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THE ROLE OF THE WOMEN IN THE FILM EMBODIMENT OF EVIL¹

O PAPEL DAS MULHERES NO FILME A ENCARNAÇÃO DO DEMÔNIO

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ABSTRACT

This text aims to study the role of women within the work of José Mojica Marins as a filmmaker, particularly in the trilogy that involved his main character, Zé do Caixão, or Coffin Joe. To do so, we will discuss his filmography through theoretical contributions on the female figure in the horror genre, and on the cinematographic productions of this director. The work consists of a qualitative analysis and thus involves an introductory and main analysis of the movie Embodiment of Evil. The conclusion points to a context of structural male chauvinism present at the time when Marins started working with movies, which favored explorations of the female body in a violent way.

Keywords: Coffin Joe, horror cinema, Brazilian cinema.

RESUMO

Este texto tem como objetivo estudar o papel da mulher na obra de José Mojica Marins como cineasta, em especial na trilogia que envolveu seu personagem principal, Zé do Caixão. Para tanto, discutiremos sua filmografia por meio de aportes teóricos sobre a figura feminina no gênero terror e sobre as produções cinematográficas deste diretor. O trabalho consiste em uma análise qualitativa, envolvendo, portanto, uma análise introdutória e principal do filme A Encarnação do Demônio. A conclusão aponta para um contexto de machismo estrutural presente na época em que Marins começou a trabalhar com cinema, que privilegiava explorações do corpo feminino de forma violenta.

Palavras-chave: Zé do Caixão, cinema de horror, cinema brasileiro.

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INTRODUCTION

Melo and Moura point out that monsters and imaginary creatures were already presented in mythological, religious, and legendary narratives⁴. Like this, they formed a kind of fantastic symbolism, impressing the ancient cultures such as the Greeks, Egyptians, Indians, and Persians. Going further, in the Middle Ages, these fantastic figures reached European fairy tales, popularized in the 17th and 18th centuries, permeated with elements of fear, respect and control. Dante Alighieri, for example, was horrified by his travels through hell, in a moral journey that showed the supernatural horrors which deviated from the Western Christian faith⁴. Monsters, as a category that encompasses different types of antagonists, were considered unnatural. Thus, they scare because they do not fit and violate a scheme of social and natural order. Besides that, they threaten common knowledge and, consequently, the social hierarchy⁵.

Witches, for example, are popular and complex characters of terror, that in addition involve questions of gender. Among the countless accusations of witchcraft, many of sexual nature, women were accused of relations with the Devil, of causing male impotence, or even the disappearance of the penis. Going further, it becomes clear that there is an approximation between feminine aspect and elements seen as polluted, like menstrual blood⁶. And it is worth mentioning that fluids, like blood, are very important for the cultural construction of terror, since these cultural representations place the viewer facing the abject, pointing to the fragility of the body⁶.

Following Larocca, there are cycles of horror, where each period privileges a certain theme, plot, or type of antagonist⁷. Therefore, elaborating a web of relations between genders, ethnicities, classes, and sexualities.

When we write an essay on the idea of fear in contemporary Brazilian cinema,

⁴ Marcelo Briseno Marques de Melo and Giovani Pagliusi Lobato e Moura, "A estética da personagem de horror no Brasil: reflexões sobre Zé do Caixão e O Morto do Pântano," *Revista Ícone* 17, no. 3, (December, 2018): 380-390.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 382.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.



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we must keep in mind, for example, the dominant Catholic formation of the country and the differences between Brazilian cinema in relation to the gigantic cinematographic machine that is the United States. That is not only about money, but it's about history, culture etc. too.

This essay is justified for two reasons: firstly, because ideological factors can be studied through cinema⁸. So, the way José Mojica Marins, as a Brazilian film-maker and an actor, treats religion and women tells us something, tells us about the way women can be represented, in the culture, out of the rings of power, dominance, and this still dialogues with the chauvinism of Brazilian society⁹. Is the Brazilian woman often reduced to a sexual symbol in the horror? Secondly, Mojica is one of the best-known Brazilian directors of the horror genre, but there is not a large academic bibliography on him, or his well-known character Zé do Caixão (translated as "Coffin Joe"), neither in Portuguese nor other languages¹⁰. Coffin Joe is the Mojica Marins' perverse alter ego and played by Mojica himself.

According to film scholar José Aguiar Oliveira da Silva, the success is due to the fact that the movies were released in the 1980s in VHS format and received attention at exhibitions in international film festivals in the 1990s¹¹. The character was a certain kind of popular culture product and seen by many as a trash cinema. As Mojica Marins commented, it was only after this international success that his work miraculously passed from trash to cult¹².

The present text is an introduction, and analysis, of the movie Embodiment of

⁸ For more information see: Slavoj Žižek, *Event: A Philosophical Journey Through A Concept* (London: Melville House, 2014) and the *Lacrimae Rerum: Ensaios sobre cinema modern* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018).

⁹ Mojica Marins is considered one of the most popular cult directors of the horror and exploitation films of the 50's and 60's in Brazil.

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that the filmography of José Mojica Marins is very extensive and varied from westerns until exploitation films, so this essay only focuses on a small clipping within his work.

¹¹ José Aguiar Oliveira da Silva, "A eterna Noite Negra de 'O estranho mundo de Zé do Caixão,'" *Veredas: Revista da Associação Internacional de Lusitanistas* 31, (January-June 2019): 119.

¹² José Mojica Marins, "A maldição de Zé do Caixão – Entrevista com José Mojica Marins," interview by the site *Jovem Nerd*, *Nerdcast*, no. 124 (2008).



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Evil (2008)¹³. A very unique movie in Mojica's career, for adding a production with much larger budget, than his previous productions, and which, at the same time, uses his classic character. It's like watching Christopher Lee come back, decades later, to play Dracula again.

This essay will focus specifically on the way this movie portrays women. The choice of this theme evolves the question of the exploitation, linked with the female body in many horror films. An exploitation that exists in many Brazilian movies too, if we take Mojica's generation as a basis. Much of what was done in the 80s has become cliché and parody in current movies. Did he, Mojica, just get outdated?

WHO IS COFFIN JOE?

According to the film scholar Marko Monteiro, Coffin Joe already makes the premises of the film *At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul*, or *A Meia-Noite Levarei Sua Alma*, very clear from the very first moments¹⁴. Life for him, Coffin Joe, is nothing more than the continuity of blood, meaning bearing a son born from the "perfect woman." As an amoral character, he seeks only materialism, a continuity of blood. As a result, he appears as a "bad guy" for rejecting society's morals and, instead, valuing ideas such as instinct and strength. Coffin Joe believes in his intellectual superiority to those around him, thus Monteiro, along with the scholars Couto and Gerbase, see similarities between the character and a figure of Nietzschean ideas; and here we speak, generically, of certain elitism and criticism against the Christianity.

Couto and Gerbase make a parallel between the character and a typical blasphemer of modernity: the upper-class intellectual, who goes against religion and norms. It is important to mention that Brazilian society is deeply hierarchical, as shown by a series of Brazilian social interpreters of reality, so the eccentricities of the upper-

¹³ The original title of the film is *Encarnação do Demônio*, it has been translated as *Devil's Reincarnation* and *Embodiment of Evil*.

¹⁴ Marko Monteiro, "Zé do Caixão: Humano, demasiado humano," *Viso: Cadernos de estética aplicada*, no 6, (January-June 2009): 4-5.



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class can be themes for many stories and suspicions.

Therefore, there are also similarities and points of contact between the figure of Coffin Joe and Sade's libertines, while blasphemous and violent figures, as Couto and Gerbase also point out. The point that can unite Nietzsche and Sade to Coffin Joe is through the understanding of the character as the figure of a freethinker, who contests religion and traditions, putting other alien ideas in their place. As a result, frightening the most conservative or reactionary sectors of society. Sade, here, refers to a figure that unites polemics, violence and sex in art, like Mojica, we believe. A curiosity for the forbidden.

According to Silva, even though Mojica Marins grew up surrounded by horror stories in foggy European landscapes and its abandoned castles, like in the 19th century horror novels or in the old Hammer's movies, he created a typically Brazilian villain. He constructed a character with a recognizable appearance and oral connection with the public in Brazil, with the idiosyncrasies of Catholicism and religious syncretism. Horror, comics etc. are seen as underdogs, so it makes sense that this character was only really valued in Brazil when he gained an international endorsement from Americans and Europeans.

Coffin Joe's trilogy began with the film *At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul*, released in 1964, which achieved great popular appeal at the time, despite the fact that José Mojica Marins did not fully recoup his investment¹⁵. Coffin Joe is characterized by his long fingernails, black cape, and top hat; and, he use of this type of clothing was extremely uncomfortable for such a very hot place like Rio de Janeiro, as Marins explained.

Coffin Joe is a gravedigger, feared and hated by the residents of the city in which he lives. The main plot of this film is how his woman, unable to conceive, becomes an object of fury, and, in a certain point of the plot, he kills her and many other people in a blind journey to produce a perfect child. The film ends with Coffin Joe's

¹⁵ Ibid., 6



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death as a victim of the souls he disturbed. This is a form of divine punishment against his amorality and against his acts of sadism and murder, as Monteiro points out¹⁶. Marins has also clarified that there is a moral element to the film, since Coffin Joe is punished, and, therefore, violence does not pay in the movie¹⁷. Couto and Gerbase point out that the character draws the attention of the public, mostly catholic at the time, for this mixture of disgust and curiosity.

This Night I'll Possess Your Corpse (1967), the second movie of the trilogy, continues where the previous movie left off. After being presumed dead, the character reappears healing from wounds caused by the vengeful spirits, thus he is acquitted of his crimes due to lack of evidence¹⁸. Back in town, he persists in his quest for the continuity of blood, kidnapping several women and subjecting them to a series of tortures, to define who will carry his perfect child.

In the end, cornered by the townspeople, he drowns in a swamp where his victims were hidden. The third movie, Embodiment of Evil from 2008, comes after a long hiatus caused by financing problems, as well as political persecution during the dictatorship, 1964 to 1985. The dictatorship lasted which greatly harmed the director's ability to work, along with the fact that José Mojica Marins was in jail several times. About this period, we have to talk about how the dictatorship, initially, was extremely moralistic. "Cultural subversion" was seen as a possible "communist weapon", so this was the "Golden Age" of cultural censorship implemented by the state. Great artists were arrested at that time, including very popular names internationally, like Paulo Coelho. Cassandra Rios, one of the pioneers of writing LGBTI+ novels in the country, has been censored countless times. And it is difficult, even today, to know how many

¹⁶ Mojica Marins, "A maldição de Zé do Caixão," n/p.

¹⁷ Couto and Gerbase, "Zé do Caixão," 262.

¹⁸ Larocca (2018, 34) speaks of a certain conservatism of the 1970s in the face of feminism and the sexual revolution of previous years. The 70s and 80s produced a huge number of films with women being silenced and humiliated. Larocca (2019) speaks of the 1980s as a return of militant and religious conservatism, which opposes a certain ideal type of representation of the 1960s and 1970s as a time of rebellion, with the hippies, Black power movements, the feminist movement (in its second wave), the anti-war movement, and countless other criticisms of US order and structure.



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were arrested, tortured and killed. In the 80's, Mojica was so without resources that he even had to direct porn movies, with minimal budgets. These productions were so tasteless that Mojica even directed a sex scene between a woman, the actress Vânia Bonier, and a dog, in 1985.

In this way, the end of the trilogy was produced many years later, with a certain chasm between the first production and the last one, something like the *Three Mothers* from the Italian filmmaker Dario Argento.

In this third production, we see again that the character did not die, but was arrested for murder, and has spent the last 40 years in prison. Freed on the streets of São Paulo, he once again begins his search for the perfect woman to carry his child.

THE WOMEN OF EMBODIMENT OF EVIL

As Larocca points out, terror produced through violence against the female body is nothing new. The author sees an increase in cases of violence against the female body in the horror movies of the 70's¹⁹; she points to an increase in nude scenes and scenes depicting women being raped and brutally murdered. At a time when there is an emphasis on the different types of women that exist in society, horror movie moves towards the clichés, like the final girl (the “good girl” that survives until the end).

It is in the 1990s and 2000s that it is possible to talk about the beginning of a new cycle, bringing changes and dialoguing with a new young audience. So, in 2008, *Coffin Joe* reappeared onto a unique sum: from an older cinema, as a direct continuation of a movie from the 60s, but also dialoguing with a more violent and extreme cinema, with exaggerated and anachronistic elements at the same time.

The film begins with a narration by Coffin Joe, explaining, again, his materialistic motivations and search for a woman etc. In sequence, we see the policemen freeing Zé from jail. This moment creates suspense, because it takes time for Coffin Joe to appear and it shows the police station as an old, dirty, and dark place.

¹⁹ *Devil's Reincarnation*, directed by José Mojica Marins, written by José Mojica Marins, DVD. São Paulo, SP: Fox Video, 2008.



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In addition, this scene shows the overall aesthetic of the movie.

There is the toxic masculinity of the police, where the director of the prison shouts, curses and says that any policeman who does not behave well, and is afraid, will go to the queer street, a rua das bichas. This is in dialogue with another scene, where a policeman, upon seeing the amount of people that Zé do Caixão killed, thinks to himself why there was no “real man” to kill the “mother fucker” while he was in jail. Thus, along with the overt misogyny, there is also a negative association with the LGBTI+ universe in the film.

The first thing you see of Zé do Caixão are his long nails. This is an iconic image coming out through the crack of the cell. We still do not see his full face. Amidst the shadows, we see his mouth. He starts talking and ironizes the Brazilian legal system, saying that the same one who arrested him, now release him.

After we see, for the first time, the complete face of Zé do Caixão walking down a corridor towards freedom, the title of the movie appears. After leaving prison, the Coffin Joe meets up with his hunchbacked helper, Bruno, in reference to the classic monstrous helpers of certain horror works. The helper takes him around the big city. After being in jail for 40 years, we see Zé’s surprise at the different world he finds.

At another point, as Zé do Caixão and Bruno are heading to their new lair, we find the first two feminine characters of relevance that appear in the film: blind witches. These refer to certain old horror movies and literary works, but also mark an association of the female identity with witchcraft.

Sequencing the story, Zé do Caixão is introduced to four associates, his fans, who are waiting for him. These include two women. The aesthetics of these new female associates share similarities with a sadomasochistic style. They wear black vinyl, leather shorts and other paraphernalia. The clothes of the males are different, less flashy, that cover more of the body. Certain tasks and obligations are also differentiated by sex according to the helpers. In the scene in which we see Coffin Joe shaving, getting a cosmetic treatment, after all this time in jail, it is the two women doing this task.



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Once Coffin Joe has regained his freedom, it does not take much for him to restart his plans to have the perfect son and show his violent behaviors. In addition to that violent quest, Joe is also tormented by hallucinations, or ghosts, of his past victims.

The old hags, at one point, comment to Coffin Joe that tormented spirits are chasing him. So, they say they can make a spell to save him, but he will need to have faith. He, as usual, has total disdain towards faith. The old hags are figures that focus in the female power as something supernatural, outside the masculine order of power presented, and also outside the Catholicism or Protestantism, they are figures of religious syncretism; in terms of image, the order of the world is represented by the policemen, by the priest (also a male figure) etc. OK, using old hags, like villains, seems very old fashioned, strange, but Mojica decided to keep that element in the movie. That is a point, we do not know what year this script was originally written.

The movie's main sequence of events shows his minions capturing women to be tested by Coffin Joe. And that involves several moments of female nudity, torture, and death. These are very violent scenes. One of the women, for example, drugged, eats a piece of her buttock; another is branded with a hot iron; another is stuck inside the sewn belly of a dead pig; another woman has her head in a vat of cockroaches while being called a bitch. Yet, in the movie's most disturbing scene, a mouse is introduced in a woman's vagina.

These scenes dialogue with the exploitation of the female body, and the violence against it. It is an old form of cinema, but with much more violence, as we said before. Mojica was doing, here, all the things that he could not do in the 60's. It is an, even more, exaggerated version of the old movies of the director.

Women appear as submissive and victimized, largely, by Coffin Joe. So, there are mainly two types of female figures in the movie: the tortured and dead victims and the women who are associated with evil, connected with the demonic Zé do Caixão, through a pact.

It is interesting to see how the role of a final girl is non-existent. By comparison, any of the living, excluding the ghostly apparitions so, who have the slightest chance



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of going toe-to-toe with Coffin Joe are men. What we are pointing out is a lack of better representation, a lack of empowerment.

The end of the movie, “the final battle”, takes place in an empty amusement park, and it is a fight between Zé and a crazy priest; this character, poorly developed, was looking for revenge because Zé do Caixão had killed his father years ago. Zé ends up being killed, stabbed in the heart.

The priest, after cursing the dead man with a witchcraft of Saint Cyprian (a typical fear of Brazilian Catholicism), begins to be chased by, apparently, a ghost of Coffin Joe. In the end, we do not know the priest's fate, but it seems that he will be tormented by ghosts, as Zé was.

In front of Coffin Joe's body, we see one of the female followers getting naked and start to have sex with the corpse. Then, Coffin Joe's hands go to the woman's breasts, and his eyes open. It's the question of supernatural evil again.

The last scene takes place at the funeral of Zé do Caixão, in which we discover that many women, his victims and accomplices, are pregnant. By placing women of different ethnicities, the movie makes it clear that the “perfect son” who the character was looking for is not a racist idea of white purity, or anything like that. White purity is a ridiculous idea for a country like Brazil, that was built with ethnic miscegenation. Let's be clear: the idea of the character of perfection is a mental state, not an ethnicity, so it is something outside religion, and the “morality of the weak”. In Brazil, as Gilberto Freyre shows, the idea of racial purity is bizarre. The Europeans who came here already had a past of miscegenation, as the case of the Portuguese with the Moors. In Brazil miscegenation was openly a form of occupation.

In the end of the movie, evil seems to have won, and the villain has succeeded in achieving his goal with all its crazy logic. However, as Marins said, he had plans to continue the franchise, however, it was something that did not happen during his life.



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CONCLUSION

There is not a single female figure possible within terror. Between witches and mermaids up to the final girl, or virginal victims of Bela Lugosi, there are many things. So, José Mojica Marins and his reading of the feminine, therefore, require contextualization. It is portrait of a generation, and pop culture. Let us remember that the cult movie fame only came to Mojica afterwards. Filmmaker's productions were seen as trash, and like it or not, he will be remembered by many as the King of Trash. The biggest icon of Cine Trash.

His first movie show the gravedigger's obsession with the figure of a woman who could give birth to the perfect child. The woman, therefore, is a means to his end, in association with "nature" and even with the violence of classic figures that mix horror and sexuality, like Sade.

In the third movie of its franchise, some things were modernized. And even if among his helpers had women, there was a demarcation of sex, and even a different treatment between the female and male bodies. The women, in big part, continue to be submissive and sexualized. Thus, even in a national classic, the character Zé do Caixão is under some problems. And, undeniably, join a generation of terror that worked with a macho vision and its exaggerations, even in violence.

To close the essay: much of Brazilian culture is still unknown by international critics, such the controversial music by Rogério Skylab or the obscene writing of Glauco Mattoso, but, even with flaws and issues, Mojica is still a major name of Brazilian culture abroad. May more academic studies arise to explore the richness of Brazil's marginal culture.

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