

## Literary and cinematographic parallels in the representation of women in the 1970s, during the Spanish and Portuguese dictatorships.

### The will for absolute love in *Cartas de amor de una monja portuguesa* by Grau & Arquer (1978)<sup>1</sup>

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#### The story of the five love letters of a 17th century nun

**C**artas de amor de una monja was directed by Jordi Grau in 1978, after the success of *La Trastienda* (1975), his previous film, which portrayed full-frontal feminine nudity for the first time since Franco's death (in the person of the actress María José Cantudo). By request of the same producer, José Frade, Grau had also made *El secreto inconfesable de un niño bien* (1975) and *La siesta* (1976). These films, together with *Cartas de amor de una monja* (1978) form a non-homogeneous cycle of four commercial *destape* films<sup>2</sup> created under the auspices of the film producing company Frade S.A. This was the first film Grau was able to make without any kind of censorship, following a body of work of thirteen films that were closely monitored by the Film Censorship Bureau. However the thirteenth film, *La siesta* (1976), could be said to have been passed without censorship because the corresponding Censorship Committee cancelled, at the last moment, their demand to suppress parts of the film. The production context of the film *Cartas de amor de una monja* (1978) is therefore one exempt from censoring legislation.

Film censorship was suppressed by means of the Royal Decree 3071/1977, November 11th, which regulates everything concerning the production and exhibition of films. This decree only demands that the production company notified the *Dirección General de Cinematografía* (the General Film Directorate) of the filming start date. Also, in the case of foreign productions or co-productions between Spain and other countries that are to be filmed in Spanish territory, a special licence must be requested. Once the movie is completed, it will be necessary to obtain an exhibition licence, which is awarded by the *Dirección General de Cinematografía* after the release of a non-binding report by the Film Visas Committee, who will suggest the classification of the work. There are no representatives of the Catholic Church in any of these bodies (Minteguía Arregui, 2008: 10).

*Cartas de amor de una monja* (1978) is the most complex of the four films, because it uses the process of constructing a woman's sexuality (a nun's in this case, someone without sexual experience – in theory), to deconstruct *destape* films and formulate a new discourse about the representation of sexuality. Both the plot and the script of the film are indebted to various sources, but the connection with the literary work *Lettres Portugaises* – the famous letters written or translated into French to be read in the salons of Paris (Alcoforado, 1669) – is obvious. The authorship of these letters has been debated for more than three hundred years; it isn't clear if they were really written by the Portuguese nun Mariana Alcoforado, if the text was written originally in French or Portuguese, or if a man called Gabriel de Guillerages made up a translation, as the writer and researcher Carmen Martín Gaité believes was the case.

Is there a woman in love out there who hasn't written or at least wished to write "a Portuguese letter"? What usually happens, though, is that she will tear it up after writing it, or keep it and not send it. And if Guillerages guessed that, he guessed a great deal. Because he understood, simultaneously, that his invention was likely to make many anonymous authors of love letters feel quite specifically identified (Martín Gaité, 2000:31).

There is abundant debate among researchers about the text's anonymity and authorship. From the 1950s onwards the general consensus agreed upon was that Guillerages was its author (Spitzer, 1954). Spitzer couldn't

have imagined that Guillerages would become a mere footnote to a text that didn't need an author and would receive multiple interpretations in the course of its life.

More relevant than the real authorship of *Lettres Portugaises* is the figure of Mariana Alcoforado, who started off as "an anonymous textual shadow" only to become "a personal identity and a genealogy, both familiar and national, that makes her (...) a nationally representative epitome of femininity, of national identity, in the eyes of the Portuguese" (Klobucka, 2000: 19). The mysterious question of authorship became extremely important with regard to the reception of the book *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* because, "As Três Marias" chose *Lettres Portugaises* (in Andrade's 1969 translation) as a matrix text, precisely because of the symbolic weight of Mariana's figure and the female image that emanated from her: the stereotypical abandoned woman, begging and submissive, alternating between love and hate and articulating a discourse of overwhelming passion for the gentleman – who will reciprocate the passion, but then depart and never return. And it is precisely this relationship of love and devotion, servitude and self-victimization that the three authors in Portugal and the cinematographers Grau & Arquer in Spain will (dis)assemble and re(assemble) three centuries later, stylizing the frontiers and limits of the subject, both in terms of its subject matter and of the language itself.

*Lettres Portugaises* was a hugely popular text in France during the reign of Luis XIV, the Sun King – a time of great literary and political splendor in the country. Some researchers corroborate the existence of Mariana Alcoforado and insist that the authorship of those letters can be ascribed to the Portuguese nun<sup>3</sup> (Vélez Pareja, 1996). These are, in essence, five love letters gathered together in a volume that was considered to be a masterpiece of the erotic genre. In them, a nun in love writes down her feelings towards her object of desire: a handsome soldier, the Marchese of Chamilly, who has abandoned her.

#### Female sexuality: As três Marias

Underlying the subject of these letters and their literary and cinematographic representations is the concern with the control of female sexual impulses. Many religions, even today, repress sexual freedom with strict

rules. The afore-mentioned canonical title awoke the imaginations of many creative people in its own epoch, and continues to do so to this day, inviting artists to recreate it in various ways.

In Portugal, in 1971, in the midst of Salazar's dictatorship, Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa, three intellectuals, wrote and co-published the volume *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*. The book was a playful collection featuring works in various literary genres. The works are principally epistolary, but there are also poems and short stories, and all surround the figure of the nun Mariana Alcoforado. In April 1972, the book was published with the support of Estudos Cor and under the literary guidance of Natalia Correia, who, despite being under enormous pressure to censor parts of the book, published it whole. The story surrounding its publication and first reception was echoed in media outlets of the time. The first edition was confiscated and destroyed by the censors of Marcello Caetano's government three days after it hit the shelves; a judiciary process was opened against the three authors because the content of the book was deemed "pornographic and an attack on public morality." The trial opened on October 25th 1973 and after a series of incidents, and following the April 1974 Revolution, never came to take place. The Spanish translation did not become available until 1975.

Em voz uníssona (em falas que se embaralham na escrita, sem se identificarem individualmente), as "três maríás" investem contra todos os valores consagrados pela dição (a pureza, o interdito ao sexo, o horror ao corpo, a proibição do aborto, o silêncio sobre o prazer do sexo, etc.), expressando a grande crise ético-existencial que vem do início do século e recrudescer neste limiar do 3º Milênio. Crise, em cujo bojo, sem dúvida, está se forjando uma "nova mulher", ressentida pelas "três Marias", mas ainda oculta em interrogações agônicas.

Colônia do homem, a mulher? ... se a mulher nada tem, se existe só através do, se mesmo seu prazer por aí é pouco e viciado, o que arrisca ou que perde em revoltar-se? [...] Só de nostalgias faremos uma irmandade e um convento, Sórora Mariana cinco cartas. Só de vinganças, faremos um Outubro, um Maio e novo mês para cobrir o calendário. E de nós, o que faremos?" (Novaes-Coelho, 1999: 120).

Book censorship in Portugal wasn't commonly exerted, but it came down quickly on any perceived challenge, so the book was removed

from circulation and the three authors, together with their editor, were prosecuted for offences against public morality. Feminine eroticism was thus considered pornographic.

The case became more popular abroad than in Portugal and international pressure, as well as the advent of the Carnation Revolution in April 1974, rehabilitated the authors. *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* is a literary game in line with the experimental tendencies prevalent at the time in which it was written, the early seventies, and the game is not limited to the mixed genres, or to the reference to a previous work from which characters and situations are derived. The game is mainly in the language itself. "As Três Marias" are three female intellectuals writing epistolary prose in late 17th century mode, mixing it with satirical and humorous poetry, with explicitly erotic descriptions, avant-garde fragments, and great doses of irony and humour. Leaving aside the fact that some parts are better than others, this is a valuable book, an incredibly daring one for its time, and a subject of study in academic circles. Moreover, a new annotated edition of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* has recently been published, the fruit of research carried out by the Margarida Losa Comparative Literature Institute at the Faculty of Letters of the Universidad de Oporto.<sup>4</sup>

#### Film analysis

In their film, Grau and Arquer seem to be saying that there is no future for a woman who tries to be free or think differently, something applicable to the clerical society of the 17th century, and this in turn could be understood as a call to female rebellion, a call for feminism to be understood as unfinished business for 20th century Spanish society. In this sense, Grau and Arquer's proposal is a cinematographic retelling of *Lettres Portugaises*, written a few years after the literary version penned by "the three Marias," *Novas cartas portuguesas* (Barreno, Velho da Costa et al., 1972). Both Grau and Arquer and "the three Marias" revisited the key 17th century text that is *Lettres Portugaises*. On the one hand, this was because of the symbolic value ascribed to Mariana herself. On the other, it was because of the female image that emerged from her: the stereotype of the abandoned woman, begging and submissive, alternating adoration with hatred and practising a discourse of overwhelming passion for the man (the gentleman/chaplain), who will initially

reciprocate the passion, but will then leave, never to return. It is this relationship of love and devotion, of servitude and self-victimization which the three Portuguese intellectuals, Barreno, Horta and Velho da Costa, and the Catalan couple Grau and Arquer would deconstruct and reconstruct three centuries later, pushing both the subjects addressed and the language used (be it literary or cinematographic) to their limits.

Another cinematographic version of *Lettres Portugaises* was made in parallel, around the same time, by the Spanish cinematographer Jess Franco, which could be placed in the category of *nunsplotation*. Jess Franco's version only resembles Grau's in that they both take place in a nunnery. In Jess Franco's version the female protagonist is a young, innocent girl forced to live in a convent where Satanism and sadomasochism reign against her will. It is not a *destape* film, but a pornographic, violent film that received an "S" rating in Spain. Franco had a generous budget, a team of German technicians and German, Italian and Portuguese creative directors. This movie had problems being shown in Spain because its main actress, who played the young nun, Susan Hemingway, was under age. Franco was the director of this piece, entitled *Cartas de amor de una monja portuguesa*, and wrote the script with his producer, Erwin C. Dietrich (who wrote under the pen name Manfred Gregor) and the dialogue expert Christine Lembach.

*Cartas de amor de una monja portuguesa* was filmed in Switzerland and Portugal and premiered in Spain in 1978, the same year as Grau's film of a similar title: *Cartas de amor de una monja*. The original German title of Jess Franco's film was *Die Liebesbriefe einer portugiesischen Nonne*, but it appeared under other titles for its distribution in the international market. In this context, José Frade, producer of a great number of *destape* genre movies, trusted that director Jordi Grau would film *Cartas de amor de una monja* (1978) turning the sexual voltage up a notch from his previous films, *El secreto inconfesable de un chico bien*, *La trastienda* and *La siesta*:

Then I proposed a script that I had written with Gemma to him, it was called *El Examen*. He wanted to do a sentimental thing and I objected. Then I put to him that we should do *Cartas de amor de una monja*, with Gemma, and he accepted, because I told him it's based on a famous erotic book. [...] Frade thought that I was going to make a practically pornographic movie, but the truth is that it's a film that shows a lot of

respect for religious feeling, for religious heterodoxy. It didn't go down well because in 1977, politically, the vibe was very right-wing and anti-church too. Right-wingers thought it was blasphemous and left-wingers thought it was too soft. But it's a film I like, and there it is (Grau Solá and Gabantxo Uriagereka 2004).

### The adaptation of a canonical literary text to 1978 cinema

It is important to reflect on the identity of the co-scriptwriter of this film: she is Jordi Grau's wife, the Catalan actress and writer Gemma Arquer, who on occasion signed her work as Gemma Grau. Although throughout her husband's cinematographic career she took part in many of the other laborious aspects involved in the creative process of making movies, this is the only time that she shared a scriptwriting credit with him. They both knew of the relevance of the canonical title *Lettres Portugaises* (de Andrade, 1969)<sup>5</sup> and also knew of the scandalous *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (Amaral, Barreno et al., 2010).<sup>6</sup> It is evident that both the original text and the experimental version by "as tres Marías" are worthy of respect and that Arquer and Grau had no intention of treating the said texts in a vulgar way in order to write their script; additionally, they were brought up Christians (they both belonged to Catholic parish groups in their youth) and felt an inherent respect toward religious feeling.

It is interesting to pause to consider Gemma Arquer's role, because the original text was supposedly written by a woman and dealt with female sexual desire. Even in the 17th century, *Cartas portuguesas* was a subversive book; in the first place, because it was written by a woman at a time when most women did not write, indeed could not write; and secondly, because the woman who wrote it was a religious woman who supposedly felt no sexual desire. Therefore, the literary text was doubly subversive and in this sense the film is too, because a parallelism was established. It is as if the text had an internal force that was in essence female and subversive, while existing in the context of a patriarchal system into which Grau's film was also inscribed in 1978.

Undoubtedly the epistolary form – I once wrote – must have been the first and most suitable of literary expressions for women. The person to whom I most like to speak about the tribulations of the soul is the person responsible for those tribulations, who supposedly is interested

in receiving a reply that is more elaborate than a rejection or a sharp amen. But if the ideal receptor of the message disappears or has never existed, the need for interlocution, for trust, drives us to invent him. Or, in other words, it is the passionate search for the "you," that connecting thread of female discourse (Martín Gaité, 2000).

Following that idea, it could be said that Grau and Arquer in this film tried to go beyond mere *destape* with sex scenes that were rather daring in tone. What underlay those images was a whole declaration of principles against the banalisation of sex; in other words, against the *destape* genre. It was also a very harsh critique of the church and of the denial of the body and sexual desire by some religious orders, who zap the life out of women like Mariana or the adolescent novice nun burnt at the stake by the Inquisition as a punishment for her sexual awakening. It is fitting to underline at this point that using the 17th century to explain these ideas serves as a safety shield for Arquer and Grau, in that the viewers are free to interpret whether the situations portrayed are similar to the reality of 1978 Spain. Consequently, the movie could also be seen as a criticism of the patriarchal, Catholic-repressive system internalised by large swathes of Spanish society in 1978. As can be observed, the film is subversive at various levels.

*Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, the breakthrough text by María Isabel Barreno, María Teresa Horta and María Velho da Costa, written in 1971, offered important aesthetic and feminist readings that were recognised beyond the frontiers of Portugal. The text, hybrid in character, played with the canonical 17th century text *Lettres Portugaises* to create a new discourse about female representation, subjectivity and desire in 1970s Portugal. Unsurprisingly, news of the scandal reached the neighbouring country, Spain, where the Catalan couple of artists Jordi Grau and Gemma Arquer, deconstructed the said literary text to create a film about absolute love, a film that was no less scandalous than the book, and showed that parallel discourses were taking place among Portuguese and Spanish intellectuals in the 1970s, at a time of openings after the dark years of the dictatorships in both countries.

### Notes

- 1 Translated by Amaia Gabantxo.
- 2 *Destape* literally means "uncovering"; *destape films* were a genre of their own in the

Spanish cinema of the 1970s, and a very successful commercial sub-genre at that. They showed naked women on film and addressed sexual issues for the first time (although sex acts were not shown). They were a reaction to Francoist ideology and censorship, and a sign of the newly found freedom that followed the dictator's death. (Translator's note)

- 3 For this purpose, Ignacio Vélez-Pareja consulted the fifty-six titles associated with the letters or their translations kept at the Library of Congress of the United States, as well as the seventy-three copies of this work at Harvard University (among them were translations into German, French, Hebrew, Dutch, English, Italian, Portuguese, Finnish and Russian), until he found a 1888 text of great importance for the culmination of this historic-literary work: *Soror Mariana, a freira portuguesa* (Cordeiro, 1891).
- 4 Universidad de Oporto, "Novas Cartas Portuguesas Três Décadas Depois" project. [Horta, M.T., Barreno, M.I. y Velho da Costa, M. (2010). *Novas cartas portuguesas – Edição anotada*. Lisboa: Ana Luísa Amaral ed., Publicações Dom Quixote].
- 5 Of the many versions of the 17th century literary text *Lettres portugaises*, it is believed that one penned by the Portuguese erudite Eugénio de Andrade, translated from the French, is most accurate.
- 6 The last edition is from 2010, and includes a commentary by the authors themselves about the *Novas cartas portuguesas* from 1971, which Marcello Caetano's dictatorship removed from Portugal's bookshops.

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