

Vergílio Ferreira's novels and the influence of cinema

Luis Cardoso

Abstract

Vergilio Ferreira, one of the most important writers of the last century in Portugal, reveals a very interesting relationship with Cinema. In his novels, we may ask if his connection with the Neo-Realism movement or with the Existencialists really influenced the writing techniques. In fact, Neo-Realism was a movement that influenced the writer's production above all because it had an epocal (historical, aesthetic, literary, and ideological) justification. Could the writer have found in the cinema structural marks with which he impregnated not only his narrative technique but also his ideological vectors? We can clearly state that the author has an interesting dialogue with cinema techniques and often they reveal themselves in his writings.



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About Author

Luis Cardoso, PhD, Full Professor, Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre and Centre for Comparative Studies – University of Lisbon, Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

When Vergílio Ferreira, in *Pensar* (1988, p. 241 - 242), reflects on how he sees a movie from the thirties, some elements loom in his comment. It highlights the crystallization value of a film, its ability to record a certain time, a certain mode, a certain way of existing in the image. Revisited after a while, an old movie acts as a trip to a childhood space that is smaller than memory had preserved. But not all are equal. The author tells us: "There are, however, films that are reviewed at no cost. But if they are great and respect does not frame them with respect as all that is to be respected, they need a reconversion to create a new space in which to breathe, and a forgetting of what died in them as in all the work of the past. Keeping in mind the value of memory, we recall that memory is essential in the dialectic absence / presence, and that, in approaching the imagination, it is responsible for the vision of something or someone "in its absolute being". Memory becomes sacred matter and, in fact, we understand why much of Vergílio Ferreira's novel production is based on it. Memory is an element responsible for the purification of the Past, of a connection to a time and a space that transforms, allowing the appearance in a mysterious dimension of people and events beyond this present moment, since there is an overlap between both times (1985, p. 50). Could the writer have found in the cinema structural marks with which he impregnated not only his narrative technique but also his ideological vectors? Vergílio Ferreira's textual production, which proved to be interested in cinema - even episodically - in the current account, seems to indicate, in the novel, nuances of approximation. We can truly underline the importance of the space-time axis and the undeniable valence of memory revealed by the explicit use of flashback, with narrative and ideological aims, as marks of a contamination of the letter by the image if we think, for example, of contacts. between the Nouveau Roman and the Nouveau Cinéma. Nevertheless, we know that the use of analepse and the relevance of memory in the narrative construction of the present are characteristics that were born in the literature and later assimilated by the cinema. Often suggestions are made for the contamination of text by image in relation to narrative strategies that actually originate from the literary universe, thus creating an a posteriori demonstration of the influence of cinema on literature. In this case, the question arises about the writer's intention regarding narrative devices. A possible transposition of filmic characteristics into the literary universe has already been suggested by several authors, but the extent of the novelist's will to this effect has not yet been clarified. On the other hand, a 'cinematic' reading of Vergilian writing may denounce an ex post demonstration exercise of that intention. Thus we began a journey through the (im) possibility of Vergílio Ferreira systematically or episodically patenting a cinematic writing. A first look at this question belongs to Lauro António (1995, 70 - 71). The director and attentive reader of the Vergilian work defends the existence of a cinematographic contamination in the writing of the novelist. To support his point of view, the filmmaker combines different arguments. Lauro António recalls that the writer lived with the cinema in a constant way (Current Account proves facets of this conviviality), regretted that no director (except Guimarães and Lauro António) was interested in his novels, and impregnated his books. with a clear proximity to the cinematic universe, such as *Fast*, *the Shadow*, *Forever*, *Until the End*, or *In the Name of the Earth*. We would say that the title of the first novel quoted, along with *The Bloody Face*, *Polar Star*, or *A Sea Terrace*, *Sunken Morning*, *Night's Call*, almost makes us imagine an image - especially if our attention is focused on the nouns that we stressed; the other novels cited by the director - *Forever* or *Until the End* - with titles less focused on nouns that elicit a visual reading, still allow the evocation of cinematic echoes. In this line, it will not be despicable to consider the titles of Vergílio Ferreira's novels as a starting point, as they always reflect portions of his significant universe, reflecting the

incidences of the text, its most prominent vectors and images (Seixo, 1977, p. 175). Titles always come after a maturation process and if some have physical or metaphysical resonances, never failing to translate their dilemmatic thinking, others contain nuances that can bring them closer to the image. Lauro António, besides presenting the novels cited as examples of the cinematic influence, concludes that "the cinematic formulation already exists in the text and that the description is often deeply visual in terms of cinema". The director, evaluating Vergílio Ferreira's relations with the cinema, adds a set of factors that favored this approach: "VF's coexistence initially with a certain neorealism (which existed predominantly in the cinematic field), with Malraux and some existentialists (who kept close contacts with the cinema), and later with the "Nouveau Roman" (where sometimes the writer was not distinguished from the filmmaker), would have been remarkable, and I say this not as an influence, but as an appetite. You will have approached these movements, perhaps because they openly fraternized with new forms of writing, in which cinema occupied a prominent place. The filmmaker thus identifies three influences: Neo-Realism, Malraux and Existentialism, and Nouveau Roman. Vergílio Ferreira himself clarified these guidelines. As for Neo-Realism, the writer stated: "I was neorealistic, although as you have just read, there is someone who claims that I did not understand it. I believe I understood it as we practice it. Simply, my position is different today, not because I have reneged on the position taken at the time. I understand that our view was or was, perhaps by the circumstances of the time, somewhat limited. So I tried to widen it. If my point of departure was the defense of humanism, I understand today that humanism cannot encrypt itself only to a socioeconomic problematic... "(Padrão, 1981, p. 286 - 287). In fact, Neo-Realism was a movement that influenced the writer's production above all because it had an epocal (historical, aesthetic, literary, and ideological) justification (Reis, 1981, p. 24), but the author would have to evolve from of this first phase.

Vergílio Ferreira had an active participation in the ideological debates about Neo-Realism, mainly because it was never defined exclusively as neorealist. Some of his works, notably the first ones he wrote, clearly show neorealistic characteristics. In the novel *The Way Away*, the narrative epilogue renews the principles of the protagonist, who will value economic and social issues. In *Where Everything Was Dying*, it unveiled the movement's lines more clearly, as in *Wagon J* and *The Bloody Face*. In a second moment, already in remoteness, it maintains neorealistic characteristics, as evidenced by the novels *Change*, *Submerged Morning* and *Night Call*. If literary Neo-Realism can be approximated to Vergílio Ferreira's production, it can be similar to cinema. The characteristics of cinematographic representation, which may be manifestly close to a mimicry of reality - if this is the explicit objective of the director - aroused the interest of many men of literature and different currents, such as Neo-Realism, who desired a creative posture faithful to the real (Reis, 1983, p. 44). This deep interest in cinematography can be illustrated with the collaboration of Manuel de Azevedo, Luis Francisco Rebello, Alves Costa and Jaime Rodrigues Viana in the magazine *Vértice*. Manuel de Azevedo values what was seen as the main facet of cinema, the representation of the real, which clearly translates the neorealist assumptions. It is really intended that the cinema adopts a documentary posture, similar to *Douro*, *Faina Fluvial*, by Manoel de Oliveira. Interestingly, *Douro*, *Faina Fluvial*, is not one of the best examples of a documentary with a markedly realistic record, but prevailing a closer aesthetic to modernist narrative models, but one understands the ideal advocated, in line with a cinema committed to reality. José Régio highlights precisely the almost dizzying speed that the making of certain planes transmits and

considers that this film is not only a documentary, but rather a true poetic document. As Regius writes:

Precious as a documentary, the Douro thus far exceeds the value of a mere documentary. Not even a documentary focuses on a work of art, except that, while documenting what it intends to document, it is also a document of an artist's temperament. Manoel de Oliveira is an artist and poet in the high sense in which, after all, these two words are synonymous. (...) And here is the great news of the Douro among us: Being a work of art. (1994, p. 19)

Manuel de Azevedo, one of the forerunners of the neorealist movement in Portugal, establishes contact points between cinema and literature. The cinema is considered a vehicle of immediate communicability and, for this reason, had a real strategic importance for many movement theorists Torgal, 2000, p. 59 - 60). It was precisely the director of Aniki-Bobó (inspired by Rodrigues de Freitas' story Meninos Millionaires) to star in a naive foray into cinematic Neo-Realism. This film, with photography by Antonio Mendes, has achieved a remarkable black and white record, considered by some to be 'magical realism', a forerunner of Italian Neo-Realism (Pina, 1986, p. 102), a movement with which it is notably Zavattini, Fellini and De Sica, and the moral foundation of neo-realist poetics that many filmmakers have chosen as theoretical support (Costa, 1991, p. 96). Beginning the relationship between literary Neo-Realism and the cinema, its course was obviously constrained by the political limitations of the time. In the universe of connections between literature and cinema, we highlight the main vector that associates them with Vergílio Ferreira: the work of director Manuel Guimarães, who would later adapt the Final Canticle. Beginning his artistic production in painting (also Mário, in Final Chant is a painter...), Guimarães makes his film debut as assistant director for Manoel de Oliveira in Aniki-Bobó. After gaining experience in several films that adapted literary texts (Love of Perdition, Friar Luís de Sousa, Cousin Basilio), Guimarães began a journey that tried to bring Neo-Realism to Portuguese cinema. The director thought of neorealism as the essence of a cultural resistance that was urgent to bring to Portugal (albeit with limitations), and which in our country was already evident in the fine arts and literature, but not in cinema. In 1952, his film Saltimbancos opens in Lisbon. His first feature film was very well received, mainly by Imagem magazine, directed by Baptista Rosa, and by figures such as Alves Redol, Cardoso Pires, Piteira Santos, Fernando Namora and Luís Francisco Rebello. Inspired by Leão Penedo's Circo (writer of the neorealist circle, who will also be the author of Dom Roberto's 1962 argument, a film reminiscent of the early days of neo-realism in Italy), the filmmaker tells the life of a small circus in decay, between misery and small daily conflicts, the desires for a better life and the impossibility of escaping the circle of social and economic sadness. Manuel Guimarães deliberately intended to leave the soulless Portuguese productions behind and to embark on the neorealist current. Mário Alves, for example, highlights his stoic praise of the characters and the empirical dimension of the film, but Roberto Nobre is more restrained and criticizes the narrative structure. Guimarães continues his neo-realistic vein and, with the arrival of Cinema Novo, feels that the patterns and horizons of Portuguese filmmakers may meet new itineraries. With Cunha Telles, conducts, in 1964, The Crime of the Old Village, inspired by Santareno. In 1965, he made The Wheat and the Weed - another adaptation of a neorealistic book - but the film proves to be a stumbling block.

Some critics consider the film an absolute disaster, not least because the neorealistic aesthetics were already in the past and Guimarães did not reveal the ability to define an alternative and consistent path. In fact, their neorealistic forays had no longer the conceptual framework provided by French and Italian cinematography, and in our country these ideals could never be affirmed and flourished. However, Guimarães will always be the prime example of the attempt to create a neo-realistic cinema (only shyly approached, for example, in *Perdigão Queiroga's* 1951 *Dream is Easy*). The example of this neo-realist director could have contributed to build a bridge between the letter and the image, able to influence Vergílio Ferreira, but the writer does not know the work or Guimarães himself before the experience of *Final Song*. In the presence of this argument, the possibility of finding a premeditated bond between the two creators is blurred. But the contribution of filmic Neo-Realism was not exhausted by Guimarães. Vergílio Ferreira thinks about some of his novels when the main filmic inheritances in neorealist novels are, above all, narrative strategies. In the 1950s, neorealist novelists will favor external focusing, dramatic representation of fictional events, and clear-cut discursive strategies such as montage, space division into planes, or the systematic use of audiovisual images to identify and to convey abstract content (Sousa, 2001, p. 129). These characteristics were analyzed by Baptista-Bastos (1959; 1962) who identified numerous points of intersection between neorealist novels and cinema.

CONCLUSION

We can talk about an approximation between Vergílio Ferreira's novels and the Cinema if we consider the relations with Neo-Realism and with technical issues. The genesis of the narrative language of literary Neo-Realism is rooted precisely in cinema. Alves Redol is an example of the use of parallel actions, flash-back, set-ups, close-ups and montages, and Soeiro Pereira Gomes, in his novels, also exemplifies a narrative aesthetic of cinematic inspiration. But what we are most interested in highlighting is the case of Vergílio Ferreira. In *The Movie and Realism*, Baptista-Bastos contradicts António Quadros when he states that Vergílio Ferreira brought from Neo-Realism the descriptive style, with images and symbols, contrasting the true essence of the movement that is its narrative character. Outlining the convergences between literature and cinema, he identifies writers such as Alves Redol, Manuel da Fonseca and Carlos de Oliveira with Visconti, while bringing Vergílio Ferreira (of *Final Canticle* and *Apparition*) closer to Fellini (both former neorealists), noting that Vergilian writing and the Italian director's films are close in their reflective themes on the subjective conditions of reality, which lead to the dimensions of Being and Thinking. In this regard, the critic, despite the explicit disappointment towards all those who abandoned Neo-Realism, is still highlighting the future path of Vergílio Ferreira (seen as "subjective"): Being and Thinking.

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