

Hollywood Aesthetic Hegemony and forms of Resistance

Johanna Gondar Hildenbrand¹, Francisco Farias²

¹ Ph.D. in Social Memory, Social Memory Graduate Program, Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro.

² Ph.D. in Psychology, professor, Social Memory Graduate Program, Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Scholarship CNPq, PQ2, Process: 307589/2018-8

Abstract— *The aim of this paper is, in a first moment, to characterize what we are calling Hollywood aesthetic hegemony, through the blockbusters, to later realize how it affects its spectators in subjective scope. Next, we will identify different cinematographic movements, of different nationalities, - here we will work specifically the French Nouvelle Vague and the Danish Dogma 95 - that have in common a same search: an image policy that resists the spectacular and the standardization of sensations. We want to understand how the forms of resistance to this type of aesthetics, provided by another type of relationship with the images themselves, affect us transforming our sensitivity and with it our memory.*

Keywords— *Aesthetics, Cinema, Memory, Resistance, Subjectivity..*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1895 the world of art would change forever through the presentation to the public of the first cinematographic images. The milestone of the public projection of cinema was in the Indien Sólón of the Grand Café in Paris, where the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière present to the public, on December 28, 1895, the cinematograph - the forerunner of the projector. In this presentation the Lumière brothers exhibited the film "The arrival of the train to the station of La Ciotat", that entered the history of the cinema like one of its founding images causing great impact in the spectators, who could swear that a real train was coming towards them, not a projection of it.

We can say that a lot has changed since the first presentation of the cinematographic images and the films that make us go to the movies these days. From simple images, like a train coming toward you, we could see the birth of stories with complex characters and many narrative experiments. It was a long trajectory of aesthetic transformations along with transformations in our own society. For, as the philosopher Walter Benjamin noted, our sensibility and perception are historical, and are capable of going through variations at different historical times: "The era of the barbarian invasions, during which the artistic industry of the Lower Roman Empire and the Genesis of Vienna arose, had not only an art different from that which characterized the classical period, but also another form of perception" (BENJAMIN, [1936] 1994, p.169).

In the early years of the twentieth century, cinema "witnessed a series of successive reorganizations in its production, distribution and exhibition" (COSTA, 2006,

p.17), and also in its aesthetics, until it reached the stability that characterized classic Hollywood cinema - with its linear form of storytelling - between 1915 and the beginning of television in the 1950s, with the end of the so-called "the golden age". But even through a difficult period in the late 1950s, Hollywood still can still be considered the place that produces the most expensive and most profitable films in the film industry. Nowadays its main products are the famous Blockbusters, films under which we will clearly identify a hegemonic aesthetic standard that will be established in the course of the work.

We can say, in contemporary times, that both the artistic forms and the sensibility and perception of Western societies continue to change. We can also say that these transformations tend to be motivated, also, by the incessant technological advances that we have undergone since the end of the nineteenth century.

The aim of this paper is, in a first moment, to characterize what we are calling Hollywood aesthetic hegemony, through the blockbusters, to later realize how it affects its spectators in subjective scope. Next, we will identify different cinematographic movements, of different nationalities, - here we will work specifically the French Nouvelle Vague and the Danish Dogma 95 - that have in common a same search: an image policy that resists the spectacular and the standardization of sensations. We want to understand how the forms of resistance to this type of aesthetics, provided by another type of relationship with the images themselves, affect us transforming our sensitivity and with it our memory.

The idea of a hegemonic cinematography, within a circuit of production, distribution and exhibition carried out by the great North American entertainment corporations, especially the Hollywood majors, is only understood from a counterpoint perspective with the national cinematography's scattered around the world. And, through the cinema as a means of expression of an epoch, it is possible to see how the use of certain aesthetic forms affect the production of sensibility of a certain historical period, how strong the connection between sensitivity and memory is, and how they build, or impact, subjectivity.

II. THE HOLLYWOODIAN AESTHETIC HEGEMONY THROUGH THE BLOCKBUSTERS

In contemporary times, we quickly identify Hollywood's standard aesthetics through what we know as a blockbuster movie. Soon we think of movies with big budgets, big box office, big actors, that is, films that call our attention for its extravagance.

In the early 1970s the success of catastrophic films as such *The Poseidon Adventure*, 1972, by Ronald Neame and *Earthquake*, 1974, by Mark Robson, opened the doors for the studios to invest in a new cycle of films, a cycle that continues to this day with the blockbusters, which has its mark with the release of the film *Jaws*, 1975, by Steven Spielberg.

Justin Wyatt, in his book *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (1994), defines the blockbusters as having the logic of today's multimedia conglomerates, which encompasses both the commercialization of the cinematographic image itself in various forms - from VHS to Blu-ray and nowadays reaching the streaming - until the commercialization of the greatest number of attainable items: soundtrack, games, clothes, toys, decoration items, different types of edits, etc. The plots, and its aesthetics, are idealized already thinking of hooks of marketing through the diverse medias. It is the economic surpassing the artistic.

In this "Hollywood conglomerate," the main product is the blockbuster. And the financial investment is so great - high cost caches and special effects; high number of copies and mass advertising - that even if there is a box office loss, which is a common thing, it is soon reversed in the "secondary display markets and related products" (MASCARELLO, 2006, p.349).

So far, we have realized that in relation to the economic aspect the blockbuster does not disappoint. But what about the artistic issue? What happens to other

filmic aspects, such as narrative, when the most valued issue is economic?

The Brazilian author Fernando Mascarello writes in an article called *Dick Tracy* the high concept film and Brazilian cinema (2005), that blockbuster, due to the predominance of market factors (such as the hiring of famous actors and marketing campaigns), ends up for sacrificing his narrative. This means that factors such as dramaturgical work - the art of composing and representing a story on the scene - and the characterization of the characters are left to second plane, or sometimes not even this, due to the spectacularization of the image.

According to the author, the narrative of the blockbuster is a simple narrative, not very significant and fragmented in modules, "characterized by a work of spectacularization or stylization that exceeds the requirements of the narrative" (MASCARELLO, 2006: 338). That is, it is predominantly a narrative of superficial character, modular and spectacular, not giving rise to a sophisticated plot.

Mascarello (2005, p. 70) says that this imbalance (in relation to the classic Hollywood balance) between the spectacle and the narrative occurs in contemporary times, undoubtedly, for an economic and industrial question. And because of the privileges to market, not artistic, factors, they are often Hollywood's most profitable films.

The Hollywood blockbusters are looking at a global market, and, on account of this, favor a standard aesthetic, extinguishing all the particular characteristics of a certain culture, such as regional forms and gestures, in order to a hegemonic model. Mascarello (2006, p. 335) says that this model is seen as an "aesthetic and sociocultural decadence". First, it weakens the narrative of the films; second, by the juvenilization of the audiences and third, the saturation releases of the blockbusters would result in a reduction to the spaces of exhibition of Brazilian films and international art films, fomenting a preference to the spectacle and the action in relation to the characters and dramaturgy, which would lead to lesser psychic investment by viewers. This entails restricting the creative thinking of the viewer. Its aesthetics is standardized in order to be consumed in all parts of the world, leaving no room for different types of interpretation of what is seen on the screen.

Due to the special effects currently available, such as 3D advancement, HD imaging and the dominance of robotic technology, contemporary blockbusters - such as *Avatar*, *Transformers* and *Jurassic World* - tend to create very realistic scenes in which we can hardly identify what actually exists and what is visual effect. In these

examples, everything is demonstrated through dialogues and exaggerated images: the screams, the explosions, the sound itself is very present and excessive leaving no loose ends, all actions and happenings are justified throughout the film.

That is, there is no place for any mystery or enigma. Nor are there subtleties or nuances, just the reality that is being violently imposed on human perception on the screen. The filmmakers appropriate an imaging technology and bring to us realities, of means of expression (images and sounds extremely realistic), ready and do not require interpretive efforts to make sense. Meaning is already given to us.

This would hinder our capacity for singularity, or rather, integrate the perceptions that we are subjected to our individual or collective memories. This means that Hollywood's hegemonic aesthetics would be hampering our ability to elaborate as experience (BENJAMIN, 1989) what we are seeing, in other words, would be hampering our ability to create meaning for ourselves through the image. Therefore, we are faced with a standardized form of thought that is fomented by Hollywood aesthetic hegemony.

On the other hand, there are still national movements interested in resisting this Hollywood industry. And as we shall see below, resistance will come from another quality of relationship with the images themselves.

III. NOUVELLE VAGUE AND DOGMA 95 AS RESISTANCE

Hollywood may now be the largest film industry on the planet, but it certainly is not the only film producer. We can identify different contemporary cinematographic movements, of different nationalities, having in common the same objective: an image policy that resists Hollywood's aesthetic hegemony. As an example, we can cite the new Asian cinema - and its directors Hayao Miyazaki, known for *The trip of chihiro* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, 2001, JAP), Naomi Kawase, known for *The Secret of Waters* (*Futatsumé no mado*, 2014, JAP), Apichatpong Weerasethakul, known as *Uncle Boonmee, Who Can Remember Their Past Lives* (*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, 2010, THA), among others - the films of German filmmaker Michael Haneke - known as *Caché* (2005, FRA, GER) and *The White Ribbon* (*Das weiße Band - Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, 2009, GER) - and even part of the work of American directors such as Gus Van Saint - *Elephant* (2003), *Last Days* (2005), *Paranoid Park* (2008) - and Sofia Coppola - *Lost in Translation* (2003) and *Somewhere* (2010). Here, we will focus on two cinematographic movements: the modern

French movement of the *Nouvelle Vague*. And a more contemporary one: the Nordic movement *Dogma 95*.

In fact, it is important to emphasize that resistance to Hollywood cinema is not a unique feature of contemporaneity. For this reason, we wanted to highlight *Nouvelle Vague*, a movement that produced ideas before producing films

At the beginning of the 1950s a group of young critics and intellectuals, known as young Turks, gathered or inspired by the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* (founded by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Lo Luca) began a movement in France motivated, mainly, by discontent with the Hollywood big productions of the time commissioned by the great studios and the space they occupied in movie theaters all over France.

The young Turks, before beginning to produce their own films, developed through their articles the idea of the cinema of author, that is, the director as the author of a film. The concept that emerged looked at the author's thoughts, not the interests of the great studios, and especially his aesthetic style:

Nouvelle Vague's articles reveal the complex relationship between tradition and rupture, the contradictory equation that lies at the heart of his cinema and, in the end, of the other modern arts as well. What *Nouvelle Vague* sees in American cinema in terms of style procedures is often what he will do in his films, giving a reflective meaning to the assimilated forms. (MANEVY, 2006, p.227)

The counterproposal was more personal films "composing a self-critical observation of urban imaginaries, radical anthropology opposed to the vocation of" vulgarity and commerce "of cinema and the mythologies of consumer society" (MANEVY, 2006: 221). Writing itself was not enough for these young critics, so much that less than a decade after the birth of this "new wave," they began to venture into the world of images.

The passage from the cinematographic critique to its actual production was not of an hour to another. Its filmmakers have experimented a bit with short films, such as, *Les mistons* (1957), directed by François Truffaut, *Le coup du berger* (1956), directed by Jacques Rivette and *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* (1959), directed by Jean-Luc Godard. In common they had a desire for creative autonomy, but each one portrayed their own personal and everyday issues. "The cinematic movement has brought to the screen the expectations and frustrations of a generation of young people matured in the Cold War, a post-war Europe without innocence, massed and overpopulated with images of cinema, advertising and

newly established television" (MANEVY, 2006, 222). Attached to this "new wave", or rather to the Nouvelle Vague, are well-known names in the world-wide cinematographic scene. Alain Resnais, Claude Chabrol, Agnès Varda, Chris Marker and Eric Rohmer are among the most famous, besides those listed before.

We can say that Nouvelle Vague had two moments, that of ideas and that of the movies. After the period of the short films, the feature film that inaugurated the movement was Claude Chabrol's film *Le Beau Serge* in 1958. Following are Chabrol's *Les cousins* in 1959 and François Truffaut's *The Misunderstood* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959).

The new cinematographic style, initiate mainly by Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, would create conditions for a redefinition in the patterns and ways of filming established by the classic cinema:

The aesthetic conception of the Nouvelle Vague would allow for the intrusion, without further apology, of cartoons, movie archives, television programs, comics, documentary material, and other records from the narrative, plot or tonality of the scene in progress. We must not forget that the search for the street, in the case of Nouvelle Vague, had the solid formation of museums. It is in this dialectic between museum and street that the Nouvelle Vague is born (MANEVY, 2006, 245).

In classical narrative construction, the apparent techniques must fade in front of the story so that the viewer can feel as part of the film, for what matters is to transmit information in a linear way, guiding the viewer from a continuous narrative. Nouvelle Vague arises mediated by the values and concepts of modern art: the discontinuity, the incorporation of random and documentary reality, the valorization of the montage and the fragmented aesthetics. We can cite here the filmmaker Alain Resnais who was "an expert explorer of time relations, confusing references and breaking the stability of narration" (Manevy, 2006, 245), as he did for example in *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959). The Nouvelle Vague explicit the existence of the narrator / narration, while the classic cinema aspires to a story that tells itself.

The end of this modern movement came in the late 1970s, influenced by the end of the friendship between its two greatest names: Godard and Truffaut. But it was not the differences between the two that caused the end of the friendship, but the political vision that Godard demanded of Truffaut after the revolution of May 1968. Godard "went through a process of intense politicization, putting in crisis the old politics of the authors, passing through a Maoist phase that would mark its most radical position in the 1970s as a modern and radically independent

filmmaker" (MANEVY, 2006, p.250). Truffaut did not share the same political position as his friend; in fact, he wanted to make more commercial films and never hid his desire to go to work in Hollywood, a desire that never materialized (MANEVY, 2006). This personal breakup established different aesthetic forms and cinematic visions for each director. With this, the movement itself came to an end. It is noteworthy that the Nouvelle Vague influenced other modern cinematographic movements, such as Brazilian Cinema Novo, Nuevo Cine Latin American and Portuguese Cinema Novo.

Having understood how the Nouvelle Vague was also a movement of resistance to Hollywood cinema of the time, let us focus, as already mentioned, on a specific contemporary movement to show how resistance to Hollywood film hegemony still exists. For in a world saturated by the incandescent light of the image in which the pattern is spectacular, by paying close attention we can see the faint glow of a cultural resistance that struggles more and more to appear, trying to escape the strong illumination that threatens its existence.

As part of this cultural resistance is the movement known as Dogma 95. This movement was presented in 1995 by Danish filmmakers Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, Kristen Levring and Sören Krag-Jacobsen and became known for the radical asceticism of his manifest, composed of a series of rules that should be fulfilled by the directors so that their films could be recognized by the movement. For the most part, these rules sought to produce an economy of narrative means of expression, of visual, sound, and montage effects. Undoubtedly, an economy of form and a movement of abstinence, to the point that its members refer to their adherence to these rules as their "vow of chastity". It was then a strategy of resistance working by subtraction: its directors seek to produce a sobriety in narration and visual effects.

On the Danish manifesto we can say, first, that he "clearly defines a target of criticism: the Nouvelle Vague and the author's cinema. The text proclaims a rupture with the modern cinema that emanated from this movement, pointing out that the concept of author was a bourgeois romanticism from the beginning (...) "(HIRATA FILHO, 2012, 121). As a solution, the manifesto proposes a collective cinema that renounces authorship and proposes, from there, the definitive democratization of cinema.

Another point criticized for the manifesto is the illusory character of Hollywood commercial cinema. In this cinema, the manifesto identifies "an aesthetic capable of transmitting only an illusion of emotion and an illusion of love" (HIRATA FILHO, 2012, p 121), proposing, on

the other hand, the negation of artifices and illusion. Although we have seen that the Nouvelle Vague was also born as a criticism of Hollywood cinema, in Dogma 95 the intention is to "deny the modern first and point out a common root between it and the classic" (HIRATA FILHO, 2012, page 123) Hollywoodian. The common root would be the bourgeois origin of both.

Dogma 95 is an act of rescue in relation to the image prior to the spectacularization and hegemony of Hollywood sensations. In order to provoke sensations that are not determined a priori, the important thing is what is not said, that is, the intellectual participation of the spectator that occurs through the minimum information imposed by the image. That is, the opposite of the aesthetics of blockbusters as we saw earlier.

Three years after the launch of the manifesto debut Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (*Festen*, 1998), the first motion picture of the movement, or Dogma 1. It was followed by Lars Von Trier's *Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998), Dogma 2, and Mifune (*Mifunes sidste sang*, 1999) by Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, Dogma 3. The releases of the feature films have generated a lot of controversy among spectators and critics:

Some praised the Danish boldness to recover the idea of an extremely cheap and simple mode of production, which turned technical precariousness into poetic force. Others reject this same initiative, accusing the movement of being just a marketing blow, since they found in *Festen* echoes of previous aesthetic propositions, wrapped in what would be a false guise of innovation. (HIRATA FILHO, 2012, page 126)

Here we have no interest in getting into polemics. The point to be emphasized is not the commotion caused by the movement, in its debut, in the cinematographic milieu. What interests us is the complexity of the films through a simplified and singular aesthetic. Which is not to say simplistic, but rather uncomplicated, but at the same time very intense.

In this type of cinematic aesthetics, the viewer is always apprehensive and waiting for answers that never appear. We do not have any information other than what is being shown, in the present time, on the screen. There is no background and no justification for the actions of the characters. We see only the flash of what they would be. Few things are shown, and yet our feelings about these images are very strong, for we interpret them in a unique, particular way. The lack of answers, color and even soundtrack can also be articulated to this elusive and nothing spectacular image.

IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The effects on our sensibility, of the aesthetics proposed by the Nouvelle Vague, by the Dogma, as well as by other movements of resistance to the Hollywood hegemony, would be opposed to those that the spectacular spectacularization impinge to us. Our sensations would be awakened by images far from the clichés and that bring us a curious world, whose meanings we do not dominate, leaving us surprised. In this way, we would be displaced from the passivity to which we are subjected when we watch a film that intends to impose us an already defined interpretation. By doing this we would be able to create new and multiple meanings, thus being able to dissociate ourselves from a hegemonic standard imposed by the Hollywood industry.

In contemporary times, there is still a weak light resistant to this spectacular standardization. National, or independent, or rather non-standard artistic forms are there to prove this.

In fact, this would be the therapeutic function of cinema, proposed by the philosopher Walter Benjamin since the 1930s. For him, cinema could make us leave the state of alienation and numbness, awakening from anesthesia, to feel again. A cinema made to remove from the torpor:

Through its big takes, its emphasis on the hidden details of the objects that are familiar to us, and its investigation of the most vulgar environments under the genius of the objective, cinema makes us glimpse, on the one hand, the thousand conditions that determine our existence, and on the other assures us a great and unsuspected space of freedom. (BENJAMIN, 1994, p.189)

We would not need big revelations and / or big epiphanies for that. On the contrary. The intensity of the senses could arise in the small things of our daily life, generally from where we could least expect, as of simplicity and silence.

Critically thinking about cinema implies recognizing the social impact of this medium of communication and seeking to know the nuances of cinematic aesthetics and its ability to evidence or even create patterns of conduct that mark social boundaries or encourage transgressions of the status quo.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001 and by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq).

REFERENCES

- [1] BENJAMIN, Walter. Sobre alguns temas em Baudelaire In Obras escolhidas, v. III. Charles Baudelaire um lírico no auge do capitalismo. São Paulo: Brasiliense. 1989. (P. 103-149).
- [2] BENJAMIN, Walter. (1936) A obra de arte na era de sua reprodutibilidade técnica In Obras escolhidas, v. I. Magia e técnica, arte e política. São Paulo: Brasiliense. 1994. (P. 165-196).
- [3] COSTA, Flávia Cesarino. Primeiro cinema in História do cinema mundial. MASCARELLO, Fernando (Org), Campinas, SP, Papirus. 2006.
- [4] HIRATA FILHO, Maurício. O Dogma 95 In BAPTISTA, M.; MASCARELLO, F. (Org.) Cinema mundial contemporâneo. Campinas SP: Papirus. 2012. (P. 121-136).
- [5] MANEVY, Alfredo. Nouvelle Vague In MASCARELLO, Fernando (Org.) História do cinema mundial. Campinas SP: Papirus. 2006. (P. 221-252).
- [6] MASCARELLO, Fernando. Dick Tracy, o filme high concept e o cinema brasileiro. Contracampo, Rio de Janeiro, n. 13, p. 69-82, 2005.
- [7] MASCARELLO, Fernando. Cinema hollywoodiano contemporâneo In História do cinema mundial. Campinas SP: Papirus. 2006. (P. 333-360).
- [8] WYATT, Justin. High concept: Movies and marketing in Hollywood. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1994.