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IRON WOMAN: THE DOCUMENTARY AND THE FORM OF AN ARCHETYPE IN THE NARRATIVE OF BRAZILIAN WOMEN

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Abstract: This article sets out to formalize the archetype of the “Iron Woman” through an analysis of the profile of the character Donana, the protagonist of Catarina Doolan, film *A Parteira* (2019), using the Chanana flower as a symbolic element. To do this, we propose a dialog with authors such as Edgar Morin and Hugo Munsterberg to deal with subjectivities in the cinematographic experience, using the metaphor to gather data on the creative process that ends in the characteristics of the Brazilian heroine. It is also necessary to delve deeper to reveal the heroine’s journey and her myth; what her tools are and how she has been represented in previous narratives.

Keywords: Iron Woman; archetypes; feminine; cinema; narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The archetype, as a psychic phenomenon, materializes when it is expressed symbolically in artistic creations and narratives. According to studies by Carl Gustav Jung, “archetypal representations can be understood as cognitive patterns that mediate human relationships with the world, acting in the process of interpretation and attribution of meanings to objects and actions” (ANAZ, 2020, p.256).

As an audiovisual director, I’ve realized the great contribution that the art of storytelling makes to my personal development and also to those who access it. With the short film *The Midwife* (2019), I had the opportunity to meet the character who stars in the film, the traditional midwife Ana Maria Valcácio, known affectionately as Donana. Her firmness, strength and courage to be free inspire me and help me in my own process of liberation from the limiting standards that every woman inherits from the society in which she lives.

During the pandemic caused by COVID-19, I studied in depth the archetype of the “Wild Woman” who took up space in my consciousness. Over the course of two years,

between 2019 and early 2022, by consolidating the *La Loba Study Circle* extension project at the Federal Institute of Brasilia, Recanto das Emas campus, I was able to delve deeper into the study of feminine archetypes, including the study of Goddesses in different myths and beliefs. Through the stories in the book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, and the exchange of experiences between women, I realized the path of an archetype and the symbolic importance of giving it a name, meaning, form and place.

In this way, I began to perceive my learning process through cinema in an investigative way and was able to imprint my findings through the formation of the archetype of the “Iron Woman”, a term coined by the character herself, Donana, the subject of my observation.

With the aim of helping to deconstruct stereotypes and give a profound and multidimensional form to female characters, this study also aims to contribute to the construction of national narratives starring women, in different formats and applications, both in the audiovisual medium and in literary and other arts, as well as in film analysis within the ethnographic and academic scope. Thus enabling the creation of new myths and heroines.

THE ARCHETYPE AND THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE

Ever since writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell brought Jung’s concepts to cinematic narratives with the traditional formula of the “hero’s journey”, and then Christopher Vogler contributed with the publication of *The Writer’s Journey*, fiction scripts have used archetypes to create narratives with which audiences can identify. But which audience would this be? In her book *The Heroine’s Journey* (2020), Maureen Murdock, a disciple of Campbell, identifies the urgent need to find new myths and new heroines, to follow

an ideally feminine journey. Since women in our society have been trying to follow the only known path, the hero's journey, but unaware that this is only part of the journey.

In line with this, the aim here is to identify the archetype of the "Iron Woman" in the real world, its characteristics, manifestations and where it is found in nature, in order to then apply the concept to the symbolic representation of documentary cinema as a narrative medium. In other words, expressing it with the help of real women.

As a fiction screenwriter, Robert McKee, in his book *Story: substance, structure, style and the principles of screenwriting* (2006), teaches us to look for the archetypal path of a story and avoid stereotypes. He reveals that there is no formula for a good script, but that each artist has their own way of bringing out a good story. Aware that stories tell us about humanity, the audience seeks to find itself on the screen in a new experience, that is, to experience new perspectives and worlds about itself and its surroundings through cinema.

The archetypal story unearths the universal human experience, and then encases it in a unique socio-cultural expression. The stereotypical story reverses this pattern: it suffers from poverty in both form and content. It confines itself to a limited sociocultural experience and clothes itself in bland, unspecific generalities (McKee, 2006, p. 18).

According to McKee, we can conclude that the best way to access the archetypal symbols, escape the stereotypical formula and find the "Deep Character", as he puts it, is to dive into the unconscious, and this path is only possible through self-knowledge. The *heroine's journey* is drawn by Murdock (2020) as a cyclical path and this journey needs to be taken by each individual who seeks to heal their feminine and their relationship with the Mother (be it the biological mother or the Mother, the Goddess):

Women imitated the male heroic journey because there were no other images to imitate; a woman was either "successful" in the male culture or dominated and dependent as a woman. To change the economic, social and political structures of society, we must now find new myths and heroines. (MURDOCK, 2020, p. 10).

In her book, Estés contributes to this reflection when she states that "in stories are embedded instructions that guide us through the complexities of life" (ESTÉS, 2018, p. 29). In carrying out this heroic journey as writers, we experience the character in us, we tell their story with discretion and intimacy and this story will be consumed, perpetuated and perpetrated so that other people experience, through the art of cinema, the same heroic journey, consciously or unconsciously:

Art is important because it celebrates the seasons of the soul, or some tragic or special event in the trajectory of the soul. Art is not only for the individual; it is not only a marker of the individual's own understanding. It is also a map for those who will come after us (ESTÉS, 2018, p. 28).

In documentaries, this archetypal study of the character is still in its infancy, since, as documentarians, we deal with the real, the one that already exists in the field of matter, in order to work on their subjectivities after the recordings. Authors such as Allan Rosenthal (2007), Consuelo Lins e Mesquita (2008), Bill Nichols (2001), among others, have analyzed and discussed the relationship between the author and the subject being filmed among the various possibilities for making a documentary.

In *Documentary script: from pre-production to post-production*, Sérgio Puccini reflects on the controlled formula of a fiction script, from which the story emerges and is then transferred to a custom-planned film production. In other words, we rescue an archetype on a journey of self-knowledge and portray its story. But what

about when the character and their story, their world and context already exist? “The journey of the documentary script is marked by the perspective of what is to come. The capture of a reality that is gradually molded until it becomes a film” (PUCCINI, 2009, p. 16).

According to McKee, “the more you penetrate the mysteries of your own humanity, the more you understand yourself, the better you will be able to understand others” (MCKEE, 2013, p. 361). Thus, the hypothesis arises that documentary cinema can bridge the gap between fiction and reality (modes of representation), matter and imagination (creation), tradition and science (wisdom), consciousness and unconsciousness (self-knowledge). Through the story portrayed of a documented reality, to enable the creation of the archetype of the “Iron Woman”: experienced in the process of creating and analyzing the film “*The Midwife*” and originating from the connection between real women: the filmmaker and “the other”. Making not only tangible the process of experiencing the archetype in the filmic experience, but the awareness that it already exists in the world, just look at a Brazilian woman. She is real.

THE COMMUNICATION OF THE SENSIBLE: THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC RESEARCH-CREATION PROCESS

Observe, analyze, process and communicate. These are the premises of the metaphor as a research procedure, where “the researcher must install himself in what changes, in order to obtain an apprehension by sensitive intuition.” (FILHO, 2017, p.57). For Ciro Marcondes Filho, it is possible to identify the occurrence of communication as a phenomenon by experiencing the event itself while researching.

As Puccini points out, the process of making a documentary arises from the

investigative interest of its creator. There is no control over what will be filmed. The set of pre-established choices provides an idea of the work’s potential. But it is only after filming that the filmmaker will have possession of all the subjectivity that can be expressed in the editing process. And thus be able to create the *heroine’s journey*, based on capturing a subjective reality. In this way, the documentary is seen as the metaphorical account of the researcher: a (self-)investigative art.

In this way, I trace a personal identity relationship with my ancestral roots, perceiving myself as a white, middle-class Brazilian woman with mixed and diverse origins. I make the cyclical journey, according to the path proposed by Murdock and, finally, I reconnect with the sacred feminine, with the Mother, with my own motherhood, healing the wounds of my own life.

Maternal and paternal lineage and integrating the masculine forces that had previously drained my energy. And as Ciro Marcondes Filho proposes, “the road is traveled [...] just like the ‘journey’ that is made in research, from which one returns changed, altered, transformed.”

Once my genetic heritage has been elucidated, I look for inspiration in a woman who carries within herself the identification and projection of my Brazilian ancestors. From this connection with the character who inspires me, I analyze in her discourse the life experiences that bring to the concrete world the veiled history of my own lineage. In other words, Donana, the protagonist of the documentary *The Midwife*, represents for me the wisdom of my marginalized black and indigenous ancestors. She is therefore the vehicle, as well as an “avatar”, that leads me to experience the trajectory narrated. According to authors such as Munsterberg and Morin, who describe the cinematic experience through the lens of psychology, I

can see that, as the author, I construct, using my subjectivities, imagination and memory, the vehicle in which the audience can embark and, with their own subjectivities, seek identifications and suggest their own personal experiences: what Morin calls “projection-identification” or “affective participation”. The investigative interest comes first from the creator of the work:

Attention is voluntary when we approach impressions with a preconceived idea of where we want to focus. The observation of objects is then impregnated with personal interest, with our own ideas. The prior choice of the object of attention leads us to ignore anything that doesn't satisfy that specific interest. Voluntary attention controls all our activity. Aware beforehand of the goal we want to achieve, we subordinate everything we encounter to its selective energy. In this search, we only accept what comes from outside to the extent that it contributes to giving us what we are looking for. Involuntary attention is quite different. The directing influence is extrinsic. The focus of attention is given by the things we perceive (MUNSTERBERG apud XAVIER, 1991. p.28).

When we put intention into our searches, intuition takes care of directing the energy of action towards the preconceived goal. The choice of Chanana as a symbolic element to represent the archetype was not a mere coincidence, nor did it require a detailed and complex search. I didn't try to understand its properties and catalogued scientific characteristics, it simply emerged in my internal searches for symbolic similarities even before this research, when thinking about the narrative of the short film. It was as if the flower caught my eye wherever I went. Living at the time in Natal, a city that has adopted the plant as its official symbol, I couldn't help but notice them crossing the concrete, in all the flowerbeds and even in the character's

house, because my attention was on creating the narrative and symbolic conditions for the production of the meaning that I proposed to bring in the editing of the short film and in its visual identity.

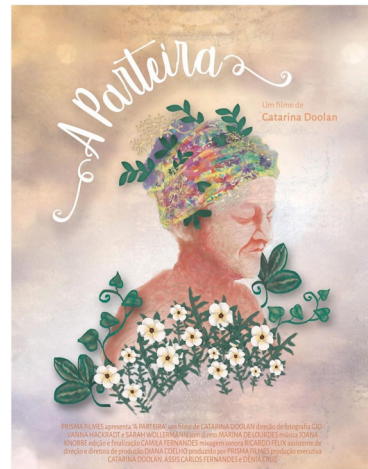


Figure 1. Poster for the film *The Midwife*, 2019, by Catarina Doolan. The Chananas are the base that support the bust, whose image symbolizes the character's wild nature.

So, as I delved deeper into my observations and brought them into the academic field, trying to translate the path I had taken into written language, I already knew which object in nature would symbolize the expression of the wisdom I was seeking internally. This is because a character does not symbolize a single archetype, but represents its strength based on the subjectivities proposed in my intention.

As Balázs would say: “There is nothing more subjective than the objective.” (BALÁZS apud XAVIER, 1991. p.97) So, since the nature that surrounds us is directly symbolic of territory, identity, the body and the feminine itself, I looked at the *Turnera Subulata Sm.*¹ (Chanana or Xanana) plant for characteristics that shape the character's universe and profile, looking for symbolic information that reinforces archetypal characteristics such as resilience, strength and persistence.

1. *Turnera Subulata sm* is a hardy and expansive plant, often mistaken for dandelion grass, which has medicinal properties.

From the symbolic identification with the flower and bringing my subjectivity experienced in the interpretation of the data analyzed (characteristics of the flower + characteristics of the character) we have as a result the form of an archetype that can be experienced by the receiver of the narrative created around this heroine. Her representative symbol is therefore the Chanana.

Finally, realizing my learning relationship with the character and identifying the archetype in me, I put the researched symbols to the test to express them in the metaphorical account of a new film: the feature film *Iron Woman*, which is in the development phase at the time of writing this work.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHANANA

According to records from the Botanical Garden in Rio de Janeiro, *Turnera Subulata Sm.* belongs to the *Turneraceae* family and grows spontaneously in Latin America. It is a typical plant of the coastal sandbanks of Tropical America and is found in abundance in northeastern Brazil.

Popularly known as Chanana, Damiana or Flor-do-Guarujá, it has a reputation for being considered to be a weed, i.e. a plant that is unwanted by human activities, whether in agricultural plantations or on city flowerbeds.



Figure 1. *Turnera Subulata Sm.* (Chanana).
Photo: Ricardo Cardoso Antônio (Unirio)

Chanana's cultivation characteristics show that it likes full sun; it can thrive and develop in poorly fertile, sandy and saline soil; it has good branching and propagates easily through cuttings (branches and shoots) or seeds; it attracts pollinators; it is hardy and therefore doesn't require much care. It is a perennial (long-lasting) plant, it flowers all year round and is very resistant to drier periods, but it grows where there is running water (which is why it is often found in flowerbeds where watering is constant and where water runs off during rainy periods). It is an Unconventional Food Plant (PANC). In addition to beautifying the garden and brightening up the environment.

It has healing and medicinal properties, such as: antibacterial, aphrodisiac, helps regulate women's hormones (menstrual cycles), antidepressant and anxiolytic; and has been used to improve the immune system in the treatment of AIDS and cancer patients, according to the UFMA Phytotherapy Program, coordinated by Dr. Terezinha Rêgo. It was recognized as a symbol of the city of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, by Municipal Law 05350/2 of January 17, 2002. In other words, a plant that is recognizably from Rio Grande do Norte.

DONANA'S SPEECH

Ana Maria Valcácio, known as Donana, is a 69-year-old single mother of five, daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter of midwives, from São Gonçalo do Amarante, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. She identifies herself as a white woman burnt by the sun from working in the fields, with African heritage and a relationship with the indigenous heritage of the people who inhabited the region, from whom she inherits the tradition and knowledge of midwifery and medicinal herbs. She is a mother of saints in the Candomblé religion, a nursing technician

and a traditional midwife. She serves on the Municipal Health Council and the Association of Midwives of São Gonçalo do Amarante. She carries the political struggle for women's health, childbirth and humanized birth through tradition. A herbalist, she takes care of everyone in the community who comes to her, without judgment as to their origin. She doesn't deny care (from bandages to bottles and spiritual consultations).



Figure 2 Character: Ana Maria Valcácio (Donana). Photo: frame from the movie *The Midwife*, 2019 by Catarina Doolan.

By analyzing the character's speech and behavior, it is possible to identify the various faces that the character has, aspects that lead to their personality traits, the values they carry and their life story, as is the case in the "Coffee Scene".

In this unpretentious and spontaneous conversation between women: crew, director, Donana and her daughter, Manuela, they talk about topics such as sexuality, gender, the right to birth and respect. The whole conversation has a lively and free tone, demonstrating the joy of female freedom and the freedom of choice of any human being, as well as the challenges imposed by the "daring" way of being a woman.

"I've learned since childhood that sexuality is a matter for every human being. It's since then that the right of a woman to decide when she wants to have a relationship, with whom she wants to have it, in what form she wants to have it, has to be strengthened.

Because every human being has to decide their own field. No one is going to decide my life or yours. Nor my way of living together, nor yours. You assume yourself as you are!" (Donana, recording of the movie *The Midwife*)

These themes range from her reputation as a flirt to her defiant tone towards her father, who judged her friendships and expected his daughter to date in order to get married, when she wanted to study in order to gain her independence, as if that were a daring thing to do. And so she did, taking on the role of breadwinner from an early age, working outside to make ends meet, a lesson she learned from her grandmother due to the harshness of working in the fields. In fact, she was considered a "brave" and "hot-tempered" grandmother, who used her temperament to be obeyed and to protect herself and her daughters from men and thieves. Donana believes she inherited her boldness from her grandmother. The same grandmother who taught her the harshness of life in the countryside and the herbs of the forest.

At this stage of the film it is possible to perceive characteristics of: leadership, courage, initiative, independence and action ("daring"), perseverance, sexual freedom, individual freedom (respect), joy and strength or ancestral heritage. Characteristics of a great "Matriarch", i.e. the leader of a family centered on the mother, are clearly seen throughout the film crew's presence: when she commands, the sons and daughters obey; the house is moved around by the daughters and the sons help with whatever is needed (like Manuel who takes her everywhere by car); when she welcomes any individual who needs welcoming (as long as they don't do anything 'wrong' in terms of the values cultivated in her home). As well as her biological children, Donana has her spiritual children, as a priestess, and she is also the godmother of many of those she has helped to bring into the world. In fact,

it is traditionally said that a midwife always becomes the godmother of the lives she has given birth to.

Her spontaneous, cheerful and captivating personality makes her shine wherever she goes. The importance she attaches to her individuality and freedom of being is also her “condemnation” to being a “single mother”, since she won’t accept marrying anyone who disrespects her and betrays her trust, or as she says in the recordings: “who drinks to annoy me, who doubts me and bears false witness to me.” This doesn’t mean that she stays alone, Donana is an attractive woman and likes to date. She is always accompanied by her comadres and family. She is, however, her best companion.

She stands out for her boldness, for speaking her mind and for dressing according to her personality: cheerful and full of life. She leads a humble life with many financial challenges, but considers herself prosperous. Her “boldness” in defending her freedom was, for a long time, a source of much suffering. When asked what it means to be a woman, Donana doesn’t hesitate to answer: “It means being made of iron”. But she goes on to reflect on the weight of being iron and the lightness of being love: “Woman is the beginning of love.” And she argues that every woman is made to love herself first, so that she can love others.

This relationship of strength and love, armor and lightness, is the challenge for women to find, nurture and stand firm in their self-love. Chanana is underestimated for her fragile appearance, but like Donana, she remains firm in her flourishing.

THE IRON WOMAN ARCHETYPE IS BORN

The following table aims to compare some of the characteristics raised between Chanana and the character, in order to formalize the “Iron Woman” archetype, which here symbolizes a representation of Brazilian women, without limiting it to the archetype studied.

Chanana	Donana	Archetype
Solar	Bright, inspiring, active	Self-love, vanity, initiative (action energy)
Grows and thrives in poorly fertile, sandy soil	Prosperous, despite adversity	Prosperity and courage
Spreads easily	Expansive, bold	Expansion, boldness, spontaneity
Attracts pollinators, easy to sow	Mother, expand your science	Mother, mother, teacher
Resilient	Resilient, strong	Strength, resilience
Strong, long roots	Grounded, ancestral strength	Grounded, firm
Blooms all year round	Alegor and renewal	Joy; the power to transform
Medicinal	Healer	Healer
PANC (Unconventional Food Plant)	Helping and feeding those in need	Nurturing
It is always among other plants	Sense of collectivity, never walks alone	Leadership, collectivity

Table 1. Characteristics

Based on a subjective analysis of the data collected on Chanana and the data collected on the personality traits of the character Donana, it is possible to identify a relationship of similarities in terms of cultural, social and, above all, territorial aspects.

By processing the symbolic characteristics in connection with my own identification as a Brazilian, northeastern and Potiguar woman, in my particular context, I was able to observe aspects inherent to the oppressed layers of our society, here related to the black, indigenous, spiritualist and free woman. The need to constantly fight to maintain individual

freedom, which is often “pruned” and “torn away”, makes us realize how unwanted women are who dare to break imposed standards and stereotypes.

As an archetype, it is essential to observe the characteristics raised, also when they are out of balance. Often the “Iron Woman” carries within her a “Wild Woman” who is trapped. Her armor can also be her prison. The imbalance of an archetype is related to the social imbalance in which the subject finds him/herself. Therefore, when activating this archetype, it is necessary to observe, for example, the exaggeration of aspects that are more interesting to society, which will be more valued, unconsciously, by the subject. For example: the nurturing, strong, resilient and motherly characteristics can lead a woman to believe that she has to take responsibility for caring for everyone and that she can bear any weight they give her, exhausting herself and not allowing herself to rest and be vulnerable. These characteristics can be balanced by seeking the strength of her sexuality and spontaneity, in her boldness when it comes to making decisions that are important to her, and in her self-love, archetypal traits of the “Wild Woman”, studied by Dr. Estés. The path to be taken by the heroine, in the narrative of the Brazilian woman in search of her liberation, requires discovering that her strengths are hidden by this imbalance.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This subject and the development, strengthening and analysis of this archetype is not exhausted here, since it is still necessary to make the narrative object to materialize the concept, as well as to search for the archetype in previously created narratives without first having a form and a name for it, to give life and territory where the archetype can expand.

By conceptualizing an archetype and materializing it in this article and in artistic

works by women, men and free beings, it is like projecting the voice of those who were silenced in the past. From the creation of the archetype, a myth is created, the myth of the Brazilian woman, who had to learn through suffering the audacity to be free. She has inherited from her ancestors resistance and survival in a world of heroes and girls, the weak and the oppressed. Through the conception of a myth that doesn't sit back and wait to be saved, we can help bring about cyclical narratives that embrace humanity in all its facets and open up a world of narrative possibilities. The archetype of the “Iron Woman” is therefore configured not as a heroine who has come to save the world from the oppressors - this would be her unbalanced aspect - but rather to walk a journey in communion with other women and men who understand the strength that this archetype carries, which is also pure love.

“The instructions found in the stories confirm to us that the path is not over, but that it leads women further, and even further, in the direction of their own knowledge” (ESTÉS, 2018, p. 18). Bringing the archetype of the “Iron Woman” to female consciousness is like dressing the “Wild Woman” in her armor to walk through this oppressive society, but with enough flexibility to move as a wolf, spread her seeds and strengthen her roots as a flower. Thus, during the winter and in dry, oppressive and constantly “pruned” territories, they reserve the strength of their thick, deep roots for the rainy season, when the chanas are reborn stronger.

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