTOS, 2015, p. 13).¹

If narrating is experiencing the world through the verb (BENJAMIN, 1994), when this narrative arrives in a poetic way it can potentialize the experience, running through, in many moments, the text itself. When assuming the cinematographic narratives can also carry poetry, it opens up a range of contingencies, once the poetic expresses itself through bodies, sensations and feelings, causing an effective communication (SILVA, 2009). Bodanzky's cinema assumes, in an opportunistic way, the poetical characteristic, through the plot, soundtrack and image sequences. The present cinematographic elements carry, sometimes, complexity and multiple interpretative perspectives, favoring a transforming experience of the subjectivity.

If it was interesting to look at Laís Bodanzky's cinema from the perspective of poetry, it was more significant to note that this poetic aspect became relevant essentially when addressing themes related to women's issues, mainly when questioning socially established roles such as the fact that "the destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so (BEAUVOIR, 2011, p. 502)".

In the present days, marriage, financial dependency related to other persons (mainly men), impositions to their bodies and behavior are a reality to most of the women, who put aside their opinions and will, in search of acceptance. When this logic is break by the artistic productions there are a new range of interpretations on what regards the feminine demands, something in the social structure moves and transforms, once:

> One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine (BEAUVOIR, 2011, p. 330).

¹ Of the original: "mais uma vez a própria experiência, incitando-se uma espécie de conversação. De qualquer modo, seja oral, escrita ou compartilhada pelas redes sociais, a narrativa segue, operando como ponte entre sujeitos que se confraternizam, fornecendo parte da realidade, criticando-a e criando outros mundos possíveis".
Therefore the idea of the feminine a social creation that needs to be constantly debated and resign edified. If before, Beauvoir (2011) saw problems in wrapping up the concept, currently, contemporary thinkers such as Judith Butler (2002) make it clear there isn't a way on how to put boundaries on the gender questions given its complexity. The author brings an open conception, stating that gender is, above all, inconstant and contextual, that is, "a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations (BUTLER, 2002, p. 15)".

Both Beauvoir (2011) and Butler (2002), states that understandings about gender are not stable, it is the opposite, they change according to the context and time in which they are inserted, emerging new demands related to the feminine that need to be debated in every possible place. That being said, the media as well as the other social spheres must comprehend such urges, supporting behavioral, perception and attitude changes in what it means to be a woman, also being a communicational apparatus aimed at gender equality. Cinema can be a narrative mechanism with the potential to bring questions and denaturalize the current woman model, contributing to what is in fact real: there is not one feminine, but several feminines. It is clear, therefore, the essential role of this media as a bearer of social and cultural debates, in this sense, cinema narrates, through its means, at the same time that it can deconstruct generalizing gender concepts.

Always looking into the feminine questions, the journey through Laís Bodanzky's work has the beginning with the movie Bicho de Sete Cabeças (2001), a narrative with a strong emotional and psychological appeal. Here we focus on the character Meire (Cássia Kis), mother of the protagonist Neto (Rodrigo Santoro), who observes her son languishing in a psychiatric hospital as she can't react to help Neto in that situation.

In the movie Chega de Saudade, Bodanzky's second feature film, we face a seniors ballroom full of women seeking for fun, company, friendship and love. They also try to solve personal issues regarding love, acceptance, maturity, feminism etc. Bel (Maria Flor) and Marici (Cassia Kiss) are opposite characters
in the narrative, the first being represented by the youth and the second by the aging, and it is exactly because of this fact that they were chosen for the deeper analysis in this work.

The movie *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* (2010), narrates the youth's dilemmas. From the protagonist's story, Mano (Francisco Miguez), it is possible to deep dive in an universe that goes from the most common teenage years issues to important and contemporary debates, such as bullying, homossexuality and depression. The analysis of this movie focused on the characters Camila (Denise Fraga) and Carol (Gabriela Rocha), the mother and the best friend of the protagonist, respectively. Both, in addition to having an important role in the unfolding of the plot, still raises relevant questions about contemporary feminines.

The penultimate movie released by Bodanzky is called *Como Nossos Pais* (2017), which tells the story of Rosa (Maria Ribeiro), a woman that sees herself overwhelmed as a mother, a daughter, a spouse and a professional. After the reveal of a secret, the protagonist goes on a journey of self-knowledge, questioning and debating about socially established roles related to gender. This is the filmmaker's most feminine (and feminist) movie.

2 ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGY

The analytical methodology of the feature films consisted in watching the films many times, and at first, doing the filmic analysis, locate and highlight female relevant characters presents in the narratives and that could contribute to the first objective of this paper, which is to observe the feminine in Laís Bodanzky's work. Afterwards, questions were raised that could contribute to interpretations about what was most interesting to observe in each movie: the feminine and the poetic. Visual and sound elements were considered, providing an attentive look at the question of this research.

The starting point was to thoroughly observe important elements, such as the most dramatic acts that helps the characterization of the characters and on the plot development, the feminine construction, poetic elements, space as a place for the emergence of the symbolic, and of the social and emotional, to
answer the questions raised in this paper. Even though the cinematographic narratives have being approached, sometimes, in a distinct way, all of the movies were analyzed starting from the analytical methodologies of narratives proposed by Gancho (1991) and the filmic analysis proposed by Vanoye and Goliot-Lété (2012). The first one allowed us to observe the movies through narrative elements, creating predefined categories as Plot, Characters, Environment (space/time) and Narrator. The second one took into account the cinematographic elements such as aesthetics, dialogues and the sequence of the acts.

The table which starts the next topic was created to compile and show the elements with more relevance, proposing a general analysis of the narratives, in order to facilitate the visualization and comprehension of each of the female characters that were chosen, providing the observation of the feminine questions and its unfolding. Divided in lines as per the analytical narrative methodology: environment, characters, plots and narrator (GANCHO, 1991), was added to the table a last line that demonstrates the elements about the feminine in the movies, once this is the main question of this work.

3 THE POSSIBLE FEMININE IN THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES OF LAÍS BODANZKY

Table 1 - General analysis of the narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOVIES</th>
<th>Bicho de Sete Cabeças</th>
<th>Chega de Saudade</th>
<th>As Melhores Coisas do Mundo</th>
<th>Como Nossos Pais</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td>Familiar and hospital</td>
<td>Ballroom</td>
<td>Family and school</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARACTER</td>
<td>Protagonist /Antagonist: Son and father (male); Secondary: mother, sister and medical team.</td>
<td>Protagonist/ Antagonist: Bel and Marici (female); Secondary: Marquinhos and Eudes, Alice and Álvaro</td>
<td>Protagonist: Mano (masculine); Secondary: Camila, Carol, Horácio, Pedro e Arthur.</td>
<td>Protagonist: Rosa (feminine); Antagonist: Clarice (feminine); Secondary: Caru, Nara, Juliana, Dado,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORYTELLER</td>
<td>Silent and Omniscient</td>
<td>Polyphonic and Omniscient</td>
<td>Dialogic and Omniscient</td>
<td>Dialogic and Omniscient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own production

After the filmic and narrative analysis, the components outline a profile of Bodanzky’s cinematographic composition, which signals a transformation in the creation path. If we observe, on table 1, we can see that from the four movies analyzed in this study, three have happened in contemporary and familiar environments associated with external ones such as hospitals or schools. The exception is the movie *Chega de Saudade* (2007), which occurs in the ballroom, but it has a familiar atmosphere hidden from the scenes of intimate acts. Most of the characters are secondary and distributed as satellites of the protagonists. It is important to highlight that two feature films have male protagonists and two female protagonists. Also relevant is the fact that most of the female characters are round, that is, according to Gancho (1991), complex characters who transform as the narrative progresses. Bodanzky begins her directions with Meire, in *Bicho de Sete Cabeças* (2001), a secondary and flat character, meanwhile the character Neto, shares part of the protagonist with his father, the antagonist.
Bodanzky, in Chega de Saudade (2007), migrates to two female characters that alternate between being the protagonist and the antagonist, but who are flat characters. As the typical divorced woman, Marici, flat, and the young woman Bel, round. In As Melhores Coisas do Mundo (2010), the female characters are secondary again, but this time both are round, such as Camila, Mano's mother (the protagonist) and Carol, Mano's friend. And in Como Nossos Pais (2017), both characters, protagonists and antagonists are round.

The movie plots are psychological, two of the movies in association with a moral conflict, as in As Melhores Coisas do Mundo (the question of the homoaffective relationship is put up for debate) and Como Nossos Pais (about paternal abandonment and marital betrayal). The themes addressed in the four feature films are universal, possibly explaining the international success of the productions. It is noticed that the filmmaker has a look inclined to social questions as mental health, depression, suicide, bullying, feminism and empowerment. Among the subjects love and sadness are in all narratives that also include fear and death.

It is important to point out that in regard to the theme, there is transformation. Bodanzky by portraying the anti-asylum struggle in Bicho de Sete Cabeças (2001) and gives the content of hidden denunciation, proposing reflection. A similar fact occurs in Chega de Saudade (2007) which raises the discussion around female aging, including sexuality in older ages. However, from Chega de Saudade (2007) going through the film As Melhores Coisas do Mundo (2010) and Como Nossos Pais (2010), the stories signal narratives of transformation, enabling the main characters to change the course of their lives.

Observing the similarities and differences of the films, it is also noticed that Bodanzky uses cinematographic resources to emphasize the always omniscient narrator, a natural proposal of the cinema, but alternating between silent, polyphonic and dialogic narratives. In Bicho de Sete Cabeças (2001), Bodanzky uses the lack of dialogues to expose the lack of knowledge that are around taboos such as adolescence, drug use and corruption.
In *Chega de Saudade* (2007), Laís proposes an experimentation with character polyphony and launches herself into the soundtrack as a dialogic complement, once the lyrics of exposed songs complement scenes and dialogs. And in *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* (2010) and in *Como Nossos Pais* (2017), Laís proposes a polyphonic narrative with several secondary characters alternating between sound and silent acts.

The gender question is debated in all films, but the constancy underscores the filmmaker's thinking. While in *Bicho de Sete Cabeças* (2001) the theme is secondary, with the typification of the submissive mother, the feminine comes into light in *Chega de Saudade* (2007), when the plot discusses sexuality and aging. In *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* (2010), Bodanzky amplifies the discussion including the homoaffective relationships, and makes clear the debate around the feminism in *Como Nossos Pais* (2017), what indicates that the filmmaker deeply understands both the importance of the discussion and the balance between genders through the acceptance of diversity, mainly in terms of thoughts and behaviors.

Finally, the poetic is present in all the filmmaker's work, which demonstrates not only her identity as a director, but her signature. Laís is intimate with the videos and sensible with the themes, proposing that the viewer follows the narrative closely. The poetic is comprehended in all the movies through delicacy, silence and surprises.

**4 CONSIDERATIONS**

This paper sought, as a broader objective, the analysis of how the feminine is presented in Laís Bodanzky's cinematographic narrative. For that, female characters of the feature films *Bicho de Sete Cabeças* (2001), *Chega de Saudade* (2007), *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* (2010) and *Como Nossos Pais* (2017). To understand Bodanzky's works, we seek to contribute with a research that demonstrates the importance of a cinema that builds narratives about the feminine through sensible observation that makes reasoning about the contradictions of this same contemporary feminine.
The choice for two methods of analysis, narrative and filmic, was important to look at the productions as a whole. To observe the specificities of a narrative text, with elements such as flat or round characters, plot, environment and narrator (GANCHO, 1991), essential in order to understand the narrative as a form of mediation. As for the filmic analysis, technical and aesthetic elements were fundamentals for the understanding of the poetic, such as the location of objects, positioning of light and framing (VANOYE e GOLIOT-LÉTÉ, 2012).

Thus, it was possible to verify that Bodanzky has a profile that signals a transformation in her creative path. The environment of the four movies are based on contemporary time and the familiar space - even in Chega de Saudade (2007), produced in a ballroom, the familiarity is hidden in the intimate environment. There is simplicity in distribution of the characters, mostly secondary who are satellites to the protagonists; the last one headlined in two feature films with male characters and in the other two, females.

Nevertheless, it observed that the filmmaker has a particular way of building the female characters. Aware and far from carrying the activist banner of feminism, she does not address racial and socioeconomic issues, but uses plot with contemporary psychological conflicts. And it is in this place that Bodanzky’s female characters are worked on from a poetic approach. Characteristics evidenced in different ways, but mainly in the cinematographic resources that emphasize the always omniscient narrator, natural proposal of the cinema, but alternating between silence, polyphonic and dialogic narrative. Besides, also, the visual and sound elements propose reflections about reality, transforming and debating important themes.

As most of the female characters are, for most of the parts, round, that means, complex and with evident transformation of course, the filmmaker breaks with the traditional image of the hero protagonist, in this example, female hero, as warned by França (2016), so played at the movies. Bodanzky’s work causes us, in several moments, different feelings and sensations, whether in the thematic approach, in the construction of the female characters or in the aesthetical aspects, and due to its poetic character, the feminine representations are full of
complexities and nuances. As an example of character of *Chega de Saudade* (2007), which as proposed by Mendonça (2012), also breaks with the stereotyped and silenced image of female old age; in Bodanzky's view, in addition to the diversity of characters, different from each other, they demonstrate that there is not one, but several ways of experiencing the feminine.

Confirming, from Benjamin (1994), that the narrative is an experience comparable to the concrete phenomena. Being the poetic narrative possible from the dialog, from the transgression, the change of perspective, providing the experience with the new (SILVA, 2009). Laís is clearly concerned with the women's demands and, in her narratives, several questions about gender appear, such as the bullying that the character Carol (*As Melhores Coisas do Mundo*) suffer for having kissed a teacher, or Camila's anguish (*As Melhores Coisas do Mundo*), left by her husband who went to live with another man.

When analyzing the first feature film, *Bicho de Sete Cabeças* (2001), it was possible to observe the director's concern with the social and public health aspects which were the asylums issues in Brazil. Bodanzky has told a story with several complex layers, such as the asylum's reality, the patriarchy, drugs criminalization, family relationships and, even so, she did not fail to portray Meire, the protagonist's mother, proposing reflections.

Meire's non-idealization, as a mother devoid of bad feelings and perfect in her attitudes, appears in a poetical way through the silence, expressions and symbolic objects, such as the cigarettes and the tranquilizers she uses. Meire smokes in an (apparently unconscious) act of searching for the transgression, since she is silent in her attitudes, once she sees her son being hospitalized because of drugs, while she is also addicted to pills and cigarettes. Meire and Neto are victims of a patriarchy that oppresses and the escape from this reality occurs, for both, through addictions.

*Chega de Saudade* (2007), also presents possible women. Bodanzky not only brings the feminine question, but also the aging, a theme rarely addressed by cinema. In this narrative, the filmmaker builds an environment with different plots, mismatches and intrigues, showing that in any time of life, people want to
have relations, live loving contexts and be noticed. It is a film about women, since the points of view are mainly focused on the feminine debates and its nuances; from the generational clash, we can observe the questions, experiences and afflictions of women who share their anxieties and joys of aging. The sample used for this study, evidencing the characters Bel and Marici, gives us the possibility to aggregate other debates that surround the gender issues, as the young Bel having a relationship with a middle-aged man - Eudes, Marici's husband -, in possible dispute between them for his attention. However, Bodanzky deconstructs this attitude, which is socially structured and accepted (and sometimes encouraged), proposing a perspective without standardized idealizations.

Despite the movie *As Melhores Coisas do Mundo* (2010) focusing on the young and the implications that technological advances have caused, transforming the world and bringing new social demands, this is nonetheless a narrative that also presents its women from a complex perspective. The characters Carol, the protagonist's best friend, and Camila, the protagonist's mother, are examples of how the feminine questions are present and are validated. The first, a girl ahead of her time, but who, at a certain point, ends up falling in love with a professor, a situation widely addressed in the cinema. The second, a mother that sees herself abandoned by her husband and with problems with her children, another issue widely approached by the cinematographic narratives. Even if these are very common topics, Bodanzky proposes a closure for both with possibilities of choices, even if they suffer with the sexism at times, they can decide for themselves, there is emancipation and protagonism, there is care when looking at the demands of women.

The best proof that contemporary feminine questions are present in Lais' work, and they are approached from the poetic point of view, is the movie *Como Nossos Pais* (2017). Rosa's life, the protagonist of the movie, is the way that the director found to criticize the patriarchy, the gender prejudices and the tiresome obligations of women of that time, imposed by society. Rosa is constructed in such a way as to bring the viewer closer to the protagonist's conflicts, doubts and
wishes; once again, the filmmaker was realistic in presenting a possible feminine, that suffers with all kinds of pressures, in a society that demands everything all the time from the women. This is a movie that makes Bodanzky's concerns clear in uncovering feminine problems and questions, promoting urgent reflections in our society.

By bringing Rosa to the forefront, the director promotes questioning about the inequalities and generational conflicts, once Clarice, the protagonist's mother, can be understood as a kind of antagonist and based on the conflict with her daughter, provokes transgressions in Rosa. Once again, Bodanzky makes a movie that addresses a possible woman, not remaining in the shallow debate or concerned in pointing fingers. Apparently, the filmmaker wants to create connections and dialogic possibilities in relation to gender issues.

The analysis carried out led us to reach some possible conclusions. We make it clear that we do not intend to exhaust the interpretative possibilities provided by the work of Laís Bodanzky, but, in fact, to contribute to studies about cinema, and more precisely about the feminine represented in cinematographic narratives.

The first consideration we come to, after analyzing the filmmaker's work, is that there is a sensible filmic approach. Bodanzky builds poetic narratives from several perspectives, providing what Nagib (2002) calls a more accurate image of reality. Starting with the care taken in treating female characters, there are no caricatured or idealized representations, there is the possible feminine, the real women. Both the aesthetic, as scenarios and costumes, and the narrative aspects, with characters, plots and conflict, are complex, e.g., the prominence of sober colors in Bicho de Sete Cabeças (2001), the character Clarice, at the piano, playing Como Nossos Pais in the movie with the same name, or the characters Mano e Camila throwing eggs at the wall in As Melhores Coisas da Vida (2010), all those elements are loaded with meaning that propose reflection. The director is concerned about not reproducing sexist approaches.

Another point to be observed is the fact that there is no objectification of the female body in the analyzed narratives. Even when there is nudity or sex
scenes, those involved are portrayed in the same way, without a pejorative approach. Laís Bodanzky seems to value the debates that concern the women in her narratives. The findings is in the environments, which are also significant to the narrative, as the ballroom in Chega de Saudade (2007), and in the intimate narrative, that searches, mainly through the plot and dialogues, to raise reflections on the human questions, with universal themes, as for example, relationships, youth, old age, growing up, love and self-discovery.

Another thing observed, going back to Flusser's perspective (2007), is that Bodanzky's narratives demonstrates, from the characters, self-discovery journeys and personal relationships, the possibility of reflecting and questioning the spheres of life and death that are fundamental to comprehend any human phenomenon. Therefore, the possibility of transgressing from the narratives can help us to think about our own existence and it is in this mediation that lies the foundation of the communication "with the purpose of promoting the forgetting of the lack of meaning and the loneliness of a life towards death, to make life livable (FLUSSER, 2007, p. 92)".

All of Bodanzky's work has a poetic look at the feminine, once it presents us with elements, being it objective such as dialogues, objects, costumes, lights, or subjectives as metaphors, ambiguities, brain teasers with words and inferences, which allow reflection, questioning and transformation based on the narratives. If "the poetry exists in the facts" (ANDRADE, 2001, p. 16), then works that show us life as it is, while allowing different interpretations and ways of existing, can therefore be transformative.

We dare to conclude that the feminine approach in Laís' cinematographic narratives is poetic because they treat the feminine aspect with lyricism, sensitivity and symbolism the feminine aspects, because they represent the possible women, without succumbing to idealizations or standards. There is beauty, aggressiveness, pain, the myriad of possible feelings that make up not one, but several feminines.

2 Of the original: "como propósito de promover o esquecimento da falta de sentido e da solidão de uma vida para a morte, a fim de tornar a vida vivível".

3 Of the original: “a poesia existe nos fatos”.
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