

Imilleocchi 2009 – Helena Ignez. Beauty Is The Beast

Helena Ignez – Exodus of a Scream Queen

by Marina Mottin

“Fear and Desire” is the title of the 2009 Imilleocchi. What better occasion to give Helena Ignez and her film *Canção de Baal* the Anno Uno prize?

The monster that threatens the integrity and the normality of art is a bleached blond. Sganzerla, in describing Ângela Carne e Osso, protagonist of his *A Mulher de todos*, wrote “I wanted to show the anxious, uncomfortable, difficult side of the modern woman (...). For the first time in our cinema, a woman sang, screamed, hit, danced, pointed her finger and kick up a fuss (...). (Helena Ignez) is Marlene Dietrich co-directed by Mack Sennett and José Mojica Marins, or me...”.

Speaking of blonds and monsters, Fay Wray died her hair, but she wasn't the author of her famous screams, that come from a colleague's throat instead. The Brazilian artist, instead of sticking a character over herself re-elaborated the myth of the *femme fatale*, crumbling her successes so that it was difficult to classify them, for the mobility and the experimentation that characterize the projects that she interprets or makes.

As is often remembered in tributes that are multiplying all over the world, Helena Ignez was the muse of *cinema novo* right from her cinematographic debut in Glauber Rocha's *Pátio* (1959) and an important interpreter of the stylistic and thematic shifts in its development (*A Grande Feira* by Roberto Pires - 1961, *O Assalto ao Trem Pagador* by Roberto Farias - 1962, *Grito da Terra* by Olney São Paulo - 1964, *O Padre e a Moça* by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade - 1965).

A few years later, *cinema marginal* would make her the icon of a generation: after *O Bandido da Luz Vermelha* (1968) and *A Mulher de Todos* (1969) by Rogério Sganzerla, seven films followed that were produced by the Belair production company (founded by Bressane, Ignez and Sganzerla): *A Família do Barulho*, *Barão Olavo, o Horrível*, *Cuidado, Madame* by Julio Bressane, *Bety-Bomba, a Exibicionista* (later *Carnaval na Lama*), *Copacabana Mon Amour*, *Sem Essa*, *Aranha* by Rogério Sganzerla and the full length feature collectively created and filmed on Super-8 *A Miss e o Dinossauro*. Helena Ignez pays tribute to this visionary and corrosive phase of cinema in her short *A Miss e o Dinossauro 2005 - Bastidores da Belair*, a “making of” of the last days of Belair, when its protagonists were preparing to leave Brazil to escape the repression of the dictatorship.

What is said less often is that her participation was decisive and Helena Ignez can be considered coauthor of Sganzerla's films in the most radical period of *cinema marginal* because much of the dramatic intensity of these pieces comes from the work of the actors, that in the representation make art through reciting and improvising.

Ignez writes: “What is an innovative actor? Someone who has full command of the traditional technique, who knows how to understand the essence of traditional art and that articulated this knowledge within the limits of a particular style (...). The perfect actor is the one that knows, thanks to his art, to go beyond the imagination of the director. The actors are researchers able to discover new ways and new situations.”.

Her collaboration and marriage with Sganzerla lasted more than 35 years. In 2002 he was threw one who shot *Reinvenção da Rua*, Ignez's first medium length film that stays true to art and life. With his death in 2004, he left a script that Helena Ignez will finish together with Ícaro Martins by the end of this year. The title of the film is already tantalizing: *Luz nas Trevas – A Revolta de Luz Vermelha* (*Light in the Darkness – The Red Light Revolt*), the continuation of the film that revolutionized Brazilian cinematographic language in 1968. We will finally know who the enigmatic bandit is talking to when he says: “And the only thing that I refuse to do is to dye my hair!”.

But is it possible to domesticate a wild animal without betraying it?

Brecht's piece is a constant presence in Helena Ignez's life, from her theater studies to São Paulo to modern stages.

Directing *Canção de Baal*, she pushes out over the abyss of the monstrous and identifies the element that definitively puts the limits imposed on man by his pretext for truth at risk. The approach is that much more risky if one thinks that, in the work that inspired Ignez's film, there is the whole anarchic catharsis of a young Brecht trying to say everything at once.

Baal provokes and taunts: in his decent into the underworld the responsibility and the awareness of the social man are brought into discussion. Along the lines of his emblematic vagabonding, the themes of individualism in the modern epoch where he impersonates all the contradictions nest: anxiety, indifference, insecurity, sex. Baal doesn't mend or reconcile with the world: a starry sky completely indifferent to his vicissitudes dominates him in the end. But he still dreams.

And the strength of the cinema that Helena loves and makes is here in the inexhaustible capacity to question without quitting amazing. The growing constant of her artistic maturity is mixed up with that of great Brazilian cinema, to which she today contributes an important renewal.

Long live Helena Ignez and Brazilian cinema!

A Unique Song

by Paulo Santos Lima

Helena Ignez, the greatest Brechtian actress of our times, has finally completed her first fulllength film.

No simple feat, even less so for a feat done for personal reasons. There is the artistic positioning of who finds themselves in the same category as uniquely genial artists like Sganzerla and Glauber, or close to the – still recent – singular work of Bressane. So to see Carlos Careqa standing up, in front of a piano, while the camera, corresponding to it's "libertine" subject, is spinning around the man while simultaneously filming him with the sun reflecting in the lens, is an image of expression. And we know what it means to "express something" today: to erode immense static barriers.

What is most striking about *Canção de Baal* is surely Helena Ignez's creative principle of staying at the edge of the image. She doesn't stop at re-elaborating Brecht's celebrated *Baal*, but pushes to the genesis of it's creator. Along the way, she shows a whole culture that stole artistic signals from fields to transform them into common and functional sense. And it here that the director certainly honors the thoughts of her great love, her husband Rogério, using a discussion that she held the reins to in the '60s, against the idea of a national culture. Ignez's film is a unique expression, that doesn't necessarily hold to any format, code or grammar of "doing Brazilian art".

Brazil is on the screen because the film was shot there, under the same material conditions and signed by a native whose whole life is there. So we can hear, for example, Bertolt Brecht's voice in the prologue, whose thought is a powerful heredity here in the West – of war, atrocities and rich rebirths from the ashes. The dialectic created in this beginning, where we have Brecht who testifies in English to the Commission on Anti-American Activities (one of the barbarisms of our times) and Baal/Careqa in total irreverence on the black and white piano keys, is an nearly irreverent attitude. After all, how could one oppose the crime that made Brecht speak a foreign language in a terrible situation, if not breaking some code of conduct?

At the beginning, as the director confirms, the Baal in the film didn't necessarily have to be a Dionysian being but – for the humor of its own free aesthetic – it is impossible not to see how the man that brings color and light to the scene, that brings chaos to celebrate life. The theoretic and visual discourse is rather torrential and, since it is essential, we perceive the destructive pulsing in Baal. He prefers love to food and alcohol (he says it himself) and at the same time he reveals the

wounds of time, the chaos that pushes him to aggression, to power (over women in particular) and to his own *mise-en-scène*.

Rich correspondence with Sganzerla's *End of the World* that occupies the screen with a devastating series of images, strong colors, contrasts, theatrical scenarios and voices captured by a cinematographic lens that multiplies the space by ten, using digital almost as a political form, like Godard did in his *Eloge de L'amour*: to the standard for "an instrument that serves something". *Cançao de Baal* could be a postmodern film because of the breathing trash and it's reprocessing of the signs of our culture and our thought (culture without quotation marks, the one that arises living from man's naturalness), but really it is a piece in search of supreme liberty, searching for the transcendence of our time. It therefore doesn't escape, but overcomes the barbarisms – sometimes through barbarisms themselves (isn't this how the mechanic sense defines the experiences that come from the conventional network?).

Speaking of research, which is a very appropriate term. Positioning herself with strength, Helena Ignez is confirming herself in the world, but doesn't confirm anything other than a way of being. She and the film are looking for something, just like Baal does by copulating with various young girls, courting worldliness and majesty and the fusion of the two. Really, Baal goes to visceral women and to the ideal woman (the imagine of the ideal woman, which would be Djin Sganzerla), in the same way in which he interacts with the fusion of these two worlds (Simone Spoladore). Nevertheless Spoladore's character seems sensual and pictorial, referring to the visual arts and to real flesh, with her image in the water that is like a movie screen. Also here, a supreme fusion of theater and cinema.

The songs, like *Tico Tico no Fubá* that comes out of Carlos Careqa's mouth in the scene where Spoladore emerges naked from a waterfall, are some of the image-audio layers that bring profound revelations (in this case, this scene could be a more sexually graphic and violated version of the classic dress consecrated in bucolic paintings). Einstein's presence, played by an actor, to comment on the indexes of our culture, is an ascertainment, but makes all its sense in this idea of crossing the imagery of a country, its art, its culture, its "culture", its thought... its drama. In the short circuit of this journey of collections, where Baal vociferates and disdains the system and creates wounds around him; there is superb respite. The most important might be one of the most cinematographic of the full-length features: the image of Djin revealed in the reflection with the foliage while opening a window; the geometric lines of a face blend with the movement of life, the green of the world. Or the shot where, capturing the side of a singer's face, juxtaposes it with the dialogue with a celebratory naturalness.

It is quite impressive how *Cançao de Baal* is able, in this endless journey, to infinitely migrate between the confines of a theatrical scenario and the enormous natural prairies filmed in the background, between theater's anti-naturalism and cinema's illusionism, or that it is able to incorporate some many elements to the point of creating something unique, that passes for ludic without taking its eyes from its severity. The world is in danger, in conclusion. But Baal, who pushes Carlos Careqa to be a Tom Waits (an intercontinental, intercultural journey), a clown or a Casanova, give strength to the voice and says that the imagination is more important than knowledge.

So it seems that the world, or life (in the case of the actress-director) is at the film's service. And no life is identical to another. That is why *Cançao de Baal* is such a unique film, so singular in respect to an ocean of encore-formulations. An opera of resistance, harbinger not only of an answer for today but for a whole lifetime. The life of Helena.