

Portuguese women film directors and the environment: Margarida Cardoso's *Atlas*

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Resumo: Este artigo discute o cinema português realizado por mulheres. A primeira secção analisa o conceito de cinema feminino à luz de condicionantes sociais e económicas e da teoria de autor. A segunda secção centra-se na representação da natureza como um ponto de entrada para uma análise do cinema realizado por mulheres portuguesas. O artigo interpreta o documentário de curta-metragem *Atlas* (2013), de Margarida Cardoso como um estudo de caso para o uso do meio ambiente no cinema de mulheres portuguesas. Esta obra tece um comentário sobre questões de género, modificando subtilmente a tradição de vincular a mulher à natureza na cultura ocidental.

Palavras-chave: cinema feminino; ecocinema; Margarida Cardoso.

Resumen: Este artículo discute el cine portugués realizado por mujeres. La primera sección analiza el concepto de cine femenino a la luz de condicionantes socioeconómicos y de la teoría del autor. La segunda sección se centra en la representación de la naturaleza como punto de entrada a un análisis del cine de mujeres portuguesas. Interpreta el corto documental *Atlas* (2013) de Margarida Cardoso como un estudio de caso sobre el uso del medio ambiente en el cine de mujeres portuguesas. Esta película hace un comentario sobre cuestiones de género, modificando sutilmente la tradición de vincular la mujer con la naturaleza en la cultura occidental.

Palabras clave: cine feminino; ecocine; Margarida Cardoso.

Abstract: This article discusses the notion of a specifically Portuguese women's cinema. The first section analyzes the concept of women's cinema in light of socio-economic constraints and of auteur theory. The second section focuses on the portrayal of nature as an entry point into an analysis of Portuguese women's cinema. It interprets Margarida Cardoso's short documentary *Atlas* (2013) as a case study for the use of the environment in Portuguese women's cinema to obliquely comment upon gender issues, going back to and subtly modifying the tradition of linking women and nature in Western culture.

Keywords: women's cinema; environmental cinema; Margarida Cardoso.

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Résumé : Cet article traite du cinéma portugais réalisé par des femmes. La première section analyse le concept de cinéma féminin à la lumière des contraintes socio-économiques et de la théorie de l'auteur. La deuxième section se concentre sur la représentation de la nature comme point d'entrée dans une analyse du cinéma des femmes portugaises. L'article interprète le court documentaire *Atlas* (2013) de Margarida Cardoso comme une étude de cas sur l'utilisation de l'environnement dans le cinéma de femmes portugaises. Ce film fait un commentaire sur les questions de genre, modifiant subtilement la tradition de lier les femmes à la nature dans la culture occidentale.

Mots-clés : cinéma féminin ; ecocinéma ; Margarida Cardoso.

A Portuguese Women's Cinema?

Is there such a thing as a Portuguese women's cinema? If we bracket the question of nationality and assume that we can talk about *Portuguese* cinema – a group of cinematic productions sharing a set of cultural coordinates and experiences that create the imagined community we call “Portugal” – the question remains as to how to define Portuguese *women's* cinema.¹ In which ways does it differ from cinema directed by men? And what is the heuristic value of discussing cinema based upon the gender of the filmmaker?

An obvious way to describe Portuguese women's cinema is simply as the collection of films made by women working in an industry that has been traditionally dominated by men. While women were pioneers in various areas of filmmaking, from directing both silent and sound movies to screenwriting, editing and acting, they were routinely sidelined throughout the history of movie making in favor of their male colleagues.² As Judith Redding and Victoria Brownworth point out, more women directed, produced, and otherwise worked in the film industry in Hollywood in 1915 than in 1995 (1997: 10). Women systematically find it more difficult than men to secure funding as directors, especially when it comes to feature films, which is why many end up

1. I bracket here the issue of what is meant by the genitive in “women's cinema.” The question always remains as to whether all movies made by women are part women's cinema, if the notion should be circumscribed to films concerned with women's issues or whether it applies only to movies predominantly addressed to a female audience. I assume that women's cinema means the cinema made by women.

2. For a brief history of pioneering women in cinema, see Redding and Brownworth (1997: 10-14). As these critics point out: “Between 1940 and 1980, fewer than one-fifth of one percent of all the movies released by Hollywood studios were directed by women, as opposed to nearly fifty percent in 1920. It could be said there has been a celluloid ceiling for women in Hollywood and other major studio systems around the world. At the end of the first century of filmmaking, women have only been directing in Hollywood again in the last twenty years, and their numbers remain pitifully few. Women still represent fewer than ten percent of directors *worldwide* and only about six percent in Hollywood. What began as an equal opportunity employment venture for women remains, as the millenium approaches, a male-dominated field in which women are still the exception where once they were the rule” (14).

as independent filmmakers or focus on less expensive cinematic genres, such as documentary (Redding and Brownworth, 1997: 8).³

The participation of women in the Portuguese film industry has been less studied than the case of Hollywood or other European film traditions. It is likely that Portugal's semi-peripheral modernity and the long, socially conservative New State dictatorship (1933-1974) both contributed to delaying female participation in movie making. The country had to wait until 1946 to see its first film directed by a woman: Bárbara Virginia's feature-length fiction *Three Days without God* (*Três Dias sem Deus*). It is significant that only 26 minutes of image from this film have been preserved; the soundtrack of the movie, as the soundtrack of the only other film Virginia directed, the short documentary *Village of Boys* (*Aldeia dos Rapazes*, 1946), have been lost. While critical and public attention has recently turned to Virginia's work – a documentary about her life titled *Who is Bárbara Virgínia* (*Quem é Bárbara Virgínia*, Luísa Sequeira) was released in 2017 – her position as an absolute exception in the male-dominated milieu of Portuguese filmmaking in the 1940s speaks volumes of the difficulties women faced to thrive in the industry. Portuguese women's cinema, then, is at a basic level the filmography of a group of women who are, even if unwittingly, the inheritors of this history of gender imbalance.

Still, as Alison Butler astutely notes, “[w]omen's cinema is a notoriously difficult concept to define” (2002: 1), “a complex critical, theoretical and institutional construction, brought into existence by audiences, film-makers, journalists, curators and academics and maintained only by their continuing interest (2002: 2). The first underlying assumption in the notion of “women's cinema” and, by extension, of “Portuguese women's cinema,” is that the direc-

3. As Barbara Quart argues, women's participation in the film industry has been circumscribed to some tasks: “The two major creative areas of film in which women have always had an assured and important place, acting and editing, involve women in functions entirely compatible with their traditional social roles. Women as spectacle marks female acting performances from the very earliest cinema; and editors (often women) serve directors (almost always men), supportively helping them realize their visions” (1988: 2). Yvonne Tasker points out that “women find it tougher to make films—and, crucially, to make more than one film—than men. This is the case in the commercial cinema, where a track record of achievement matters a great deal, and in the seemingly relentlessly author-led independent sector” (2010: 217). Redding and Brownworth add that “the rules for women directors differ vastly from those for men. [...] women have a much tougher battle to get funding, garner a good distribution deal or achieve bankable (or historical) status as a director. Although women now enter film schools at a rate almost equal with men, they remain far less likely to get jobs in the industry or to be able to make movies, whether within the studio system or independently” (1997: 10). In addition, a movie flop seems to impact a woman director's career far more extensively than it would a man's: “When a man makes a bad film or a box-office bomb, it's simply a bad movie; that failure doesn't translate into a conception that all men are bad directors. In fact, in Hollywood and other systems, one bomb doesn't even necessarily mean that particular male director is considered bad; invariably, he will get the opportunity to direct another film. But when a woman makes a movie that doesn't do well, then all women are suspect” (Redding and Brownworth, 1997: 9).

tor is the central figure in a movie and that she indelibly marks the entire film. In the case of cinema, which is by definition a collaborative art, with producers, screenwriters, actors, camera-people, and so on, all playing crucial roles in the final product, this is not an uncontroversial postulation. By conceiving of the existence of a Portuguese *women's* cinema we are implicitly espousing so-called "auteur" (or should we say "autrice"?) film theory, developed in the 1950s. While acknowledging the impact of social circumstances in filmmaking, auteur theory claimed that, akin to the author of a novel or a poem, the film director's vision is what determines the movie as a whole.

Feminist film criticism has struggled with this emphasis on auteur theory at a time when literary studies, whence the concept originated, has moved beyond biographical and author-based interpretations in the aftermath of the "death of the author" proclaimed, among others, by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Yvonne Tasker summarizes this predicament: "[w]hile I agree absolutely that women filmmakers matter for a feminist cultural politics, it can be difficult to establish precisely why, not least since authorship is often regarded as a methodology that film studies has in many ways moved beyond" (2010: 213). Tasker goes on to list the disadvantages of auteur-inspired criticism – "[a]t worst reductive, at best naive, auteurism privileges the authored text over the complexities of context" (2010: 213) – only to conclude that, in spite of its pitfalls, taking the gender of the director into account and, in case of her particular study, paying attention to the history of female filmmaking, renders visible a body of work that has hitherto been mostly relegated to the margins of film history.⁴

Building upon Tasker's insights, one should note that auteur theory is particularly apt for the analysis of Portuguese women's cinema. The notion was developed in relation to art and avant-garde film, smaller-scale productions in which the director has more control over the various stages of the movie-making process than in the case of, for instance, a Hollywood blockbuster. Because of the constraints of funding and the small size of the Portuguese film market, most Portuguese movies are, in effect, auteur productions that largely depend on the efforts of the film director to get off the ground.

4. In Tasker's words: "the work of feminist film historians in documenting the contribution of women to the film industry represents not only an important attempt to write women's history but a rejection of the claims made by, or more typically on behalf of, one person – the male director – to have priority over the text" (213). She goes on to add: "I wish to make a case here for a sustained consideration of female filmmakers and their work. I acknowledge the irony of a situation in which the achievement of some measure of visibility for women directors dovetails so neatly with the falling out of favor of authorship criticism. And yet I would still insist that the female filmmaker remains a potent figure whose iconic presence has to do with the very possibility of a distinct women's cinema. She is significant in terms of her visibility within a field that remains male dominated" (2010: 214).

But deploying auteur theory for the study of Portuguese women's cinema depends on a second underlying assumption, namely, that there is a specifically female mode of filmmaking. For Maggie Humm, "invoking the importance of authorship in the current postmodern crisis of representation might seem a curiously old fashioned project," but she still emphasizes that authorship offers "strategically useful tools for feminist film study," in that it makes "a firm decision that gender shapes signature and that there is an aesthetic difference in the way in which gendered signatures write" (1997: 110). Humm is not alone in this stance. Barbara Quart also believes that "a woman's voice has different things to express, in a different way, even if the differences cannot always be defined" (1988: xiii).⁵ Similarly, for Redding and Brownworth "[s]eeing the world through a female lens may make the film inalterably and obviously female or may only subtly influence the film as a whole" (1997: 6). What unites these critics is the certainty that women directors leave a gender-marked trace in their work.

The debate about a specifically female mode of filmmaking, especially in the context of auteur theory, evokes the idea of "*écriture féminine*" – translated into English as "feminine writing," "female writing" or, simply, "women's writing" – a term coined by Hélène Cixous in her 1976 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." For Cixous, writing is "marked" and has been until recently dominated by "male writing," that is to say, a kind of writing "run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine-economy; that [...] is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction" (1976: 879). In an effort to counter the pernicious effects of "male writing" Cixous urges women to take to the pen and produce their own works of literature that would expose the dominant male system of belief for the exploitative ideology that it is and create a female-focused counter-narrative.

Following on Cixous's footsteps, we could speak of a "*cinéma féminin*" that presents a specific female take on the world. While Cixous's ideas run the risk of essentializing categories such as "man" and "woman," each of which would necessarily produce a certain kind of work of art, they might prove useful if considered in dialogue with feminist film criticism that regards movies as vehicles for the dissemination of a patriarchal ideology.⁶ In her ground-

5. Quart adds: "What quickly becomes apparent is that recent films by women directors have been doing nothing less than opening up literally new worlds on the screen, women's worlds, to which probably only a woman could provide entry in depth" (1988: 4).

6. Cixous's position is more nuanced than a crass essentialization, whereby a form of writing would be directly connected to biological sex. She acknowledges that some men produce what she defines as "women's writing" (she offers Jean Genet as an example). Conversely, not

breaking 1973 essay “Women’s Cinema as Counter-cinema,” Claire Johnston argues that Hollywood movies have been responsible for presenting stereotypical images of women and, therefore, have contributed to disseminating “sexist ideology itself, and the basic opposition which places man inside history and women as ahistorical and eternal.” Johnston’s research on the work of Dorothy Arzner, the only female director working in Hollywood between 1927 and 1943, is precisely a way to see how “films made by women within the Hollywood system [...] attempted by formal means to bring about a dislocation between sexist ideology and the text of the film” (2000: 30).

Women’s cinema can be viewed, in light of auteur theory, as films made by women in the context of a tradition that represents women as objects of the male gaze, devoid of psychological depth, who tend to fall neatly into one of two categories: the Vamp, the seductive femme fatale with loose morals, or the Straight Girl, destined to marriage and motherhood (Johnston, 2000: 30). The specifically female signature, women’s voice or vision that the different critics discussed above allude to in the case of women’s cinema, would therefore be nothing more than women directors’ efforts to craft their work in the context of patriarchal ideology. A study of Portuguese women’s cinema, then, would entail an attempt to understand in which ways Portuguese female directors have responded to long-held views of women both in society and, as a result, in their cinematic depiction. This is not tantamount to saying that all Portuguese women directors are interested in fighting patriarchy and in promoting women’s causes, nor that a feminist interpretation is the only possible way to approach their work.⁷ Such a stance would merely retrace a reduction-

all women would create “women’s writing” in the sense she attributes to the expression. Still, she appeals mostly to women to create a new kind of writing that would break from patriarchal models. A related issue is that the term “women’s writing” refers to a monolithic entity called “woman” that does not take into account subtler gender distinctions – lesbians, bisexual women, transgender people, and so on –, as well as class, race and other forms of discrimination. True, all women, independent of their sexual orientation, class or race have suffered from gender prejudice in one form or another. But such, more fine-grained, distinctions might make it difficult to define a unified women’s writing. A lesbian women’s writing might share more with a gay men’s text; a working class women’s more with a working-class men’s, and so on. Cixous’ answer to this quandary would be that the term “women’s writing” applies only to texts that explicitly promote a feminist agenda or, at least, put patriarchy into question. But would this not be a very reductive view of women’s writing? The very fact of writing could be regarded as an emancipatory gesture for a woman before the twentieth century and even texts by women who espouse the dominant ideology might prove to do so with a slight twist if we take the trouble to analyze them carefully. A final pitfall of Cixous’s notion of “women’s writing” is the danger of regarding works of art as mere vehicles for the dissemination of a certain worldview. Is the division between men’s and women’s writing all that useful for the interpretation of texts? As we all know, reading a text against the grain, searching for its blind spots – as Althusser and later Paul de Man have brilliantly suggested – often yields surprising results. A “men’s” text might end up teaching us a lot more about women’s emancipation than a “women’s” text.

7. As Butler points out: “Some of the most distinguished practitioners of women’s cinema have deliberately distanced themselves from the notion, for professional and/or political reasons, to avoid marginalisation or ideological controversy” (2002: 2).

ist view of women as only concerned with women-related issues, a view that feminism itself tries to move away from. Still, it does mean that Portuguese women directors share a certain number of socio-cultural coordinates that will leave an imprint in their filming. Even when not directly *reflecting* upon matters related to female emancipation, women's cinema *refracts* some of these questions.

In the second section of this article, I will focus on the portrayal of nature as an entry point into my analysis of Portuguese women's cinema. I will concentrate on Margarida Cardoso's short documentary *Atlas* (2013) as a case study for my discussion of the use of the environment in Portuguese women's cinema to obliquely comment upon gender issues, going back to and subtly modifying the tradition of linking women and nature in Western culture.

Portuguese Women's Cinema and the Environment: Margarida Cardoso's *Atlas*

A discussion of how Portuguese women's cinema depicts both women and the environment should have as its starting point the similarities between the portrayal of women and nature in Portuguese cinema in general. I will address this topic through the lens of Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking 1973 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she interprets the portrayal of women in Hollywood using a psychoanalytic framework. Mulvey argues that the depiction of female characters in cinema needs to take into account that women are both the object of male sexual desire and signify a threat of castration, and hence unpleasure. In order to deal with the menace that female bodies stand for, the representation of women either disavows castration and fetishizes women (scopophilic fetish, as in the cult of the female film star); or else gives in to sadism and devalues and punishes women (Mulvey, 1999: 840). Could Mulvey's framework be used, *mutatis mutandis*, to analyze depictions of landscapes and, more broadly, of nature in the Portuguese filmic tradition?

Nature is frequently feminized in Portuguese cinema. While the sexual tension inherent in the portrayal of women should, in principle, not apply to the environment, the rhetoric of sexual exploits is often used to describe the relationship between men and the land. Along these lines, the natural world is either presented as pure and pristine or as a land in need of development. In the latter case, nature is regarded a space to be conquered and shaped by masculinity, agriculture – tilling the land, sowing, and so on – being equated with a traditional view of human procreation, whereby men are the active and women the passive elements in the relationship. Portuguese movies therefore portray nature as either a benign entity that provides for human beings – the

fetishization of a beautiful, harmless natural world, in Mulvey's argument – or as an unpredictable force that thwarts human aspirations in films such as Leitão de Barros's *Maria do Mar* (1930), Jorge Brum do Canto's *A Canção da Terra* (1938) and *Lobos da Serra* (1942), to name but a few.⁸ In colonial propaganda films such as António Lopes Ribeiro's *Feitiço do Império* (1940) and Brum do Canto's *Chaimite* (1953), on the other hand, African nature is consistently depicted as wild and savage, requiring taming by enterprising male colonizers.

Given the traditional depiction of both women and nature in cinema as either a fetishized icon of pristine beauty *OR* as a threat in need of punishment and domesticating, how do Portuguese women directors navigate these stereotypes? To put in differently, and speaking more directly to the point of my argument, how do Portuguese women directors portray the environment in a way that subverts traditional views of the natural world? I will begin to answer this question through an analysis of Margarida Cardoso's short documentary *Atlas*. The movie, ostensibly about the port of Leixões, offers a novel way to look at the environment that avoids facile fetishizations of a paradisiac, pristine nature, while also sidestepping the master narrative of human civilization bringing order to an otherwise wild natural world. It is perhaps worth noting that many of the sequences from the film allude to *Manoel de Oliveira's* renowned short *Douro, Faina Fluvial* (1931), Oliveira's film reveling precisely in the tropes for depicting nature that I have just mentioned.

Cardoso's film employs two key strategies to reframe (quite literally) our perception of the natural world. The first, and perhaps the most obvious one, is the creation of a distancing effect, in the Brechtian sense of *Verfremdung*, whereby the sea, an omnipresent natural element in Portuguese topography, is seen through a different perspective. This effect is achieved, for example, through the use of inverted shots, that is to say, shots of the world upside down, when filming the sea. Another means to reach this goal is by filming with half the camera inside and another half outside of the water, the focus often shifting between the underwater world of fish – in murky waters, not crystal-blue, transparent ones – and the above water scenario of ships approaching the harbor. The film also includes several reverse motion sequences that halt the normal flow of time and lead viewers to dwell on the contemplation of the various port activities. By filming at dusk, at night and ending at dawn – Oliveira's *Douro, Faina Fluvial* begins at dawn and ends at dusk – Cardoso also inverts the usual rhythms of the natural world. The filmmaker brings the sea center stage: the water is no longer just the background where the

8. For an analysis of the depiction of nature in Portuguese cinema from the 1930s-1960s, see Vieira, 2013: 81-124. For a discussion of women in cinema from the same period, see Vieira, 2013: 151-75.

action takes place but becomes the focus of the action. By creating a sense of detachment between viewers and the sea, though, Cardoso frees this natural element from traditional associations of both pristine beauty and of danger, which can be found, for instance, in Leitão de Barros's *Maria do Mar*. The sea becomes open to resignification in its various social and aesthetic dimensions: as enabler of economic development, source of human sustenance, home to a variety of fish, object of artistic contemplation, and so on.

A second strategy Cardoso uses to undo traditional views of the natural world is to highlight the often-negative impact of human action upon the environment. For instance, toward the middle of the movie we find a sequence depicting the moon at night, against a pitch-black sky. Such images evoke notions of the natural sublime that go back, at least, to the Romantic period. As the sequence continues, though, the bright light of a lighthouse completely outshines the moon for a few seconds. The moon again comes back into view when the light of the lighthouse goes off and the process is repeated a few times. The human-made light eclipses that of nature, in the same way that human actions are often predicated on a distancing from and forgetting of the limits of the natural world. In another, more obvious criticism of environmental destruction, the film includes a still shot of a pile of garbage in a garbage dump, filmed at night, the garbage reflected upon the water. Arguably an ironic take on images of snow-capped mountains reflected upon lakes, this shot underlines the waste that the operations of the Leixões port generates. It adds an element of ecological awareness to celebratory images of the ocean as an unlimited source of natural resources that we find in earlier Portuguese movies.

Atlas opens with found footage of a young boy trying to climb a steep rock and then walking over another rock near the sea. The movie then cuts to black-and-white images of waves in the ocean and immediately to a woman's face turning sideways. Only then do we see the first large container ship in an upside-down image, as a faux point-of-view shot. This unconventional opening for a film about a port makes it a point to highlight the presence of children and women in a context usually associated to masculinity. The undoing of ready-made gender associations goes hand in hand with a fresh approach to nature, moving away from stereotypical depictions of the environment as either beautiful and inviting or savage and menacing. Cardoso follows in a line of Portuguese women filmmakers, from Noémia Delgado (*Máscaras*, 1976), through Margarida Cordeiro (in her work with António Reis: *Trás-os-Montes*, 1976; *Ana*, 1982; *Rosa de Areia*, 1989) to Teresa Villaverde, who question cinematic tropes for depicting women and the natural world in Portuguese cinema. Her work points in the direction of a specifically Portuguese women's

cinema that dialogues with conventions for portraying both femininity and the environment in earlier movies by male directors and invites viewers to see women and nature anew.

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- Máscaras* (1976), by Noémia Delgado.
- Transe* (2006), by Teresa Villaverde.