

Fernando Morais's *Olga* translated for the screen: a revolutionary in Rio?

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ABSTRACT:

A comparison with the eponymous novel by Fernando Morais (1985), upon which the film *Olga* (Jayme Monjardim, 2004) is based, illustrates how its reliance on the production values of the *telenovela* means it falls into the trap that the book avoids: that of representing the communist political figure of Olga Benario as unable to balance her personal and political lives.

Keywords: *Olga*. Jayme Monjardim. Fernando Morais. Adaptation. *Telenovela*.

Introduction

Long-running financial and logistical difficulties seem to have delayed the adaptation of Morais's extremely complex narrative with potentially spiralling costs. The realisation of this epic story into an on-budget commercial film success with almost ready-made audiences seems to have been favoured by the *telenovela* style. This is not to dismiss the *telenovela* genre as an inferior art form. The point is that, whilst the adaptation uses some of the genre's technical elements to ensure entertainment value and a firm suture between text and spectator, what it fails to do is to engage with the historical relevance of its subject or the social and political contexts of the day, as *telenovelas* consistently do.

The production – using an intrusive extra-diegetic soundtrack, dramatic lighting, incessant close-ups, melodramatic dialogue and constant shot/counter shot exchanges – celebrates Olga's transition from hard, cold, militant to lover, and finally, mother. The emotional and melodramatic production style as well as screen writer and producer Rita Buzzar's clear exaltation of motherhood as a redemptory state for Olga 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 focus on her other roles, as a woman and a soldier, denies her overall representation as a multifaceted, yet unified character. As the story resonates strongly with Brazil's recent political history (a country that only returned to democracy in 1985), another argument then arises: 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*.

Olga's story by Fernando Morais

Morais's account of Olga's life is one of Brazil's most successful publications selling near to 600 million copies at home and being published in over 20 countries (BEZERRA, 2004). 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, p. 9).

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” (McFARLANE 1996, p. 8), we can analyse the way in which the life of this heroine, as documented by Morais, is represented on screen. Morais’s novel is the only text that brings together otherwise scattered information about Olga and which gives equal weight to her various roles as mother, lover and political agitator. In fact he 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).¹ The style of the book is somewhere between journalism, political thriller, and historical document. Most importantly it shows Olga as the powerful political force she was but does not isolate her from the world of human emotions.

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. It presents an alternative, though more dramatised, version of Olga’s life.²

Brazilian journalist William Waack’s *Camaradas: Nos arquivos de Moscou: A história secreta da revolução brasileira de 1935* (2004), 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’s 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, p. 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 abriam os arquivos em Moscou” (Waack, 2004, p. 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” (WAACK, 2004, p. 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” (WAACK, 2004, p. 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 (WAACK, 2004, p. 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 (WAACK, 2004, p. 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 posited with an enthusiastic rather than a great political mind (WAACK, 2004, p. 103). Waack does however concede that Olga’s work in 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's lover.

Ao contrário de outros profissionais da revolução, a atitude e a participação políticas de Olga eram marcados por vigoroso idealismo. Embora não tenha deixado escritos “políticos” [...] transparece em suas cartas um vibrante entusiasmo por uma causa que, para outros militantes nas estruturas onde ela atuava, não passava de palavreado vazio” (WAACK, 2004, p. 104).

Though fascinating, all this has little bearing, in fact it perhaps only more firmly illustrates Olga's misrepresentation in the film version of her life. The very enigma she represents, her varied political profile and the fact that she has rightly earned her place as an important example of militant womanhood, suggest that her filmic representation should reflect these elements. It is irrelevant whether or not Waack's version is correct or whether Morais's and Werner's versions are romanticised, because based on the information we do have regarding Olga's life, it is clear she was a strong example of political womanhood. For example there is no doubt she was a committed Communist, that 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, including piloting and parachuting training, and 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 epistolary evidence between Olga and Prestes and Olga and Prestes's mother, Dona Leocádia, during her time in prison confirms she did indeed achieve this balance (MORAIS, 2005, p. 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.³

Taking into account these various representations of Olga's multifaceted character, along with evidence from Morais's 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 and how this is transposed onto the screen.

A Brazilian “super production” and a telenovela style

As well as working very fast, he knows how to communicate to the public the emotional content of each scene (BUZZAR apud MONJARDIM, 2004, p. 23-24).⁴

Since its launch in October 1985, Fernando Morais's novel has been an attractive choice for cinematic adaptation.⁵ 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 *TV Globo*, joined

with Buzzar's production company *Nexus* and eventually the film became a co-production between *Nexus*, *Globofilmes*, *Europa filmes* and *Lumière*, 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, p. 23-24, BEZERRA, 2004, p. 26-28).

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 soap opera *A Casa das Sete Mulheres*, which also starred Camilla Morgado, the actress chosen to play Olga (INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE, Production notes).⁶

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* wealth of talent and experience was indispensable to finishing the project on time and on budget. In fact technically the film is to be praised, and is extremely well accomplished; the production glossy and tight.⁷ The need for any location shooting was obviated by filming all 184 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 an isopor machine. 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 European/Russian winter (SCREEN INTERNATIONAL, 2004, p. 23-24, BEZERRA, 2004, p. 26-28, PINTO, 2003, p. 35).

Although the film is 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's 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. 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.⁸

Olga: rejecting the woman

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 is that Olga comes across as a fragmented character rather than the unified example of womanhood that she was. However for Olga, as for many women in her position, 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 mulheres, 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, p. 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, i.e. 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 representation is how the film deals with her rejection of the traditional female role but does not pay sufficient attention to the reasoning behind this. In Morais’s 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” (MORAIS, 2005, p. 35-36). However, this is supplemented by the background information as to why Olga rejects the feminine traits deemed appropriate to her sex, including why she rejects the idea of marriage, that is, due to 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 idéia 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:

– Não nos casamos exatamente por isso: porque nos amamos. Eu jamais serei propriedade de alguém (MORAIS, 2005, p. 36).

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 burguesa fútil, pegar uma coisa de ser um soldado mesmo, [...] ela tirava, ela lutava, ela soltava de paraquedas, para encontrar de novo uma outra mulher”.⁹ This explanation of why Olga appears to reject her womanhood is absent from a film which represents Olga as a dysfunctional character.

What exacerbates the lack of insight into Olga’s behaviour and how her personal beliefs were influenced by her political beliefs, is the way 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’s 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, the opening sequence in the film shows Olga as a child of around 12 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 an important part of her personal history. 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 ("Não sabia que você gostava tanto de reuniões familiares"), suggest she has a frivolous attitude to family life. The truth is 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, p. 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 her 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 scrutinizes Olga's anti-family, anti-feminine ideals by lacing her dialogue with sarcasm, and failing to show her internal thought processes, obscures the real reasons behind her behaviour.

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, p. 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-quadras, 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 at this point, which perhaps could be conveyed 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 30 seconds. Furthermore, the compression of Olga’s military prowess into a 30 second mini-montage, in comparison with the significant amount of narrative space allotted to questioning her womanhood, de-emphasizes her political skills and highlights her inability to reconcile these with her personal life.

Olga and Prestes

The representation of Olga as not a “real” woman, or 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 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, p. 56).

The slow undoing of her hard, emotionless exterior is completed by Prestes during their journey from Moscow to Brazil. 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 woman in love and Communist party member. As Olga and Prestes board a ship sailing for the USA, Olga becomes lost, confused and weakened and the camera emphasises these difficulties. In fact the dancing scenes humiliate and infantilise Olga: as she struggles with the dancing, she also struggles with the intimacy that is brought to the scene through music, a variation on the violin theme that punctuates 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 upbringing, to physically take her around the dance floor.

All of this behaviour seems to greatly contradict Prestes's 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". The conversation, featuring incessant shot/counter-shot exchange, then continues, with Olga further contradicting Prestes remarks. As he compliments her 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 emphasize 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 (15 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 historic 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 side, as if she feels her political credentials have been compromised. For example after they recite a poem together Prestes comments "Essa poesia se parece com você" to which she replies after a loaded 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 cannot cope with male attention or that she confuses fiction with reality is patronising and suggests she is ill-equipped for this 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's 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.¹⁰ Whilst on their travels they always adhered to the behaviour their disguise demanded, even if it meant wearing expensive clothes. In this respect Morais details of a shopping trip in Paris (2005, p. 59-60).¹¹ 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 (MORAIS, 2005, p. 57-62).

In Brazil: Olga as Prestes's lover

After Olga and Prestes begin their relationship in earnest Olga's representation becomes 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 disface.

Sabo: Mas parece que este disfarce não esta 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 never thought she would have time to go to the beach. 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 us) to see that she is foolish to reject a traditional lifestyle.

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

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

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?

Olga: Meu dever era proteger a vida dele. Com a minha se fosse preciso.

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

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, 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. 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 is never mentioned anywhere explicitly. We can therefore conclude that this is another narrative device designed to separate Olga from her political context, in order 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 compromise Olga's representation.

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 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 further two months, so indispensable had she become in the conspiracy of 1935 (WAACK, 2004, p. 101, 182-183).

Pregnancy and motherhood

Despite Olga’s filmic realisation at times contradicting the idea, Rita Buzzar clearly sees her as a positive example of political womanhood who manages to carefully balance all aspect of her life. This is exemplified on one 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 apaxiona 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 (BUZZAR, 2007).

In this statement Buzzar clearly explains Olga’s triple role as soldier, lover and mother and her ability to simultaneously deal with all these positions. However, in terms of the transposition of this multifaceted example of womanhood into the film, there are clearly contradictions.

The first issue to discuss is that the discovery of Olga’s pregnancy is consistent with her poor representation 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 emphasis on her internal thoughts reveals more of her character than is previously shown. Further complicating this argument however is that whilst motherhood provides Olga with access to her own consciousness, Buzzar’s suggestion of motherhood as *the* fundamental element of Olga’s character, something which is strongly evident in the film, undermines her other roles which are of equal importance.

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, p. 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" (2005, p.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?

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 desconfio 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".

In the book, as in the film, Olga embroiders cardigans and knits baby clothes. However, in Morais's account she asks one of her cell mates, José Gay da Cunha, 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, p. 156-157, 163-164).

Although we cannot deny that Olga must have felt overwhelmed when she discovered her pregnancy, other emotional milestones in her life, like when she left her home and family, must also have sparked a similar reaction, something which is glossed over in the film. The idea that she had never felt love or elation and that motherhood some how "unlocks" Olga's emotions, over-emphasizes 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 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, é 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 internal thoughts. Whilst her hard, militant exterior remains, other elements also emerge which clearly show her suffering as well as the strong resolve that enables her to continue with her difficult life. Although her voice is deep and her expression fixed as her 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. 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. The scene where she gives birth unaided, reciting words of encouragement to herself whilst Nazi doctors stand around silently, also illustrates her inner resolve. 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.

This is also evident in the overlaying of the letters between Prestes, Olga and Prestes mother, which again reveal Olga as a multifaceted yet unified character. 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 again melodramatically rendered, which has consequences for her representation. 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 as reproduced in Morais's 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 alimente 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 possa dar-lhe o melhor da minha força vital, da força que eu possuo.

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 a haunting vocal. 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's 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's lover and mother to Anita Leocádia and presents her as a unified example of political womanhood. Most importantly it provides evidence of why Olga behaves as she does.

In the film *Olga* is presented as continually in turmoil, flitting between a hard, cold, soldier and an emotionally compromised woman. Without insight into why this may be the case, and limited access to her internal thoughts, evident in narrative devices, her character becomes fragmented and her representation compromised. It is the *telenovela* style however, employed to produce the film on-time, on-budget and as a guaranteed 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. 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. The failure of the production team to demonstrate the varied yet unified traits of *Olga Benario* is worrying for the representation of women in the new Brazilian cinema and particularly for the representation of militant women who are yet to find a voice during *Retomada* film.

***Olga*, de Fernando Morais, na tela do cinema: uma revolucionária no Rio?**

RESUMO:

Uma comparação com o romance homônimo de Fernando Morais (1985), no qual o filme *Olga* (Jayme Monjardim, 2004) se baseia, demonstra que o uso dos valores da telenovela fez com que o filme caísse nas armadilha que o livro evita: representar a figura política comunista de *Olga Benario* como incapaz de harmonizar sua vida pessoal e política.

Palavras-chave: *Olga*. Jayme Monjardim. Fernando Morais. Adaptação. Telenovela.

End Notes

- * Doctor of Philosophy in Film Studies, School of Languages, Linguistics and Film, Queen Mary, University of London.
- ¹ See also *Comaradas e companheiros, memória e história do PCB* (Pandolfi, 1995, p. 128).
- ² There is also a documentary film of her life *Olga Benario - Ein Leben für die Revolution / Olga Benario - A life for the Revolution* (GALIP IYTANIR, 2004), which also features interviews with William Waack, Morais and other prominent biographers of her and Prestes's life.
- ³ This letter is reproduced on the last page of Morais's novel (2005, p. 240).
- ⁴ Taken from an article in *Screen International*, cited in bibliography.
- ⁵ A newspaper article charting the various "wars" between Morais's publishing company Alfa Omega, film director Sílvio 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, 1986, np).
- ⁶ See bibliography. More recently Monjardim has been involved in prime time *telenovela Páginas da vida* (2006/7)
- ⁷ 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, p. 9).
- ⁸ Director Monjardim'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, p. 23).
- ⁹ Taken from an interview I conducted with Buzzar in São Paulo in March 2007. All subsequent comments from Buzzar originate from this interview.
- ¹⁰ 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" (2004, p. 111).
- ¹¹ Waack writes of this episode, based on an interview Prestes's son Iuri Ribeiro, conducted with his father: "*Olga* dedicou-se alegremente em Paris a comprar vários vestidos longos, pensando nos coquetéis e jantares a bordo do navio. 'Dinheiro é para gastar e não para guardar', dizia a Prestes" (2004, p. 110).

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