

# Literary Narratives and Film Readings: Cinema in *Conta-Corrente* by Vergílio Ferreira<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**—Vergílio Ferreira had an intense literary activity that included novels, essays and the daily production that he collected in the *Conta-Corrente* volumes. In this work of two series and several volumes, Vergílio Ferreira analyzes different themes, including Cinema. Through his criticisms of national and international films, thoughts about literature and cinema and narrative creation, the author presents an evolution in his thinking. Initially, he sees Cinema only as an illustration of Literature, which is considered the greatest art, but slowly we see that there is a growing appreciation of the Seventh Art, which is one of the subjects of aesthetic and narrative analysis in his *Conta-Corrente*.

**Keywords**— Literature, Cinema, film criticism, *Conta-Corrente*, Vergílio Ferreira

Vergílio Ferreira was not a big fan of movie theatres, as evidenced by the sparse and brief references that he devoted to the Seventh Art in *Conta-Corrente*. The author's only motivation was to confirm or refute critical opinions that the film had already received. The vast majority of his comments are not praiseworthy; moreover, it is ruled by deeply unjust judgments. Vergílio Ferreira strongly criticized films such as *Veronika Voss*, *Zelig*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *The Mystery of Oberwald*, and refuted aspects of *Citizen Kane*, which may lead us to consider the novelist as an irreducible opponent of cinema. However, the writer reveals pertinent criticisms of *Cries and Whispers*, *La Luna*, *Orchestra Rehearsal*, *Raging Bull*, *Andrei Rublev*, *Amadeus* or *The 4th Commandment*. In summary, in his analyzes, the writer's main reason for reflection is the narrative construction of the films and this concern leads some authors to consider that Vergílio Ferreira will not have been indifferent to the contact with these film narrative models, as we will demonstrate later.

*Conta-Corrente* is also a repository of comments about films and filmmakers, national and foreign. Always involved in an aesthetic-literary controversy, Vergílio Ferreira's daily creation has given rise to different comments. From the cinematographic universe, we have some records. Recalling a conversation with Vicente Jorge Silva, the author recalls Eduardo Geadá's opinion on *Conta-Corrente I*:

Vicente Jorge Silva, who is going to write about the book, tells me that there is perhaps a parapsychiatric issue to resolve regarding my

“affective” world. Frost tells me that there is a lot of “resentment” in the diary. And I was more or less in agreement because psychiatry solved it with the outburst; and resentment too ». Still, in the same volume, Vergílio Ferreira analyzes the last film by Fernando Lopes and the criticisms that the director had made against the writer, constructing a rather violent comment: «The “wave of indignation” continues in my diary. Yesterday, the *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias* (“ideas” - holy God!) brought a testimony by a filmmaker, Fernando Lopes, in which our tape man calls “bitter” and “boring literate” to a person “give it the name of VF”. Well, why is it that our friend Lopes, who is the author of good films, is undoubtedly indignant with me? Just because of one of his films (*Nós Por Cá Todos Bem* - I suppose - I don't even remember the title anymore) I said that I was boring, except the mother's interventions, which were picturesque and friendly. But what most unworthy of our Lopes is that it is me (a type “who goes by the name of”) to say it. Me? A subject already enrolled in the obituary? What an abuse! Now a guy, having opinions without even needing a crowbar table. A Fabiano “who goes by the name of” like a dog he has there. But is friend Lopes convinced that it is enough to treat others with arrogance to be immediately overjoyed? That it is enough to speak loudly to be loud soon? And that he must have patience, but this film of his is really a sinker that doesn't even deserve a name (1981, p. 327,328).

In his *Conta-Corrente*, Vergílio Ferreira writes about the cinematographic universe in six main topics: commentary on Portuguese films, commentary on foreign films, reflections on *Cântico Final*, reflections on *Manhã Submersa*, comments on personal experiences related to cinema, and episodic reflections on cinema. However, of the 2307 pages of the five volumes of the first series, only 87 times contemplates the universes of television and cinema, which indicates the writer's little appreciation for the Seventh Art.

As for the first theme we identified, Vergílio Ferreira starts by analyzing *Talvez Amanhã*, a short film by António Damásio. He criticizes the lack of clarity and the condensation of the film but praises the clear plans, which remind him of a film by Antonioni. From the film, Vergílio Ferreira derives to the value

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of cinema. He thinks that young people are only interested in cinema, as opposed to all other arts, as it is marked by speed. At the same time, he considers him to have the mystique of silence and darkness. As the youngest art of all, Vergílio Ferreira does not hesitate to consider it as the most attractive for young people.

Resuming a point of view that we have already analyzed, the writer, comparing the permanence in time with a book, affirms that a film can only be seen once (the novelist, in 1969, could not contemplate the advantages of the video), it ages faster and points out its central aspect: «A film is always very concrete, as an image of concrete. (...) A film is not “contemplated”: it is seen » (1981, p. 19).

Again, the novelist devalues the film. When he considers it to be "very concrete", we are unable to internalize or measure the scope of his words; on the other hand, we do not consider a film to be an "image of the concrete", as we have already mentioned - that is, a technical fixation of a portion of the real. For the writer, as opposed to a painting, a film is not contemplated, because this aesthetic evaluation only allows immobility, that is, a film, without the criterion of immobility, cannot be evaluated aesthetically. We do not agree with this manifestly subjective judgment. As viewers, we don't just watch a movie; we are in a process of decoding, reading, aesthetic appreciation - of contemplation, therefore - and we are not limited in time, because we can see it again and renew the process of contemplation and reading. If we recover the study already carried out on the convergence between literature and cinema in the textual and narratological domains, we can defend that a film also provides an exercise in reading, if we think that it means an operation that aims to unveil the sense or senses of a text, according to a conceptual framework, and according to a set of horizons. We recall Carlos Reis and Ana Cristina Lopes:

In general terms, without prejudice to this effective plurality of frameworks and possible translational meanings (eg, reading a film), the concept of reading can be understood as an operation by which it makes a sense of the text emerge, in the course of a certain type of approach, with the help of a certain number of concepts, depending on the choice of a certain level at which the text should be approached... (1997, p. 212-213)

This excerpt from *Conta-Corrente* reveals, without a doubt, the author's initial vision of “resistance to the image”. Cinema is secondary to literature, as the excerpt proves, which reduces the film to less important, not only in terms of its relationship with reality (the concept of «concrete image» seems to us to be reductive), as well as the “impossibility” of contemplating.

About the film centred on Resende, made by Manuel Guimarães, our writer unveils his bonds of paternity: he collaborated on the script, wrote the text, chose the music and built a «metaphysical» film, quite contrary to the neo-realistic ideals of the director, but the public does not respond, and the author is embarrassed, particularly with the criticism of *Le Monde*, which strikes him with “lyricism”. In the same "lyrical"

line, he defends the film *Perdido por Cem*, as opposed to his students who criticized his lack of a political face. Precisely in this regard, he fiercely lashes *The Demons of Alcácer Quibir*, classifying it as pretentious, gratuitous and revolutionarily hateful. As we have seen, he also criticizes *Nós Por Cá Todos Bem*, by Fernando Lopes, a film that does not arouse any interest in him, and in which he only highlights a touch of picturesque in the testimony of the director's mother. For the writer, this is a typical portrait of a Portuguese cinema without shine or present (1981, p. 182).

*Amor de Perdição*, by Manoel de Oliveira, does not captivate him. A slow narrative, with a comic strip aesthetic, this film motivated a curious reaction: the Portuguese critic received him badly and, after praise from the French critic, inverted his opinion and praised him immensely. Vergílio Ferreira takes the opportunity to dissect the problem of adaptation and writes:

Camilo is unrepeatable, except with a metamorphosis. Repeat it verbatim, just as a problem of this metamorphosis, as did the character of Borges who copied Quixote. Borges simply did not intend to convince us that his Ménard wrote a masterpiece ... (...) Manuel de Oliveira decreed - and we were left out and did not respond to the decree. When we read a book by Camilo, we read it in his time; when we see this film, we see it in our time. And there it is hardly visible. (1981)

The novelist thus criticizes the copy in the adaptation and defends the metamorphosis in this process, which evidences a deeply current and consensual idea

About a film made by Dórdio Guimarães centred on Antero de Quental, Vergílio Ferreira praises the ordering, the situation in his time, but he does not fail to mention anachronistic lapses or the abuse of emotion and conventional processes and tricks. He praises *Cerromaior* in the same way, regarding his image, although he does not know the name of its director very well. As for the speech, the writer is critical. In the film, certain plans remind him of paintings, without failing to point out the lack of the typical Alentejo horizon, and the excessive use of stereotypes, falling short of the psychological climate of *Manhã Submersa*. The writer criticizes neo-realistic facets, recovered by the director of the same current novel by Manuel da Fonseca, and praises the predilection for the psychology of the film by Lauro António. Again, the writer seems to want to remove the inheritances of Neo-Realism, at the same time that he will delineate his line of choice, the analysis of the characters' inner universe, well in line with his existentialist values. This point of view is reiterated when analyzing an article by E. Prado Coelho about the film, which also identifies the absence of this inner aspect, but which ends up deserving praise for that very reason, which leads him to a preliminary statement: «It is the which has been called “making virtue necessity” for many centuries » (1981, p. 328).

In a double commentary on *Raging Bull* and *Oxalá*, the writer praises the first - not without irony about incongruities in the character's conception - and criticizes the second: futile,

conventional, marked by excessive theorizing, even though the director knows how to tell a story (1990, p. 337-338).

Regarding reflections on foreign films, Vergílio Ferreira celebrates Welles' *4th Commandment* ("What a force for narrative, for feelings", 1981, p. 118); and *Cries and Whispers*, by Bergman (the writer tried to analyze the film's "writing", the aesthetic issues, the characters' experiences, the director's strategy in building expectations); labels *Last Tango in Paris* as pornography; highlights the linear narrative of Barry Lyndon (1990a, p. 21), by Stanley Kubrick; it characterizes Bertolucci's art in *La Luna* ("Bertolucci's art is above all to step on the limit of the interdict without overcoming it or treating it with a heavy hand", 1990, p.157); highlights the narrative difficulty of *The Truck*, by Duras («Actually, what it is all about is making the film of the film as Fellini did in *Eight and a half* (?) and how the poem of the poem or romance of the novel has been done or the theatre of the theatre. (...) Marguerite Duras (almost) filmed nothing of what she would later film. And we leave the cinema "dry", 1990, p. 181); finds in Fellini's *Orchestra Rehearsal* the message that art is the last value that disappears; criticizes the forced regeneration of Iris and the transformation of the driver into a champion in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, 1990. p. 395 (perhaps the regeneration at the end of the film is a little hasty, but the transformation of the taxi driver into an avenger is a product of sociopathy and disturbed post-memory Viet Nam that the narrative evokes and Vergílio Ferreira forgets); is disappointed with Antonioni's *Mystery of Oberwald* and John Boorman's *Excalibur*, 1990, p. 419); he is surprised by the metaphysical vision of a combination of art and religion in *Andrei Rublyov*, by Tarkovsky (1993, p. 213) (the theme certainly brought him closer to his reflections on this combination, such as those outlined in *Cântico Final*); criticizes *Citizen Kane's* hyperbolic rhetoric (the characteristics that the writer points out are precisely those that make *Citizen Kane* a masterpiece:

I had the vague suspicion, from the memory that remained, that it was not a movie to blow the scale. And in fact. Nice film, no doubt, but with rhetoric of blistering in the soundtrack, in the planes, in the almost systematic filming from below, to amplify the figures projected against the top, etc. It is thus a rhetorically grandiose film, aggressive from the outset, excessive, of a manufactured counter-epic (1993, p. 486).

It is assumed, in the words of Vergílio Ferreira, that this film illustrates a cinema-show, similar to a novel - a show he condemned, as opposed to the problem-novel he defended. In this perception, the film could only be criticized); he is disappointed with *Zelig*, of Woody Allen (1987, p. 79), although he portrays the depersonalization of the man; is excited by the value of art in *Amadeus*, by Milos Forman:

What stands out from the whole film is that art rises above all the luxury or misery or degradation of the life lived and only it reaches us to relive the spirit of the time that produced it.

What remains of the entire film is the shock that overwhelmed me and came with me, and it is still here in this somewhat uncontrolled agitation in which I shoot the writing of this note. What the film means is this reunion in us with the excess that speaks the voice of the gods or our disturbance that streaks to the limits of us in a joy so profound that it transports us from ecstasy and almost makes us cry ... (1987, pp. 358-359)

In this short reflection on Vergílio Ferreira's thoughts on Cinema that left us in his *Conta-Corrente*, we find that the writer has a very critical view of several national and foreign films, mainly in his narrative, aesthetic and poetic analysis. His concerns are centred on the narrative construction of the film, on the issue of adaptation and the relationship between the book and the film, the question of "fidelity" and "metamorphosis", which is still one of the main debates in cinema studies, comparative literature and literary studies. Currently, as Vergara writes, researchers are dedicated to analyzing the problem of adaptation with new horizons, which will be presented in future studies:

Due to the attention adaptations have received academically, the number of scholars studying film adaptation and developing new research and theories has increased— a phenomenon which has led to the rise in studies and frameworks towards cinematic adaptations and its relation to literature. This new dawn has also led to the development of new categories and frameworks particularly focused on analysis. Although some researchers have dedicated to the study of fidelity, there have been others interested in the descriptive analysis of such adaptations, that is, research embedded with the ideas of Gideon Toury and the influence of an empirical, descriptive (how it is) rather than prescriptive (how it should be) approach (Cattrysse, 1996: 168-169)... (2015, p. 156).

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