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nothing but the girl

by Luis Urbano





Corte de Cabelo, Joaquim Sapinho
(Rosa Filmes, 1995)

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Corte de Cabelo locates its narrative in the Lisbon of the early 1990s, a time that was infused with a sense of confident optimism. That much is apparent in the architecture and vibrant colours of Tomás Taveira's Amoreiras shopping mall, here introduced to the sound of Bonney M; in the construction works for the expansion of the subway; in the inordinate ambition of Centro Cultural de Belém; in the fascination with the new private television stations; all signs of the euphoria surrounding Portugal's first decade in the EEC, later the European Union. The allocation of structural funds was felt not only in the establishment of numerous infrastructures towards the modernization of the country but also in the events that Portugal was called upon to host: Europalia, in 1991; the European Capital of Culture in Lisbon (1994) and Porto (2001); the Universal Exposition, in 1998; the 2004 European Football Championship. But the film does more than just reflect that sense of excitement. The vibrant colours of the spaces, the costumes, the objects on set, contrast with a darker side of aggressiveness and uncertainty. The futility of consumerism, hinted by the constant reference to brands like *Marks and Spencer*, *Yves Saint Laurent*, *Boss* or *Adidas*, coexists with the looming reality of hard drugs. The sociological portrait of the *shopping girls* — hairdressers, makeup artists and shop assistants — is confronted with the primitive and racist violence of the skinheads.

The film is quintessentially urban, in that it focuses entirely on the city of Lisbon and deliberately shows many of its hallmarks: the Christ the King statue, across the river; the 25 de Abril Bridge, seen from below, from a road intersection; the architecture of the modernist housing estates and the buildings in the Soft Portuguese style; the river Tagus, from a car ride, to the sound of Hole's *Violet*. But it is equally architectural, in the way it records the characters' whereabouts and actions: Rita comes into the film, bringing us with her, through the automatic doors of the shopping mall she works in; the couple starts their married life in a symbolically empty flat, still undergoing renovations. That apartment is also a lead character in the film, holding some of the more intimate moments between the couple. There is a subtle refer-

ence to Godard, namely to *À Bout de Souffle* — both in Jean Seberg's hairstyle and in the long sequence of the lovers in bed — but most of all to *Le Mépris*, in the spatial dynamics between a husband and wife in crisis, inside an apartment. In both films, the apartments display a modern architecture and in both, the architectural elements are addressed from the point of view of the narrative, like the

doors and walls that keep the couple apart, the windows that let in light and shadows, or the white tiled washrooms where the men cleanse in bathtubs and the women stare at themselves in the mirror. Rita and Paulo's flat is located in a housing estate that one presumes to be in Restelo, by its proximity to the football stadium, whose light tower is visible from the roof terrace. That terrace is a maze of walls, chimneys, water tanks, pillars and clothes lines, a meeting spot for barbecues and cold beer, where Sapinho captures Rita's resistance to Paulo's advances, with a panoramic Lisbon in the background.

Most of the spaces in the film linger in our memory, even



Corte de Cabelo, Joaquim Sapinho
(Rosa Filmes, 1995)



Le Mépris, Jean-Luc Godard
(Rome Paris Films, 1963)



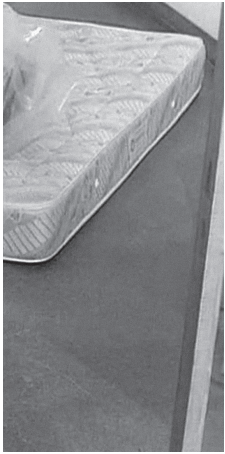
Corte de Cabelo, Joaquim Sapinho
(Rosa Filmes, 1995)

after the closing shot: the double height boat warehouse in Belém, dark and dense; the messy sidewalk where the confrontation between the two friends takes place, with a modernist vanishing point in the background; the restaurant's terrace in Belém, overlooking the Monument of the Discoveries, where Rita leaves Paulo during their wedding lunch; or the subway tunnels under construction, magnificently lit, where the lovers again fail to meet. That sequence quite astonishingly conveys the idea of the underground, of a whole other subterranean city, with increasingly larger spaces as Rita searches for Paulo in the tunnels. The characters do not, in fact, truly inhabit any of those places; they are always in transit, just arriving or just leaving, conveying a perpetual feeling of impermanence — Rita arriving at the mall just to say goodbye to her co-workers; Rita failing to catch up with Paulo in the depths of the subway system; Rita leaving home to wander through nighttime Lisbon.

Even so, in specific moments, an opposite sense of confinement, of claustrophobia, comes across, like in the subway station with rubble to the ceiling or inside the flat, either in the pantry where Rita hides from her husband's underlying hostility, among the objects that still have not found their place in the house, or in the plastic that wraps the mattress and then the lovers, in a seemingly playful interaction that soon becomes asphyxiating — a double metaphor for a life together originating from an amniotic sac but also for a smothering marriage that Rita struggles to break free from. An iconic image of the early 1990s — Laura Palmer's body wrapped in plastic in the opening episode of *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch, 1990) — comes to mind. And in a similar but unexpected way, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), also makes an *appearance*, be it on the wedding veil Pris (Daryl Hannah) wears when she disguises as a mannequin in Sebastian's flat in the Bradbury Building, or in the scene in which the replicant Zhora, in her

see-through plastic raincoat, runs through several shop windows, shattering the glass, as she tries to escape Deckard's bullets. And, in fact, at the beginning of *Corte de Cabelo* there is also a shattered shop window glass, the one from the wedding dress boutique in the vicinity of the Amoreiras where Rita buys the scarf to hide her recently cut hair. That same shop is the set for one of the most inspiring sequences in Portuguese cinema, the one in which, late at night, Rita sneaks through the broken shop window that awaits repair and tries out the wedding dress she could not wear for her wedding ceremony at the register office. A travelling then follows Rita to the outside, leaving behind the shop's mannequins covered in protective plastic wrapping. The use of video, with its grainier and less defined image, is something Sapinho goes back to throughout the film, not only as a technical device to make a contrast to the sharpness of film but also as an element with clear cinematographic meaning. Video substitutes film in the images on the video surveillance monitors that follow Rita along the subway, but sometimes the director's camera is replaced with Paulo's, a cameraman who films his wife incessantly, which renders him an alter-ego of Sapinho. That footage is broadcast in real time in two monitors in a room in the flat, much to Rita's annoyance at the omnipresence of her own image.

More than *Os Verdes Anos* — repeatedly referenced by film critics at the time of *Corte de Cabelo*'s premiere — it is *O Cerco* that one can draw the most parallels with, in a woman's desire for independence in marriage, in her wandering through the contemporary urban environments of the capital, in the evident fascination of the camera and its directors with *their* lead actresses. In *O Cerco*, the emergent world of advertising, fashion boutiques, travel agencies and night life is portrayed; in *Corte de Cabelo* it is the new world of private television broadcasting, shopping malls, cash machines, and multiculturalism. In Cunha Telles's film we see Lisbon's downtown, the



Blade Runner, Ridley Scott
(Warner Bros., 1982)

Açoreana Café, the Eduardo VII Park, the Tagus from the ferry; in Sapinho's film we get the Amoreiras, the Mexicana Café, the Príncipe Real garden, the Tagus in Belém's riverfront. In *O Cerco*, the leading character walks away from a snob and violent husband; in *Corte de Cabelo*, Rita makes her wishes of independence known by cutting her hair on her wedding day, to her fiancé's violent disappointment. Interestingly, a similar episode marked the filming history of *O Cerco*. Director António da Cunha Telles recalls how, after casting a long-haired Maria Cabral in the leading role of Marta, the actress showed up on set for her first day of shooting with short hair, much to his dismay.

Corte de Cabelo follows the circadian rhythm, filming Rita and Paulo through the course of 24 hours. The film starts in the morning, introducing Rita as she comes out of a flashing light; unfolds during the day, with the wedding ceremony, multiple car rides through the city and the occupation of the flat; and goes into the night when the lovers consummate their marriage and Rita leaves the house, wearing a red hoodie, like a little red riding hood. She then starts a night tour that includes a garden made forest and a big bad wolf — a black man who had previously harassed her at the shopping mall — who turns out to protect her, in the end, in their confrontation with the neo-Nazis. After this eventful nocturnal rite of passage, the morning comes up again, radiant; Rita hums Suzanne Vega's *Tom's Diner* at the mirror and it all comes full circle; near the shopping mall, the replacement glass is on its way to the wedding dress shop window, reflecting the sun and blinding us in a washout symmetrical to that initial one.

The band name *Everything but the Girl* was inspired in an ad on a furniture shop, indicating that everything was for sale, except for the girl. I started out writing this text meaning to talk about everything in *Corte de Cabelo* but the girl. I seem to have failed miserably.

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