



***Night on fire, the
Brazilian's 1970s seen
by Jean Garrett***

*Noite em chamas, os anos
1970 sob as lentes de
Jean Garrett*



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Abstract: *Noite em chamas* (Night on Fire, Jean Garrett, 1977), is a fictional version of Brazil of the 1970s that points out ambivalences between the search for the film market and the glimpse of authorial possibilities; the exploitation of conventional eroticism and the observation of the female emancipation; the self-taught creation processes and the “bricolage” in appropriation of a varied repertoire. The film’s plot brings tensions of class and gender by setting them up in a decadent luxury hotel in São Paulo, treated as a mosaic from Brazil. Our analysis aims to contribute both to the understanding of Garrett’s film and of social processes whose representation his film articulates.

Keywords: Brazilian cinema; 1970’s; Mouth of Garbage; Jean Garrett; *Night on fire*.

Resumo: *Noite em chamas* (Jean Garrett, 1977) é um registro fictício do Brasil da década de 1970 em que podemos identificar ambivalências entre a busca pelo mercado e o vislumbre de possibilidades autorais; a exploração do erotismo convencional e a observação do processo de emancipação feminina; os modos de criação autodidatas e uma apropriação “bricolada” de um repertório diverso. Do mesmo modo, tensões de classe e gênero articulam-se na trama do filme, ambientada em um hotel de luxo, tratado como microcosmo do Brasil. Nossa análise busca contribuir para a compreensão dessa obra de Jean Garrett e da representação de certos processos sociais em seus filmes.

Palavras-chave: cinema brasileiro; anos 1970; Boca do Lixo; Jean Garrett; *Noite em chamas*.

Introduction

This paper aims to register and discuss the memories of film production based in the region of Boca do Lixo District [Mouth of Garbage³ District] in São Paulo city, between the 1960s and 1980s, beyond the dichotomies that have characterized some of the frequent approaches on this subject. These dichotomies are shown, on the one hand, by the attribution of stigmas that associate this production to an appealing cinema, of low quality, ideologically conservative and aesthetically irrelevant. On the other hand, there is a contemporary tendency to the euphoric celebration of artists and films that are suddenly converted into masters and masterpieces despised by the critical thinking of that time. This study aims to discuss the films, searching an intermediate perception between these two perspectives. This approach allows treating the films from Boca do Lixo District as documents of that time, with all the ambiguities that characterized the Brazilian media culture of the 1970s, in the process of expanding of the market and liberalizing of customs rivalling the conservative censorship of the media promoted by the Civil-Military Dictatorship (1964-1985).

During the last decade, critics, researchers and enthusiasts of Brazilian cinema have reviewed this production. This movement has occurred in the context of a worldwide tendency to give a new value to historically delegitimized cinematographies located on the margins of audiovisual canons. On the other hand, at the national sphere, there is a revival of the debates around the consolidation of an effective audiovisual industry in Brazil. This is evident in books⁴, YouTube channels⁵; documentaries⁶; television (mini)series⁷; film festivals in Brazil⁸ and

³ Quarter in São Paulo downtown, located near Luz Train Station. The height of the region as an audiovisual pole occurred during the 1960s and 70s, when not only the productions were kept in constant operation (on the margins of the official financing and distribution regulated by Embrafilme) but also the public response to a large number of erotic films made there was expressive (ABREU, 2002).

⁴ *O coringa do cinema*, by Matheus Trunk (Ed. Giostri, 2014), about Virgílio Roveda; *A boca de São Paulo*, by Nicole Puzzi (Laços Editora, 2015), among others.

⁵ *Papo de Boqueiro*, accessible at: <http://bit.ly/2IT1kDX>. Acesso em: 19 jan. 2017.

⁶ *O galante rei da Boca* (Alessandro Camo and Luis Alberto Rocha Melo, 2003); *Boca do Lixo, a Bollywood brasileira* (Daniel Camargo, 2011); *A primeira vez do cinema brasileiro* (Bruno Graziano, Denise Godinho e Hugo Moura, 2012), all displayed by Canal Brasil; *Histórias que nosso cinema (não) contava*, by Fernanda Pessoa (2016).

⁷ *Magnífica 70* (Claudio Torres, Renato Fagundes and Leandro Assis, 2015-2016), displayed by HBO, and *Zé do Caixão* (André Barcinski and Vitor Mafra, 2016), displayed by canal Space.

⁸ *Chico Cavalcanti e a Boca do Lixo*, in Cine Olido, May, from 10 to 19, 2011.

in other countries⁹, and even in a film-tribute made in episodes¹⁰, in addition to an increasing insertion in academic circles.

The ambivalent character of this production is in the set of works and social and affective relations established in Boca do Lixo District, and in the individual trajectories of specific professionals and in the singularity of a single film – as seems to be the case of the object of this article. *Noite em chamas* is a Brazilian feature film made in 1978, directed by Jean Garrett and produced by MASP Filmes, by Miguel Augusto de Cervantes (codename of the producer Manuel Augusto Sobrado Pereira). The story develops in a single night and contemplates multiple parallel plots, which take place in the rooms of the fictitious Hotel Passport, located in the center of São Paulo city¹¹. The central plot is about the revenge of João (Tony Ferreira, standing in Figure 1, left) – the employee responsible for maintaining the elevators of the building – against the bosses who neglected the help to a colleague victim of a fatal accident.



Figure 1: Standing on the left, Tony Ferreira on the scene of *Noite em chamas*.
Source: Banco de conteúdos culturais (Bank of cultural contents) (<http://bit.ly/2vw3NeE>)

⁹*The Mouth of Garbage: subculture and sex in São Paulo*, in International Film Festival Rotterdam, 2012.

¹⁰*Memórias da Boca* (2014), documentary/drama with segments directed by José Mojica Marins, Alfredo Sternhein, Mário Vaz Filho, Clery Cunha, Diomédio Piskator, Valdir Baptista, Diogo Gomes dos Santos and Antonio Ciambra.

¹¹In reality, the Hotel Comodoro, located on the corner of Duque de Caxias Avenue and Conselheiro Nébias Street, today transformed into a residential building (cf. ORMOND, 2014).

Closed in the gloomy engine room, João plans to execute his plan to blow up the Passport from a short circuit in the elevator system. This on an intense night, when the hall, corridors and rooms of the Hotel become the stage for different events. In one case, self-help guru Bob Stank (Roberto Maya) gives a conference. In another, the actress Beth Lemos (Maria Lucia Dahl, Figure 2, left) plans her suicide. Elsewhere break happens between Walter (Renato Master) and his lover Laura (Zilda Mayo) but it is interrupted by the arrival of the betrayed wife. In another situation, a couple of friends decide to celebrate the admission of one of them to college by organizing an orgy with a group of prostitutes (led by the character played by Helena Ramos). In another, a young millionaire, addicted to drugs (played by Ricardo Petraglia, Figure 2, in the center, on the right), after murdering a girl, hides in one of the rooms, in the company of his hitman and a lawyer, having in his wake the reporter Ademar (Carlos Reichenbach) who hesitates between spreading the scandal and accepting the bribe of the boy's father, a politician very influential. In another situation, Junqueira (Guilherme Corrêa) – a cattleman – talks about the reproductive power of his bull Marajá to Virginia (Lola Brah), recently divorced due to the incompatibility between her ex-husband and her poodle.



Figure 2: Maria Lúcia Dahl (left) and Ricardo Petraglia (right, center)
Source: Banco de conteúdos culturais (Bank of cultural contents) (<http://bit.ly/2DVr2nd>)

For the purpose of this work, Garrett's film will be approached in its condition of register/recreation of the transformations in political, social and

cultural level that Brazil had around 1978. Covering diverse themes such as the recently promulgated Law of Divorce¹², the increase in drug consumption among young people of the upper classes, the growing popularity of self-help hippie gurus, the rise of agro-industry and the pet segment. Besides promoting critical comments about the social asymmetries that configure the capitalism made in Brazil, and even about the tensions between art and commerce that characterize the making of the film.

In the following sections, we will try to draw a brief overview of the context of the production of Boca do Lixo District, in particular concerning the link between a substantial part of the films produced there and the aesthetics of exploration/exploitation, as well as in the practice of similar national as a strategy for occupation of the Brazilian market. We will also situate the journey of the Portuguese-Brazilian photographer and director Jean Garrett as representative of an intermediate aspect of Boca do Lixo District's cinema. Finally, we will discuss the case of *Noite em chamas* (a work a little absent from most of the reflections about this set), carrying out the analysis of some thematic and narrative aspects of the film, as well as the discourses of the critics and the director himself regarding his cinematographic project. With this, we believe it is possible to contextualize the film in its environment of creation and circulation and thus understand some of the meanings of this work when observed forty years away.

Jean Garrett and the Boca do Lixo District

The period between the 1960s and 1980s registered the emergence of many waves of massive popular and genre film production in various national contexts, with expressive box-office returns within their respective domestic markets, in countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, Italy, Japan, France and Australia (Figures 3, 4 and 5). There is no consensual explanation covering the diversity of such production, but it is possible to identify elements common to all the scenarios. Firstly, a peripheral position in relation to the Hollywood “center”, especially in terms of distribution and exhibition. Secondly, the adoption of the “national similar” practice, with the aim of taking advantage of the repercussion of some international box-office success “translated” into a new cultural context. Third, a systematic appropriation of the codes of one or more narrative genres, sometimes in the same film. Finally, but no less important, the excessive or

¹²Officially instituted with constitutional amendment number 9, June 28, 1977.

sensationalist representation of some subject considered taboo or controversial (sex, nudity, drugs, blood, violence), for its value as a kind of attraction (SCHAEFER, 1995; TOHILL; TOMBS, 1995). In some cases, local variables may be added to these elements. Such as an atmosphere of liberalization of customs favored by the decline of dictatorial and/or conservative regimes of long duration (as in Brazil and Spain), the enactment of laws establishing “screen quotas” or promoting national production (as in Brazil and France); or even the existence of a favorable economic scenario after the post-war recovery period (particularly with regard to some European countries, such as Italy).



Figures 3, 4 and 5: Posters of French exploitation films (Requiem for a vampire, by Jean Rollin, 1971), Japanese (Sex & Fury, Inoshika Ochô, 1973) and Brazilian (Excitation, Jean Garrett, 1976).

Sources: Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>)

The relationship between Boca do Lixo District's production and the idea of an exploration cinema can be linked in particular to the called *sexploitation*¹³. In this sense, the label “barn of *pornochanchadas*” (pejorative title attributed to erotic comedies inspired by the Italian model, in the 1960s, ABREU, 2006, p. 143-144) was part of a strategy of disqualification of those films. Given their often precarious and (necessarily) appealing condition, since inserted in an industrial and market logic (RAMOS, 2008, p. 178-195), these films tended to be judged as symptoms of our underdevelopment (BERNARDET, 2009, p. 210-215).

¹³ *Sexploitation*: Denomination given to exploration films dedicated to the theme and representation of sex. Other aspects were given famous denominations: blaxploitation (for films of gangsters starred by a mostly black cast); nazisploitation (for films spent in concentration camps); bruceploitation (for films of martial arts made with imitators of Bruce Lee) etc.

However, unlike what common sense established, not only *pornochanchadas* were produced in Boca do Lixo District. There were also police thrillers, westerns, comedies, horror films and melodramas, with the constant presence of erotic elements. Equally, the aesthetic proposals of its directors were diversified. In Boca do Lixo District, the sensual anarchy of Carlos Reichenbach (*Império do desejo* – Empire of Desire, 1980; *Extremos do prazer* – Extremes of Pleasure, 1983) and the metaphysical restlessness of Walter Hugo Khouri (*As filhas do fogo* – The Daughters of Fire, 1978; *Eros, o deus do amor* – Eros, the God of Love, 1981) coexisted. Alfredo Sternhein explored the sentimental conflicts of the bourgeoisie (*Herança dos devassos* – Inheritance of the libertine, 1979), while Francisco Cavalcanti provided the revenge instincts of the popular classes (*Horas fatais* – Fatal Hours, 1987). The small urban chronicles of Claudio Cunha (*Amada amante* – Beloved lover, 1978) shared space with the erotic odyssey of David Cardoso (*Dezenove mulheres e um homem* – Nineteen women and one man, 1977). While Ary Fernandes (from the series *Águias de Aço* – Eagles of Steel, 1967) and Carlos Coimbra (*Independência ou morte* – Independence or death, 1972) tried to please the military government.

In the reflections formulated by critics and researchers about this phase of Brazilian cinema, the name of Jean Garrett usually emerges as a singular figure. Largely because of his background as a still photographer, but also because he composed his teams from the expertise of professionals above the technical average of Triunfo Street (Carlos Reichenbach, Eder Mazini, Inácio Araújo). Garrett in fact achieved – in some of his films a strange third margin between the erotic-sensationalist appeal and the certain claim to artistic legitimacy, expressed in the identification of a style and the transit through various genres. While names like the already mentioned Reichenbach and Khouri sometimes resorted to more hermetic narratives with philosophical and literary references. These mentions were influenced by filmmakers such as Ingmar Bergman; Michelangelo Antonioni; Valerio Zurlini (with whom they used to be associated by critics), and more instinctive filmmakers such as Chico Cavalcanti or Tony Vieira (pseudonym of Mauri de Queiroz), who openly dialogued with the most popular genres, such as the western and the urban police. In Jean Garrett's films, it is possible to notice the conscious appropriation of stylistic elements associated both with classical Hollywood and with the European genre cinema of that time, but without neglecting the entertainment or compromising the public's interest.

With the name José Antônio Gomes Nunes da Silva, he was born in 1946, on an island in the Azores Archipelago, in Portugal. Garrett came to Brazil as a tourist and never returned to his country. His creativity always pointed in the elaboration of the framing, besides the careful *mise-en-scène*, are usually attributed to his experience as a fashion photographer and author of soap operas. He worked in magazines such as *Melodias*, using the pseudonym Jean Silva¹⁴, before starting to work with cinema. First, he was an actor and then assistant director, working with filmmakers such as José Mojica Marins and Fauzi Mansur.

Throughout his 11 years of career as a film director, he directed 18 titles (an admirable average of almost two films per year), Garrett experienced different genres, often within the same work. Working with police films (*A ilha do desejo* – The Island of Desire, *Amadas e violentadas* – Beloved and Violated, 1975), horror (*Excitação* – Excitation, 1976), social satire (*Possuídas pelo pecado* – Possessed by sin, 1976) to the psychological drama of surrealist tones (*A mulher que inventou o amor* – The woman who invented love, 1979) and the supernatural thriller (*A força dos sentidos* – The strength of the senses, 1979). Even the film object for this reflection shows this use of different genres. According to the narrated segment, *Noite em chamas* has elements of disaster movie, farcical comedy, softcore eroticism and criminal drama.

His film with the greatest repercussion among the public was the drama, vaguely inspired by the Hite Report, *Mulher, Mulher* – Woman, Woman (1979). After an intimate and autobiographical essay (*O fotógrafo* – The photographer, 1980) and two tragic novels played by Angelina Muniz (*Karina, objeto de prazer* – Karina, object of pleasure, 1981, and *Tchau, amor* – Bye, love, 1982), Garrett made three low impact features films (*A noite do amor eterno* – The night of eternal love, *Estranho desejo* – Strange desire and *Meu homem, meu amante* – My man, my lover), already under the shadow of the film of explicit sex, which was beginning to be insinuated simultaneously with the process of political opening and of the Federal Censorship.

Garrett's adhesion to the x-rated wave occurred in 1985, with *Gozo alucinante* – Wacky pleasure, the last feature film that he signs under the pseudonym that consecrated him. Curiously, and in this aspect differing from his colleagues who made pornographic films from 1983 adopting callsigns, Garrett signs the direction of

¹⁴ For a sample of Garrett's work as an author of photonovels (here, starred by Carlos Reichenbach), in <http://bit.ly/2J5IYie>. Access: Jan. 19, 2017.

the three explicit features (Fuk à Brasileira – Fuk à la Brazilian mode, *Entra e sai* – In and out and *O beijo da mulher-piranha* – The Kiss of the slut-woman) that he directed in 1986, before retiring from film direction as J. A. Nunes, his real name. Working as administrator of the Bibi Ferreira Theater in São Paulo, after the decline of the Boca do Lixo District, Garrett became a victim of the same depression that affected several directors who saw themselves with no prospects of restarting their careers. He died from a heart attack in 1996, before his 50th birthday.

Of all the nicknames attributed to Garrett, perhaps the most recurring is artisan. Defining a person inserted in a reality that valued serial production and the conscious management of the narrative codes of some cinematographic genres. However, at the same time, he is recognized as the owner of an identifiable stylistic characteristic in his films.

It is possible to observe an approval of the mainstream critics in relation to the style of the director, especially with regard to his first features. No matter how problematic the films were evaluated in terms of script, performances or production values, Garrett's *mise en scène* was often highlighted. About his debut film, *The Island of Desire*, Carlos Motta pointed out the director's intentions for a "well composed and treated image" (MOTTA, 1975). Luciano Ramos said that Garrett "takes care of the image with the affection of an artisan, adorning it with good editing and elaborated camera movements" (RAMOS, 1975). About *Excitation*, done the following year, the severe critic Rubem Biáfora said: "It's almost the first time that something that came from Triunfo Street reveals a taste and a capacity for manipulation, a germ of language for accomplishments of different content: unity, plasticity, cinematic imagination" (BIÁFORA, 1977).

However, the brief good relationship with the critics ended with the relative failure of *Noite em chamas* audience, seen as excessively pretentious and sterile in an attempt of a Brazilian disaster movie, clearly indebted to the world success of *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974). For Bruno Becheruchi, it was "a too big idea for a film full of tedium" (BECHERUCCI, 1978). Edgar Pereira said: "Everyone has *The Towering Inferno* that deserves. But perhaps the Brazilian spectator did not deserve to be so mistreated" (PEREIRA, 1978). Almost unanimously, the critics condemned a certain excess of pretense of the director. The irregular rhythm of the plot and the reduced production values of the film, which affect the supposed apogee of the story: the awaited explosion of the building, which occurs only in the final five minutes (of 104 minutes of projection) and is limited to precarious image overlays and some smoke.

Noite em chamas: eroticism, disaster movie and social commentary

“Forty-five actors, a thousand extras, the best technical team, a lot of trucking and special effects, in forty-five days of shooting, this is the balance of *Noite em chamas*, the first overproduction directed by Jean Garrett and produced by MASP Filmes” (Figure 6), said the material distributed to the press shortly before the launch (NOITE, p. 2). “*Noite em chamas* tries to show, in just one night, the contemporary society dominated by the machine and the whole corrupt system that it represents”, the text completed. In the same material, the synopsis highlighted its sociological and psychological aspects:

The action occurs in a luxury hotel [...], where the characters experience their own problems, addictions, frustrations and neuroses, without knowing that, trapped in the engine room, João, a simple man, introspective and immersed in his own loneliness, rises from his degrading anonymity with a single idea – destroy that whole system that over the years and unconsciously, tormented him. (NOITE, p. 4)



Figure 6: *Frame of the final sequence of Noite em chamas.*
Source: Photobucket (<http://bit.ly/2VfQsXn>)

The graphic material distributed to the press, with still photos that intended to contemplate all the subplots, also sought to show the aspect multiple and intimate of the film. As can be seen in the image below (Figure 7), which puts side by side a scene that happened outside the hotel, after the fire starts, and a scene in which the actress Beth Lemos (Maria Lúcia Dahl) shows herself dissatisfied in a night of sex with a fan, the businessman Mesquita (David Neto).



Figure 7: *Noite em chamas*, between the spectacle and the intimacy.

Source: Banco de conteúdos culturais (Bank of cultural contents) (<http://bit.ly/2Wm3ILI>)

Noite em chamas is linked to the trend of disaster movies, very popular in international markets. However, there was an effort to highlight the uniqueness of this work in publicity material and in the director's statements. Garrett said to the journalist Jairo Ferreira: "I want to be accused of everything but not of cultural colonialism. I did not imitate *The towering Inferno*" (apud FERREIRA, 1978, p. 19). "In my film," said Garrett, "the motivations are completely different: they are not engineers, architects and electricians who are behind the crime, but this new character who has been emerging in Brazilian cinema, the urban man pressured by the social machine".

Noite em chamas is representative of its context and geographical place of production. Besides the most obvious connection with the success of *The towering Inferno* in the country's marketing circuit, the expected "Hotel Passport tragedy" staged by Garrett was preceded by two similar episodes involving skyscrapers located in São Paulo downtown: the fire at the Andraus Building in 1972 and the fire at the Joelma Building in 1974. The latter, indeed, also deserved a cinematographic re-reading with the DNA of the Boca do Lixo District, by Clery Cunha, in the spiritualist horror feature *Joelma 23º andar* (1979), which, however, dedicated most of its footage to the fire moments, using, even, documentary scenes. Therefore, in addition to the box-office appeal of disaster films, some local

precedents would justify the market viability of a feature film with a dramatic axis centered on a burning building.

In addition, the script written by Garrett and Castellini, with the collaboration of Carlos Reichenbach (who also plays a part as an inconvenient investigative reporter), shows several questions and themes pertinent to the zeitgeist of that time (Figure 8, right). We can even identify, in the collective character of the dramaturgy of the film, the style of each one of its creators. The self-referential dimension and critical commentary about cinema is a characteristic of Garrett. We can attribute to Reichenbach the tone of irony and scorn in some episodes (as the cattleman obsessed with his breeding bull and the woman with her puppy), besides a political subtext (in the fundamental discussions about American imperialism carried out by the self-help Guru; Figure 8, on the left).



Figure 8: Social commentary and conventional eroticism in *Noite em chamas*.
Source: Banco de conteúdos culturais (Bank of cultural contents) (<http://bit.ly/2ZP6beq>)

The period between 1975 and 1980 is considered the peak of Boca do Lixo District in terms of the volume of releases and the consequent box office return of films. This auspicious scenario favored the production of increasingly ambitious production, in which some characteristics of cinema of Triunfo Street – such as the erotic appeal, the aesthetics of exploitation and the practice of the similar national – began to be at the service of supposedly more complex plots and less restrictive budgets than those available in the first half of the decade.

Parallel to this, also regarding Garrett's filmography, we can identify a turning point represented by *Noite em chamas*. He represents the passage of a style characterized by a clear demarcation between the boundaries of genders. Demonstrating the passage of films that seemed to be in a purely cinematographic reality (patent in the *quasi giallo*¹⁵ of *Beloved and Violated*) to a more intimate cinema, psychologizing and, therefore, in a kind of communication perhaps so difficult to the target audience of Boca do Lixo District, who showed preference for simple plots. This turn, towards the phase that includes features such as *The woman who invented love*; *Woman, woman*; *The photographer*; *Bye, love*, curiously also marks a period of criticism not favorable to Garret's work and his tendency to aesthetic exaggerations, seen as something sterile.

Nevertheless, *Noite em chamas* seems to materialize some of these and other tensions found in the cinema of Boca do Lixo District. Its structure with diverse plots, on the one hand, refers to the experiences made by filmmakers such as Robert Altman in *Nashville* (1975); on the other hand, it is linked to a trend of that time within the big Hollywood industry of disaster movies. In a moment of the plot of *Noite em chamas*, the sides come into conflict. The ambivalence, from a perspective, results in a singular and complex work, can also be at the heart of the relative resistance that the film found from the critics and the public.

Substantial critical production of disaster movies does not exist, besides a limited bibliography that tries to inventory some expressive titles and place them in respective contexts of production and circulation. There is no consensus on the constitution of these films as cinematographic genres, more commonly understood as a cyclical market trend. The definition of these works according to genres can contemplate aspects of melodrama and science fiction, as well as horror, action or suspense, sometimes all in the same plot. According to Keane (2006, p. 3), categories of the disaster movie can be perceived since the 1910s – period of crystallization and expansion of cinema as a great spectacle (KEANE, 2006, p. 5) –, but only after 1970s it became a more clearly identifiable genre for the audience (KEANE, p. 2).

The cyclical characteristic of this trend seems to be linked to sociocultural contexts similar to those that enable the popularity of horror/terror narratives, especially those guided by some uncertainty and/or political instability, economic

¹⁵*Giallo* (in Italian: yellow) is an Italian literary and cinematographic type of suspense and detective novel that had its peak in cinema between the 1960s and 1980s. One of its main features was plots about masked killers. The name is a reference to the yellow covers of Italian pulp magazines, published since 1930.

and/or social. Although this reasoning presents characteristics of mechanism, we can observe, for example, that the 1950s and 1970s were configured as fertile for the dissemination of the disaster movie, but there is a substantial difference between them. While the first one, constituted under the fear of the Cold War and the nuclear threat, transferred the source of catastrophes to extraterrestrial beings (*Invaders from mars*, William Cameron Menzies, 1953) or atomic calamities (*Gojira*, Ishiro Honda, 1954). The second one we could understand from a perspective closer to everyday and urban fears, in which tragedy is a consequence of human intervention/interference in the environment. This was true for some of the nature goes wild films of the seventies' disaster movies (*Night of the Lepus*, William F. Claxton, 1972; *Shark*, Steven Spielberg, 1975), and for those whose tragedy is due to human error or motivated by the greed of characters belonging to the most privileged classes (*Airport*, George Seaton, 1970; *The Poseidon adventure*, Ronald Neame, 1972).

Noite em chamas adds to this last scheme some variables and concerns typical of the historical moment experienced by Brazil. To the central leitmotif of the fire, the script adds a plurality of themes and peculiar conflicts, transforming that night at the Hotel Passport into a kind of microcosm of a country captured in the process of transformation of mentalities and customs. More specifically in the transition between the most radical period of the ongoing civil-military dictatorship (1968-1973) and the beginning of the political opening of the Geisel Government (1974-1979).

In episodes as that of Madame Virginia (Lola Brah) and her puppy Frufriu, the comic result is evident. Described by its owner as “a true poodle, a champion, with vast pedigree, [...] of internal and external beauty, pure breed, without any crossing”, Frufriu becomes the pivot of the separation between her and Augusto (Sergio Hingst) who goes to Passport to be reconciled with his wife. The dialogue shows not only the beginning of what, years later, would become a promising market segment, but also seems to denounce a supposed frivolity of Virginia. On the other hand, even if the film does not show great sympathy for the character, she seems to have good reasons to prefer the dog than her husband:

Augusto: A judge would never homologate a divorce for incompatibility between husband and dog. He would laugh at us. However, I am disposed to reconsider. I think we three could make a deal.

Virginia: We will never understand each other. You don't really want it. You called the animal control officer to take Frufriu. You tipped the maid to put poison in his food. You told me to choose “me or Frufriu”. Well, I chose Frufriu. (NOITE, 1978)

The dialogue between these two characters shows the concern to demonstrate the agendas that were interesting to the public at that time, such as the Divorce Law and the partial achievement of greater female autonomy. The segment involving the guru – played by Roberto Maya – is equally rich in such moments, since it is for Mr. Stank's speech that the trio of scriptwriters of the film seems to direct their acidity in relation to the current stage of global capitalism, as we can see in this conversation between Stank and the businessman Mesquita (David Neto):

Mesquita: And do you really count on the adhesion of the working class to this new religion, Mr. Stank?

Stank: Mr. Mesquita, you have to learn one thing: the first step for the mobilization of the proletariat is to have the middle class in hand.

Mesquita: Yes, your philosophy fits like a glove into the ideals of the petty bourgeoisie.

Stank: No cynicism, Mr. Mesquita, no cynicism. Today's man needs didactics, symbols, signs, slogans, do you understand? Men of faith like us cannot distance themselves from the means of communication. (NOITE, 1978)

In another aspect, the tensions between a more conventional representation of eroticism and the desire to subvert these same representations are articulated in the appearances of the actress played by Maria Lúcia Dahl, and in the sequences of the orgy involving the couple of young men from the countryside and a group of prostitutes, headed by Marcela (Helena Ramos). Although friends since childhood, the relationship between Sérgio (Denis Derkian) and Jorge (Washington Lasmar) presents a social asymmetry: Jorge is the son of an employee of Sérgio's father. As soon as the prostitutes arrive, Sérgio begins to humiliate Jorge in front of the women, and Marcela, an experienced sex professional, attributes it to a homosexual desire repressed by the other. Alone in a bedroom of the room, after an attempt at sexual intercourse, Jorge begins to reproduce, with Marcela, the same logic of oppression that Sérgio establishes with him. The prostitute says:

Marcela: You have no right to humiliate us! You're just as much a whore as any of us. How much does your friend pay you? How much do you charge? For your humiliation, the price must be high. [...]

Jorge: Sergio is my friend!

Marcela: Friend? As long as you're ugly, poor and stupid. Maybe your business is being exploited. (...) I'm a slut, but I respect myself. I have my price. And it is not cheap. There is a price for everything. Even the time I've wasted here with you I'll charge. (NOITE, 1978)

Jorge's "awareness" of his subordinate condition culminates in a sequence in which Sérgio spans him, claiming that the stronger the friend's punch is, the more expensive he will be entitled to charge him. After to be battered by Sérgio, Jorge raises his eyes to Marcela and asks: "What now, young lady? What do I do?", and she replies: "Do like every slut, man. Fend for yourself!"

The existential dilemma of the actress Beth Lemos (Dahl) materializes the tension that was verified between the desire for a "serious", "reflective" cinema and the need for a profitable box office. *Noite em chamuscas* adds a new variable to the debate: the star of erotic productions proud of her status as a sexual symbol for the public, but resentful about the end of youth and, therefore, the imminent loss of her status. Along the film, images of Beth Lemos' glorious times alternate in her wanderings through in the hotel, accompanied by a record of her last wishes.

I [...] film actress, specialized in erotic films, considered by many people as a great sexual symbol, leave on this tape for the last time my recorded voice and the reasons why I will die. I like the films I made. [...] I was happy, especially because I believed that my work had a purpose. [...] I had a perfect body, and my eroticism brought the people to me. I was their safety valve. [...] I liked to be seen as beautiful, nice and stupid. How good it was for me to realize the people, the public. It was good to feel loved, to feel loved and desired. (NOITE, 1978)

In the third act of the film, Beth receives in her room the visit of Mesquita, who wants to invite her to be the star of the commercial of one of his vitamins, and to have sex with her too. With a check left as payment for her "services" Beth makes her final recording minutes before jumping from the balcony of the Passport Hotel and having her body reduced to a pool of blood: "As I will no longer need this money, I would like the person who finds this recording to donate this money to the Actor's House because it is the product of my last night of sex and should be used for people who really needs it".

Here is evident the confusion between the work of erotic film actresses and the activities performed by sex workers, in a record of how Brazilian society treated the stars of erotic cinema – which, it is worth mentioning, were the main responsible for attracting audiences to cinemas. They were printed in the posters and all the publicity material of the films and were on the covers of the magazines that covered the cinemas of Boca do Lixo District, especially the publication *Cinema em close-up* (Cinema in close-up), which circulated between 1975 and 1977. Beth Lemos' sacrifice is also the episode of *Noite em chamuscas* that points more clearly to the self-conscious (and perhaps self-indulgent) content sought by Garrett.

Although *Noite em chamas* is presented as a critical work about various aspects of Brazilian society and although spends much of its footage trying to justify the João revenge against his bosses, it is noted that, in the end, the worker ends up being the only character to die in the fire of Passport. Beth commits suicide before the explosion; the managers of the Hotel and other representatives of the instituted powers and the big capital survive without a scratch, being evacuated from the hotel by the police and the firefighters.

The critics, the film and its limitations

Despite the intentions that *Noite em chamas* was a criticism of Brazil in 1978, it must be considered that this approach was given from a mostly conservative perspective, characteristic of the sociocultural background from which not only the filmmakers came, but also a substantial portion of the audience of Boca do Lixo District films. In the magazine *Movimento*, Dagomir Marquezi highlighted the limitations of the critical content of *Noite em chamas*. In the text entitled “Um porno-libelo contra a luta individualista” (A porno-handout against the individualist struggle) (which adopts the critical cliché of referring to all Mouth films as “porno-something”), Marquezi says that the film was wrong from its own conception, whose complexity would not match the cinema practiced in Boca do Lixo District. For the critic: “As a *pornochanchada*, *Noite em chamas* can even be efficient, as long as it is watched by a *pornochanchada*'s audience. Every three minutes, a woman takes off her clothes or somebody punches someone. [...] Trying to analyze the urban man pressured by the social machine” with these common slot machines is a task for a great filmmaker, which is not exactly the case of Jean Garrett”.

Jean-Claude Bernardet, in the review “Nosso cinema catástrofe é desanimador” (1978) (Our disaster movies are discouraging), written for the newspaper *Última Hora*, tried to advance a little in the contradictions of *Noite em chamas*. He begins describing the poster for the film posted at Cine Marabá, and tries to make a reflection from it: “A burning building, a naked woman's body that falls, a style of terror and sensationalism, photos of four traditional actresses from the *pornochanchada*: this is what the façade of Cine Marabá presents as a calling card for *Noite em chamas*”. Based on this description of the promotional material, the critic asks: “Is it necessary to see the film or is it enough to see the façade? He answers: “It is necessary to see the film: the poster announces the film that the producers would like to made; the real film is a little different”.

In the review, Bernardet try to recognize what *Noite em chamas* reveals about our society in comparison with the American model of disaster movie. According to him,

“In the Brazilian film, there is a will to avoid the conflict, which can be justified, but only partially, by production problems. The fact is that, when the fire starts, there is no one left in the building (except the incendiary). Therefore, we do not watch a disaster. And this, undoubtedly, is not the American model” (BERNADET, 1978). The character of the arsonist, in particular, intrigues the critic. For Bernardet, he is the one with the greatest difference between Garrett’s film and the imported model – but the result seems politically confusing: “What are the intentions of the *Noite em chamas*? Are the workers neurotic? Is the working class ready to set fire, criminally, at this society? [...] The danger is imminent! In any case, there must be some intention, because in an interview [to] Jairo Ferreira to the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, Garrett cites exactly this character to prove that he does not follow the American model” (BERNADET, 1978).

Following Bernardet’s lead, it is appropriate to ask: how the film was away from a poster clearly linked to the exploitation model, which promised a disaster with a crazy man and beautiful naked women who is going to die on fire (Figure 9)?

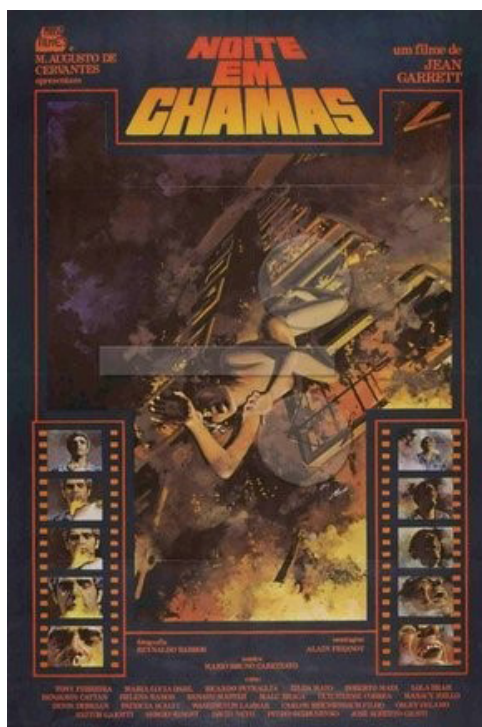


Figure 9: *Noite em chamas*' poster.
Source: Cinemateca Brasileira

Perhaps the slogan in the publicity material – “You will never forget this film, because you are one of the characters” – can help us to respond. In fact, even interested in the disaster movies, Garrett and his team sought to make an amalgam of various genres practiced by Boca do Lixo District cinema, and also explored the possibilities of social criticism by adopting, as protagonist, a character inspired by the spectator typical of those films: a male urban worker and dedicated to subordinate functions (cf. ABREU, 2006). *Noite em chamas* shows this character without the most frequent resources of comedy or adventure. However, the film seeks to understand the anxieties involving him – on the one hand, dissatisfaction with his living conditions and anger about the corrupt behavior of the elite represented by the hotel guests; on the other, the conservatism and social alienation that make him unable to take the lead in a revolutionary process.

In this sense, Marquenzi's already mentioned text sought to give the film some meaning, but showing disdain for its audience's critical capacity:

Garrett has any merit; it's that he delivered his message in amidst of so much fire, blood, panties and underpants. The villains of the film are some of our great nowadays social 'villains'. However, they escape from the punishment that comes to the rebel himself. Maybe it is a story against the individualist struggle, the political adventurism. Does everyone understand? (MARQUEZI, 1978, p. 19)

Final considerations

In this paper, we seek to point out a series of issues articulated by Jean Garrett and his crew in *Noite em chamas*: the male disturbance in the face of female autonomy; sexual exploitation; class struggle; the justice system that does not penalize the richest people; the limited effectiveness of political alternatives aimed at the working class; bad working conditions; the pusillanimity of the press; the ultra-liberal political speeches that seek to win hearts and minds; the oppression of the urban landscape. At the same time, some stylistic traits of the Portuguese-Paulistan director are present, such as the expressionist framing (especially in the sequences set in the machine room), the artificial and evocative lighting of the environment of a photographic studio (in the deliriums of the character of Ricardo Petraglia), besides the omnipresent eroticism. All this seems to converge to the tragic end of the character João, incapable of tolerating the processes to which he is subjected. If *Noite em chamas* was not a great success – in

part for not delivering the promised disaster – it is precisely in this impossibility that its interest lies, forty years later.

This analysis of *Noite em chamas* reaffirms the feasibility and the need to deepen the interpretation of different stylistic, thematic and productive aspects of São Paulo cinema in 1970s, representing one of the greatest phenomena of popular consumption in the history of Brazilian cinema. Dozens of films were made annually over two decades; many reached the box office of millions of spectators, opening direct competition with Embrafilme's national productions and even with products imported from Hollywood. This production system maintained hundreds of producers, technicians and artists in activity, and established many representations and records of the dilemmas faced by Brazilian society – many of which are still current.

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