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LIGHT IN MANGO YELLOW: A FOCUS ON REALIST AESTHETICS IN THE FILM DIRECTED BY CLÁUDIO ASSIS

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Abstract: According to Andrew (2002, p. 91), although there is no doubt that the dominant theoretical trend in the first decades of cinema was formative, there was an undercurrent, in fact a counter-current, which constituted the beginning of the realist tradition. Theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, focusing on Realism as a cinematographic theory, made very important considerations and took a new look at narrative in cinema. This article analyzes the film *Amarelo manga*, directed by Cláudio Assis, in the light of the realist theories of Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin. Kracauer examines science for its excessive abstraction and proposes a reconnection with concrete reality through cinema, which is capable of recording everyday life with singular fidelity. In line with this, Bazin sees cinematic realism as an opportunity for the viewer to experience a reflexive approach to reality, without merely attempting to reproduce it. *Amarelo manga* stands out for its deep exploration of Recife's urban daily life, bringing up philosophical and social reflections on alienation and automatism in modern life. In an emblematic sequence, it portrays various forms of eating, reflecting the mechanized and silent social routine, inciting the viewer to critical awareness. The film's visceral narrative is illustrated by characters such as Kika, a symbol of religious and sexual repression, who expresses her internal conflict through a liberating and violent outburst, expressing the underlying social and cultural criticism. The production stands out for the deliberate absence of *storyboarding*, emphasizing spontaneity and creativity in the construction of scenes, providing an authentic and impactful cinematic experience. The treatment given to eroticism and the constant presence of death in the work remains on an artistic and poetic level, in line with Bazin's ideas on cinematic representation. *Amarelo manga* transcends simple film narrative by presenting itself as

a philosophical and critical exercise, offering the viewer another perception of social reality. Cláudio Assis therefore materializes the aspirations of realist theorists, using cinema as an effective instrument to provoke reflection and cultural transformation.

Keywords: *Amarelo manga*. Cinema. Realism. Kracauer. Bazin.

Siegfried Kracauer, in his text "Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality" (1997), focuses directly on the conception of the purpose of cinema in the life of man. In a summary of the situation of modern man, he attributes the diffusion and emptiness found in contemporary life to the disappearance and fragmentation of ideologies. J. D. Andrew defines how the Russian filmmaker and thinker sees the ideological void created and not filled by science:

Kracauer insisted that the failure of science was the result of its incessant plunge into abstraction. Instead of helping us learn to know, love and live in harmony with the things and beings of the world, science consistently dissected these things and beings in search of the higher laws that control them. It has sacrificed intimate knowledge of the earth to allow us to "understand" more phenomena from more perspectives. Because it always considers things from an abstract point of view, science has enabled us to deal easily with phenomena (our technological instruments are an obvious measure of this), but we have lost the sense of "thing" in things. The phenomena we confront are not evaluated in themselves, but only insofar as they participate in broad patterns in our minds or in the "minds" of our computers. Without any unifying belief, we are living in a fragmented world of intersecting patterns, barely touching the physical universe that these patterns are supposed to explain (Andrew, 2002, p. 106).

But is it possible to regain a sense of things, reversing the trend towards "false scientific truth?" Kracauer argues that an unconditional

return to outdated pre-scientific ideologies and religions is not the solution. He believes that one must sail forward with science, working and refining it, through its non-abstraction, in order to reach the safe harbors of the world itself. When the world of objects is allowed to speak directly to those who access it, the ability to escape from the solipsism of standards arises, providing the real possibility of generating something new, a different way of seeing the world, a new ideology, with the strength to add the human being to a culture, intimate to it. Achieving this would be what we might call, on our own, a metathematic utopia, a culture solidly based and solidified on the theme, responding naturally to the theme.

In order to establish a supremacy of communion, a new ideology needs to be qualitatively different from the worldviews that have existed in the past. It must not, like them, be a system worked out in mass and applied, with greater or lesser success, to everyday life and human experience. In order to have a lasting effect on culture, such an ideology would have to be born naturally from culture itself, not from people who are averse to it. This can only happen if it resonates with the surrounding cultural world.

In Andrew's view, this task of re-tuning is not essentially scientific - science usually invests its product in the direction of systematic interests. Until now, this mission has been assigned to art, which supposedly elevates our experience of life. The Russian formalists gave voice to this project. But Kracauer thought that art had failed and had unconsciously acted directly in the dilution of culture. For him, art always begins with imaginative patterns that appeal to the viewer and then works these patterns into a physical vehicle. It is conceived from above, from a high level of generality, and makes its way down to experience. No matter how realistic his intentions may be, the traditional artist subjugates reality when

creating his autonomous work. He necessarily makes reality adapt to his vision of it. And although the viewer may believe that he is finally close to pure experience, he is in fact re-experiencing in a new way the same patterns that shape his daily life and actions. Kracauer states that the experience of reality in cinema goes far beyond the image recorded on the film and the camera's ability to capture it:

It rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality. Now this reality includes many phenomena which would hardly be perceived were it not for the motion picture camera's ability to catch them on the wing. And since any medium is partial to the things it is uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat (Kracauer, 1997, p. 9).

The material of life manipulated by the filmmaker in a different way can bring salvation from cultural abstractionism, from which art in general has not been able to escape. When cinema art "captures" reality to create its works, it displays it more fully than traditional art - "Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat." Instead of forcing reality by adopting an artistic pattern, it follows nature's own patterns. Cinema is a process that starts at the grassroots and can rediscover the world we have eliminated in exchange for general scientific knowledge. Again in Andrew:

Kracauer's conception of the purpose of cinema, as well as his advice on the correct cinematic approach, is closely related to his theory of the uses and methods of history. In a posthumously published treatise on historiography, Kracauer specifically linked the task of the historian to that of the photographer. He initially attacked all

ideological histories, whether Marxist or Christian. He then condemned 20th century attempts to draw up grand evolutionary schemes, such as those of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Kracauer has praise only for the modest historian, for the specialist who pays meticulous attention to the details and objective facts that are the substance of life and its history (Andrew, 2002, p. 107).

When the light of realist aesthetics penetrates more deeply into *Amarelo manga*, a film by Brazilian director Cláudio Assis, released in 2002, to observe the treatment given to human experiences, beyond the simple capture of images by means of elaborate shots, one notices the director's extraordinary philosophical ability to situate his discussion in the mobile field of the intimacy of being, without extricating it from the social context. Assis demonstrates that both the film and the historical account can serve philosophical purposes, even though they themselves are not philosophical. They exist as if they were the dressing rooms of the great theaters, where the unified systems of culture are put on. It is necessary to understand them and go through them in order to penetrate the greatness of the composition of these systems, which are presented daily on the stage of life.

One of the moments in *Amarelo Mango* that is reminiscent of a philosophical incursion, starting from aspects of social reality, takes place during the camera's walk through the city of Recife, when everyone is having lunch. She presents lunch in the city. Family lunches, restaurant lunches, beggar's lunches, packed lunches. The sequence is always interspersed with shots of the big city and is not made up of any of the characters named in the film. They are images of ordinary real people eating as if they were programmed to do so. Nothing happens in the city at that moment, apart from the silent eating. Then the viewer begins to hear the voice of Mr. Bianor, who asks about

the capitals of some countries, and that of the priest, who answers the questions, while they have lunch at the table with the other guests in a small room at the Texas Hotel.

Among other discussions, such as hunger and urban loneliness in big cities, Cláudio Assis reveals in this sequence a representation of the spectator himself, inserted in a social reality, where he obeys a kind of contract, which he doesn't break so as not to subvert the order. Life exudes itself in a pre-established time, which even determines the physiological condition of the human being. The filmmaker envisions for the viewer the possibility of rediscovering the world, the awakening of a critical sense. In an interview with Eduardo Simões, available on the *Cult* magazine website, he says:

My cinema is very much plugged into social reality. I think the world is very unfair to everyone. And, as much as issues such as love and the anarchy of the poet come into play, we have a social problem that is very serious and cannot be ignored. And the moment I have to be present at this discussion is in a movie (Assis, apud Simões, 2011).

Experimenting with analytical reasoning, through a film narrative that brings the viewer closer to their own context, undoubtedly contributes to changing the way of perceiving the world and understanding what is cognizable. Andrew argues that Kracauer ended his work on film theory by aiming to find peace and communal friendship through their mutual experiences and knowledge. He says that, despite the clashes of ideologies that have caused wars and human aggression in the past, it is to be hoped that a common ideology, based not on schemes but on the facts of earthly experience, can bring peace and harmony. Cinema, when used appropriately, is already helping to move towards this dream. It becomes appropriate, then, to require filmmakers to take an interest in thinking about the reality that surrounds them. Care in popularizing cinema is fundamental. When

proposing a critical analysis of Hollywood cinema, Kracauer, in his book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of German Cinema*, argues that a nation's films will certainly reflect its mentality, for two reasons:

First, films are never the product of an individual. [...] Since any film production unit encompasses a mixture of heterogeneous interests and inclinations, teamwork in this field tends to rule out arbitrary treatment of film material, suppressing individual peculiarities in favor of traits common to many people. Secondly, films are intended for, and are of interest to, anonymous crowds. Popular films - or, to be more precise, popular film themes - are supposedly made to satisfy the desires of the masses. From time to time it is claimed that Hollywood manages to sell films that don't give the masses what they really want. According to this opinion, Hollywood films, more often than is supposed, ridicule and delude the public, who are persuaded to accept them due to their own passivity and overwhelming publicity (Kracauer, 1988, p. 17 and 18).

In the quest to exercise an analytical capacity, the vision of Brazil in *Amarelo Manga* in the context of Recife is not in line with commercial interests and the mediocre popularization of art. It is possible to see that Assis' production, in its content, does not aim for box office profits. An example of artistic courage and critical interest can be found in the construction of the character Kika, who faces the overwhelming influx of believers in Brazilian churches.

Kika is an evangelical and represses all her desires. Married to the butcher Wellington, who only values her because she is very religious, she lives a life of seclusion and passivity. Her liberation comes when she discovers that her husband has a mistress. That's when she takes out a red lipstick, which she has been hiding from her husband and herself in the back of her closet, as if it were a sinful object. She puts it on her lips and goes to meet Wellington and

his lover Dayse. Kika bites off part of Dayse's ear, then removes an earring with her lover's blood on it from her lips and throws it away. On the way back she meets Isaac, who invites her into his car. Kika accepts and ends up having a violent sexual relationship with Isaac. In the last sequence of the film, she goes into a hairdressing salon and asks to have her hair cut and dyed mango yellow.

In line with Andrew's analysis, we believe that thinking about the purpose of cinema should always provoke discussion. Any theory that proceeds carefully, classifying films based on their cinematic value, will necessarily upset those attracted to films that don't conform to the given definition. Furthermore, it is salutary to admit that nothing will ever completely obliterate the differences between realists and formalists, which have existed since the birth of photography, because such discussions are largely the result of opposing starting points. No matter how many examples there are on the subject, some statements remain unchanged in a realist conception of art. Cinema is much more a product of photography than of editing procedures or other formative processes. Photography, for its part, is first and foremost a process linked to the objects it records, rather than a procedure that transforms those objects.

UNDER THE FOCUS OF THE CRITICAL FUNCTION

In the realms of the realist tradition, the Frenchman André Bazin, one of the most important film theorists, advocates the construction of a critical gaze, where the quality of each moment in the film depends on the duration experienced. Andrew (2002, p. 139) reflects on this theorist's fundamental beliefs regarding the importance of cinema and how Bazin's deep love for the reality provided by this vehicle is understood. According to Andrew, Bazin's qualities as an ardent lover of the

earth - for Bazin it could offer us unbelievable revelations - will be directly reflected in his ideas. His incontinent passion for geology, zoology and botany leaves traces that his main purpose was to establish cinema's contribution to our discovery of nature. Bazin breaks with the avant-garde theorists and believes that the trajectory of cinema should not follow the path of its pure development towards plasticity and the devaluation of narrative. For him, the search should be for a constant progression towards an increasingly realistic narrative style: cinema as a unique and valuable instrument of knowledge, perception and, ultimately, action.

Andrew also emphasizes that Bazin's love for cinema was self-sufficient, that he saw it as an intrinsically valuable entity. His creation of the magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* is testimony to this value. Truly, he never stopped insisting on the role that reality can play in filmmaking. His conception insists that his interest remains an art that seeks out the refractions of reality, not reality itself. His advocacy of an approach without pre-established styles can be understood not as a desire to put cinema aside in the face of a reality that is generally distorted, but as a way of creating a new kind of cinema - a narrative that intimately incorporates its raw material, but remains forever cinema. Bazin shed a lot of light on his ideas by referring to writers such as Hemingway and Dos Passos, who renounced an exquisite "literary quality" in order to capture not reality itself, but a proximity to reality. The French theorist wanted cinema to acquire new styles in order to surpass itself; he was convinced that "realism" was the main alternative towards such progress.

It's not too hard to see that *Yellow Mango* claims a position within a new and alternative style. It goes beyond a simple representation of the world; it sheds light on scenes from life and reality, almost like a vivid portrait, colored with a peculiar and courageous style. Although it is set in Recife, with all its peculiarities, it is not a regionalist film, limited to the realistic representation of the lives of the marginalized

people of Recife. As in the reality of the whole country, the emptiness of the labor exploiter's conscience and the alienation of a large part of the workers are integrated and reproduce the patriarchal mentality, which destroys the strength for possible social transformation. *Amarelo Manga's* narrative features emblematic figures of this context, such as the characters Bianor, who uses the workers' labour to satisfy his economic interests, and Wellington and Isaac, who rationalize women's sexual freedom to satisfy their own needs, maintaining domination and reproducing exploitation. The patriarch, be he the owner or the worker, becomes a universal figure in the narrative, an active link in the contemporary economic system.

The narrative of *Amarelo Manga* begins with Lúcia waking up very early, a shot that is presented to us using the *plongée* technique (high angle), causing us to feel trapped. First in the bedroom, the camera pans around the house until the character's first line: "First comes the day, everything happens that day [...], but then the day comes again and it goes on and on and on and on". The whole film takes place over the course of one day, with time as the determining aspect in the narrative, which has a deep core of social criticism embedded in the theme. One of the most poignant works of contemporary Brazilian cinema, *Amarelo Manga* penetrates the existential core without fear, resisting and opening a deep cut and exacerbating the symptoms and creatures that inhabit the pulp of a dogmatized and stunned society. In Assis' film, social life and everyday life are treated in a visceral way through the construction of the types and attitudes of the characters who concentrate a miscellany of pulsating feelings, guilt and moral decadence. These personifications, coupled with a stunning narrative that runs along a razor's edge, make for thought-provoking objects of analysis from a critical perspective.

Cláudio Assis, from Caruaru in Pernambuco, sets his story in Recife and imprints the marks of his experience on the narrative. It creates and provides the ideal environment for aesthetic and existential discussions, which are stylistically unusual. The work with reality is intense and inexorable, stitching together the linguistic variant, the scenery, the lighting, the costumes and the photography, which, efficiently exploited, shape the mirror in which the exterior and interior human image is reflected, pulsating in a rhythm of personal identification or repudiation for those who look at it. If the representation of images relates to the states of space and the senses, when it moves and transfigures, it will determine the artistic intention of the narrative. The category of formal content, which promotes spatial and temporal relations, is shown in the filmic text by the representation of the image.

For Bazin, cinema is not just a lens through which to look at nature, but a remarkable product of science and nature that can contribute to the transformation of reality. His desire to see cinema expand into new areas was fueled by his concern for the future of cinematic art and social reality, or at least our relationship with reality. Ismail Xavier, in the first introduction to *The Experience of Cinema*, highlights how Bazin sees the relationship between cinema and reality:

The fundamental question of his theory is the “presence of the real” in the image obtained by the automatic recording of the camera, a presence that defines an “ontological”, ethical commitment specific to cinema as a form of representation. For Bazin, strictly speaking, cinema does not present things, it is a decal of the world, and it is this essential link with reality that marks its value and destiny within culture. His thinking radically shifts the axis of the question of the specificity of cinema: instead of privileging montage, he privileges the reproduction of the *continuum* of life (Xavier, 1983, p. 23).

In his concern, Bazin’s attitude is similar to that of Kracauer. Both see cinema as a substantial resource for providing a common understanding of culture, from which new and lasting social relationships can begin to be forged. Seen together, these two film thinkers turned their ideals towards creative energy, which should be directed towards the ambiguous mystery of nature and the future. However, we can see that Bazin’s aspirations for the life of the human being in society, propositions that feed on the philosophical thought of Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, surpass those of Kracauer. Andrew (ibid. p. 140) explains that, based on various thinkers such as Teilhard, Malraux, Marcel and Sartre himself, Bazin took on board the belief in the evolution of the earth itself and all forms of life, grasped the ability to read in the arts of the past the development of the creative mentality in the face of the human condition and sought out and incorporated the sense of adventure associated with authentic life. For him, cinema is a light that “the traveling man” (Marcel’s expression) can keep burning to free him from the darkness that surrounds him when he wants to project himself towards the future and a destiny to be created.

Cinematographic production will always have, within it, a certain *status* as a sixth sense, or even as a privileged instrument within its vision of the world. Cinema, far beyond photographic images, in its relationship with time and reality, surpasses photography, from which it originated:

From this perspective, cinema becomes the achievement in time of photographic objectivity. Film is no longer content to preserve for us the object sealed in the instant, like amber the intact body of insects from an extinct era, it frees baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. For the first time, the image of things is also the image of their duration, like a mummy of mutation (Bazin, 1991, p. 24).

The transformation of the cinematographic narrative, revealing much more than what is set out, is directly linked to technique and scientific research, but not only. Creativity and artistic ability are also driving forces behind the development of differentiated cinematography. Unusual films like *Cada um com seu cinema* (*Chacun son cinéma* or *Ce petit coup au coeur quand la lumière s'éteint et que le film commence*, 2007) give us this certainty. The film was produced in honor of the sixtieth anniversary of the Cannes Film Festival. The festival's president, Gilles Jacob, invited great filmmakers such as David Cronenberg, Takeshi Kitano, Gus Van Sant and Lars Von Trier, a total of thirty-five, who filmed three-minute shorts and made a feature film together at . The theme that unites the directors in this work is their love of cinema. The diversity and metalanguage of the short films produced show that enthusiasm for the art of cinema is universal and that each cultural experience that comes from it is completely unique. However, this diversity of experimentation forms a single body, a single narrative.

The film *Amarelo Mango* is also the result of an essentially authorial experience, escaping the Hollywood pasteurization and increasing standardization that we currently see in Brazilian productions. It is innovative, including in its production technique. Cláudio Assis didn't use a *storyboard* (a sequential outline of the script in drawings), he preferred to exercise cerebral cinema, filming the sequences from his imaginative creativity, in agreement with his realistic and poetic-narrative sense. In the same interview given to the *Cult* magazine website, he talks about the need to reinvent cinema and the search for the new:

In Brazilian cinema, it's very sad to see younger people wanting to repeat what already exists, there is no cinema of reinvention. As much as people say that cinema is a new art, it's dying out, so we need a new look, one that isn't bound by rules, stereotypes and the market" (Assis, apud Simões, 2011).

Assis' new look and re-creation are forceful and present throughout the film. One of the most striking sequences in *Amarelo Mango* is starring the character Aurora, whose very name is the antithesis of life. Aurora is sick and has constant complications when it comes to breathing. At one point, alone in her room, a gloomy environment with poor lighting, Aurora, lying on her bed, uses an inhaler. As she thinks about life and her past, she breathes with difficulty, absorbing the oxygen coming through the pipe, making a sound as if she were on the verge of death. She removes the part of the inhaler that covers her mouth and nose and moves it to her vagina, in the act of masturbation, as if she wanted to breathe through it. There is a concomitant pleasure in sex and the act of breathing. The atmosphere provided by the scenes is surreal and funereal. That obese lady, masturbating as if she needed to breathe, evokes a shocking sense of eroticism and death. The eroticization and presence of death observed in this sequence are intertwined in the film as a whole.

Finishing with Bazin's discussions, we have eroticism as one of the important points in his theorization of cinema. In his article, *Eroticism in Cinema*, he clarifies that eroticism must remain much more on the plane of the imagination than in the explicit documentary act:

It's quite obvious [...] that if we want to remain on the plane of art, we have to stick to the imaginary. I have to consider what happens on screen as a simple story, an evocation that never takes place on the plane of reality, unless I subject myself to the complicit transference of an act, or at least an emotion, the realization of which requires secrecy. This means that cinema can say everything, but by no means show everything. There are no sexual situations, moral or not, scandalous or banal, normal or pathological, whose expression on screen is forbidden *a priori*, on the condition, however, that the possibilities of abstraction of cinematographic language are used, so that the image never assumes documentary value (Bazin, 1983, p. 140-141).

Assis follows this path with mastery, his erotic appeal receiving the treatment of art in the best sense of the word. When he removes the veil of morality and good manners in his scenes that shock the viewer, he is poetic and pictorial. To understand cinema, with all its poetry and context, is to consider its origins and observe the directions of its growth in an ever-changing environment. Bazin sees cinema as the product of realist roots. Realism, as an artistic style or school, originally comes from painting, which since the Renaissance has sought to represent the observable world. He shows this in a precious way in his essay *Ontology of the photographic image* (1991). Filmmaking also received a major boost from literature in the direction of realistic narrative. Since the emergence of the novel, literature has been moving solidly towards an ideal that reached its apogee in the various movements of Realism. Cinema accepted and moved directly towards this wave of impulses, bringing the possibility of liberating both literature and painting from what could be called the neurosis of imitation. The scientific spirit is another important factor, which led to the invention of the very apparatus needed for cinema.

For Andrew, of all the researchers involved in the origin and discovery of cinema, Bazin has a preference for Étienne-Jules Marey, who spent his life trying to understand the movement of birds and animals, even before cinema was conceived. This desire for cinematic knowledge was necessary for him and his curiosity about the world contributed to the invention of the cinematograph, years later, by the Lumière brothers. Marey can be considered an emblem of his generation, a generation that shows in countless ways an incredible wave of popular interest in how the world exists and works - cinema arose in the context of this need to satisfy such curiosity. Popular culture played the other important role in the origin and development of cinematography. Cinema continues to serve artistic knowledge and the entertainment industry, and is heavily promoted by it. In his texts, Bazin repeatedly mentions the relationship between cinema and its realistic characteristics and *music hall*, cheap soap opera and melodramatic theater. He believes that it is as impossible to ignore the sociological function of cinema as it is to ignore its congenital realism.

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