

## **Lovers, not fighters**

### **Left politics and *brandos costumes* in *Capitães de Abril***

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#### **Abstract**

The popularity of Maria de Medeiros's *Capitães de Abril* [*April Captains*] (2000) has made it a significant reference point in perceptions and post-memory of the Portuguese revolution. This essay argues that the film presents the 25 April 1974 coup as a restitution of social justice predicated on the long-established notion of Portuguese *brandos costumes* [gentle customs]. By foregrounding both the April captains' commitment to non-violent regime change, and their attitudes of humility, empathy and good humour, the film opposes them to an authoritarian regime whose arrogant, stubborn and brutal defenders repeatedly traduce 'traditional' national values. The endemic nature of *brandos costumes* is meanwhile implied by representing army conscripts and the common people as ill-suited to military engagement, but strongly disposed to 'feminine' values of love, solidarity, and compassion. Ultimately, *Capitães*' appropriation of this national myth revises the gender politics of commemorations of the April Revolution, but reinforces paternalistic conceptions of Portuguese social organization.

#### **Keywords**

Portuguese 25<sup>th</sup> April Revolution, Portuguese cinema, post-conflict memory, national identity

‘Portugal é, realmente, o país de brandos costumes. Não nos está nos genes a luta, o motim, a revolta, nem, muito menos, a revolução. Não somos um povo com escola de cidadania suficiente para sairmos à rua e defender os nossos ideais’

[‘Portugal genuinely is the land of gentle customs. Conflict, rioting, revolt are not in our DNA, and revolution still less so. We are not a people sufficiently schooled in citizenship to take to the streets and defend our beliefs’]

(Saragoça da Matta 2013)

‘[O 25 de Abril] foi uma revolução atípica, em que os jovens militares preferiram dialogar em vez de usarem as armas. Uma característica essencialmente feminina. [...] Foi justamente esse carácter incomum que me motivou a dirigir o filme. Não houve muitas revoluções assim.’

[‘[The 25<sup>th</sup> April] was an unusual revolution, in which the young men under arms preferred the use of dialogue to that of weapons. An essentially feminine characteristic. [...] It was precisely this uncommon character that motivated me to direct the film. There haven’t been many revolutions like that.’]

(Maria de Medeiros, in Anon., 2000)

On its release in April 2000, *Capitães de Abril* was already a minor landmark in Portuguese cinema history. It had assembled the biggest budget, and one of the most numerous casts, ever for a domestic production.<sup>1</sup> It also constituted the first attempt to encapsulate, within a feature-length realist drama, what is generally still regarded today as ‘o momento da história portuguesa mais importante dos últimos tempos’ [‘the most important single moment in Portugal’s recent history’] (Pereira 2000). Sixteen years later, it can be argued that *Capitães* has maintained a prominent place in

popular commemoration of Portugal's 1974 Revolution. This prominence is particularly significant in the context of early twenty-first century Portugal's increasingly acrimonious debate regarding the legacies of the *Estado Novo* [New State] dictatorship and of the revolutionary socialist movement that finally ended it, a debate in which an alternative historical narrative, seeking to rehabilitate at least certain aspects of Salazarist rule, has been asserted. This essay argues that *Capitães*'s affirmation of Portugal's April Revolution as the decisive and indispensable overthrow of a brutal, bankrupt regime is especially intriguing for the manner in which it represents the MFA coup as a restitution of traditional values and principles that can be subsumed within the long-established concept of Portuguese *brandos costumes* [gentle customs]. The MFA captains' heroic characterization emphasizes their commitment to peaceful methods, and the humility, empathy, and good humour, with which they prevail against an authoritarian regime whose contrastingly arrogant, stubborn, and brutal defenders have repeatedly betrayed those 'national' values. The notion of Portuguese *brandos costumes* also underpins the representation of both army conscripts and the Lisbon *povo* [common people] as ill-suited to military engagement, but strongly disposed to kindness, solidarity, and, especially, romantic love. This imputation of pacific and affectionate characteristics both to the MFA coup, and to a collective Portuguese psyche, is consistent with Medeiros's conception of 25 April as a revolution powerfully influenced by women (who, as wives, lovers, employees, and civilian opposition activists, supported and inspired the April captains), and informed by values that she, following a recognized cultural convention, has labeled as 'feminine'. This appropriation of the myth of *brandos costumes* is crucial to achieving Medeiros's aim of revising the androcentrism of hegemonic accounts of the April Revolution. It is, however, bound up with two more

problematic aspects of the film. The first of these is that *Capitães*'s emphasis on the political significance of personal relations and of affective transactions is achieved through an indiscriminate blending of anecdote and invention with historical fact. Secondly, while attacking the *Estado Novo* with the very notion of Portuguese gentleness and humility that the regime developed and ruthlessly exploited, *Capitães* leaves unchallenged the entrenched social hierarchization, and paternalistic assumptions about political agency, that the Salazarist conception of *brandos costumes* entailed.

### **The political (ir)responsibility of cinematic historical drama: *Capitães de Abril*'s reception, 2000-present**

Amid the flurry of media interest aroused by *Capitães*'s release, one comment in a review by the filmmaker, critic and scholar João Mário Grilo has proven to be especially prescient. Given the scarcity of existing cinematic treatments of 25 April, Grilo (2000) claimed, Medeiros's deployment of 'meios humanos e técnicos pouco habituais' ['technical and human resources on an uncommon scale'] had propelled *Capitães* 'para um ridículo plano de responsabilidade social e política que o filme [...] não tem condições para suportar' ['to an absurd level of social and political responsibility which the film has no chance of meeting']. No single feature-length historical drama, no matter how ambitious its attempts at a 'faithful' reconstruction of documented events, could provide an adequate focus or foundation for the reanimation and re-shaping of public memory and debate of this defining moment in Portugal's journey from colonialist dictatorship to liberal democracy. Yet the very singularity of Medeiros's film ensured that it would be received – by no means always approvingly - as a contribution to popular commemoration and understanding

of the April coup and of its place in the birth of a democratic and post-colonial Portugal.

Grilo was not the only critic in 2000 to lament the paucity of screen treatments of the Revolution, or to imply that national cinema had thereby failed to make its due contribution to what we might, with Ricoeur (2004), term ‘the work of history’.<sup>2</sup> Further to notably experimental treatments such as Rui Simões’s *Bom povo português* (1980), and the remarkable 1975 documentary *As armas e o povo*, made by a collective of politically-engaged film-makers famously including Glauber Rocha, the first film on 25 April to reach a mass audience in Portugal was the TV channel SIC’s 1999 documentary-drama miniseries, *A hora da liberdade*, broadcast to mark the Revolution’s twenty-fifth anniversary.<sup>3</sup> The success of this anniversary production set a precedent for *Capitães*, whose prominent place within the following year’s practices of collective memorialization of 25 April justified Grilo’s complaint about the ‘political and social responsibility’ that the film had brought upon itself and would inevitably fail to fulfill. Even before its general release to forty screens nationwide (an exceptionally wide distribution for a domestic film) on 21 April 2000, *Capitães* became embedded in official commemorations. Gala previews were held in Lisbon, Porto, and Santarém, the latter screening attended not just by President Jorge Sampaio, but also by one hundred MFA veterans from the city’s Cavalry School (Talete 2000). One year later, the Ministry of Education funded the distribution of DVD copies of the film to numerous schools across the country (Lobo 2001).

*Capitães*’s subsequent success first at the box office, and later in DVD sales and downloads, suggests that Grilo was correct at least in foreseeing the Portuguese public’s appetite for a documentary-drama film treatment of 25 April. While *Capitães* may not have significantly enhanced commercial cinema’s repertoire for the

representation of complex and divisive historical events, it nonetheless merits the close attention of cultural historians investigating collective identity and memory in contemporary Portugal. *Capitães* dramatizes what had, over the 1980s and 1990s, become the hegemonic narrative of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA)'s April coup, as an unsustainably euphoric pivotal moment in the construction of a modern Portuguese liberal democracy. Over the last sixteen years, the film's cultural significance has arguably increased, as that narrative has been challenged by increasing dissatisfaction with Portugal's democratic institutions and economic performance, by fiscal 'austerity' and the consequent 'deconvergence' from the EU mainstream, and by a resurgent nostalgia for empire and for the conservative social mores of the Salazar era.<sup>4</sup> In this light, it is tempting to view *Capitães* as an early salvo in what became, amid the economic crisis and fiscal austerity of the early twenty-first century, an increasingly bitter national memory war. The film's representation of the MFA coup as a decisive strike against a brutal, bankrupt tyranny provides an audio-visual refutation of an arguably revisionist alternative account. In this alternative master narrative, prominently asserted in the Partido Social-Democrático - Partido Popular coalition government's programme for the thirtieth anniversary commemorations of 25 April, the coup and the subsequent eighteen-month *Processo Revolucionário em Curso* [Revolutionary Process in Action], or PREC, were but a moment of turbulence and giddy excess in a longer process of political 'evolution', initiated by progressive elements within the *Estado Novo* high command as early as the mid-1960s.<sup>5</sup>

It should go without saying that, as much in the present-day context as in that of April 2000, Medeiros's approach to recreating an epochal national event on screen, and her conception of her film's contribution to the memorialization of the

Revolution, are open to question. While claiming, in 2000, that she wanted to ‘dizer aos jovens que a história não acabou e que há muito a aprender com ela’ (Ferreira 2000) [‘to tell young people that history has not come to an end, and that there is much to be learned from it’], Medeiros also stressed that she had never had ‘a intenção de fazer algo épico ou histórico’ (Anon. 2000) [‘the intention of making something epic or historical’] and that she considered *Capitães* to be ‘essencialmente [um] filme de aventuras’ (Ferreira 2000) [‘essentially an adventure film’]. Rejecting the conventional format of film dramatization of epochal historical events as excessively ‘pomposo’ [‘pompous’] and ‘solene’ [‘solemn’] (Anon. 2000), Medeiros asserted that *Capitães*’s more ‘personalized’ and informal account of the coup, punctuated by comic minor incidents and exchanges, derived from her reading of the memoirs of Captain Francisco Salgueiro Maia (the film’s central character) and those of the MFA’s operational commander, Otelio Saraiva de Carvalho.<sup>6</sup> According to Medeiros, reference to these sources guaranteed an account that was more faithful to the real nature of events, but also enabled younger viewers to ‘identificar-se facilmente com as personagens’ (Ferreira 2000) [‘identify easily with the characters’]. One might sympathize with Mário Bettencourt Resendes’s suggestion, at the film’s official launch in DVD format in 2001, that Medeiros’s use of anecdote and humour is a welcome contribution towards the search for “fórmulas mais imaginativas” que perpetuem a memória através dos “laços” e dos “afectos” (quoted by Lobo 2001) [“more imaginative formulas” that perpetuate memory by means of “connections” and “affective ties”]. Moreover, one might recognize, with Miranda, the film’s valuable work of ‘reengineering’ national history, by ‘cutting through the historical masculine façade of revolution to the particularities of [an] atypical revolution’, and thereby challenging androcentric ‘concepts and preconceptions of what revolution was and

should be' (2012: 272). At the same time – and as is pointed out by many of the more astute comments posted by viewers of the film in on-line fora such as *YouTube* and the PTGate *Cinema* site – by retaining most of the conventions of historical realist drama, and thereby disguising the sutures between the factual and the purely anecdotal or fictional components of its diegesis, *Capitães* threatens to distort the discourse of historical memory into which it consciously inserts itself. As this essay argues, the consequences of this prolapse of 'political and social responsibility' are all the more serious when the film's blending of anecdote and historical fact rehabilitates the potent national myth of *brandos costumes* in defence of its conception of the progressive politics of 25 April, but does so without wholly dissociating it either from claims of the exceptional benignity of Portuguese colonialism, or from the social elitism that underpinned Salazarism.

**A very Portuguese coup: *Capitães de Abril* and the redefinition of *brandos costumes***

*Capitães*'s screenplay, which Medeiros co-wrote with Ève Duboise, spans a period of slightly more than 24 hours from the late evening of 24 April. Incidents and conversations that introduce the complex military and ideological contexts in which the MFA emerged, and that simultaneously enable the film to represent a demographically diverse nation in cross-section, are carefully woven into the plot. The salient events of the coup, and its aftermath, are, however, presented predominantly through the experiences of a few closely connected primary characters. The action commences with the introduction of Rosa (Rita Durão), a young, innocent working-class woman of rural origins, and her boyfriend Daniel (Duarte Guimarães), also young and working-class, a well-intentioned but hapless army conscript who is



soon to embark on his first tour of duty in Africa. The couple's tender and passionate encounters throughout the film contrast with the troubled relationship of Rosa's employers, the well-connected university lecturer and political dissident, Antónia (Maria de Medeiros), and her husband, Air Force Major Manuel (Frédéric Pierrot). This couple's marital breakdown, born of Antónia's accusations that Manuel is complicit with the regime and with its war crimes, and that he is conducting an affair with a woman in Africa, is presented initially from the perspective of their six year-old daughter Amélia (Raquel Mariano), a mute witness in scenes throughout the film. Antónia and Manuel's first sequence follows their angry discussion as Antónia prepares for a government reception, at which she hopes to prevail on her brother, cabinet minister Filipe (Joaquim Leitão), to secure the release of her student, peace activist Emílio (Pedro Hestnes), who has been detained by the regime's secret police, commonly known as the PIDE.<sup>7</sup> Manuel refuses Antónia's request that he accompany her to the party, but cannot reveal to her the reason for this refusal: later that night he will command the four-man squad tasked with capturing the Rádio Clube Português, as part of the MFA's planned lock-down of Lisbon's key media, military premises, and financial institutions.<sup>8</sup> The taking of the Rádio Clube permits the advance into the city of tank columns, including that of Daniel's Cavalry School in Santarém, commanded by Manuel's old friend, Salgueiro Maia (Stefano Accorsi) (the sole historical figure amongst the film's lead characters, here elevated, as Lopes (2000) observes, 'à condição de herói puro' ['to the status of a flawless hero']). From the outset, Maia is accompanied – but only occasionally assisted – by his cynical superior, Major Gervásio (Joaquim de Almeida), whose sympathy for Maia's cause is tempered by the deep scepticism that he expresses at every turn about the chances of its success. Maia's initial objective is to secure command of Lisbon's waterfront

square, Praça do Comércio [Commerce Square], and arrest cabinet ministers based in its surrounding buildings. This sequence provides a first pinnacle of dramatic tension, depicting the pivotal confrontation between Maia and the leader of the Seventh Cavalry regiment, loyal to the regime, whose subalterns refused to fire on the MFA rebels and ultimately made common cause with them. Maia's bravery and leadership are highlighted again in a second nail-biting historical reconstruction, where he commands the siege of the Carmo Barracks, wherein Prime Minister Caetano (played by Ricardo Pais) holed up, creating an impasse that was resolved peacefully only after the MFA agreed to General António Spínola's intervention to broker Caetano's surrender and assume the role of interim Head of State. Elsewhere, Manuel proves his heroism in thwarting the (wholly fictional) plot of a 'lone wolf' agent to recapture the Rádio Clube, and Antónia and her friends, gay Marxist Gabriel (Manuel Manquiña) and Cabo Verdean photo-journalist Cesário (Horácio Santos), make an ingenious intervention to curtail the PIDE's brutal interrogation of Emílio. These characters' plot lines are configured so as to offer a seemingly panoramic view of national life, from the clandestine meetings of military and civilian resistance activists to the offices of cabinet ministers, and from the provinces to diverse Lisbon locations, where jubilant citizens of all classes, ages, and ethnicities are interviewed in sequences that closely mimic authentic footage shot in April 1974 itself.<sup>9</sup>

Eduardo Lourenço (2000: 147-62) has famously argued that, in the discursive construction of national identity in the 1980s, the April Revolution was configured as modern Portugal's apotheosis, the realization of an 'exemplaridade democrática' [democratic exemplarity] (2000: 149) by means of which the country assumed an exalted position as role model for Europe's other post-colonial, and/or post-dictatorship, states. While *Capitães* does not overtly represent the MFA coup as a

Portuguese ‘lesson’ for the world, the film’s celebration of its exemplary bloodlessness ultimately projects a(nother) narrative of Portuguese exceptionalism: an exceptionalism predicated on an endemic predisposition to *brandos costumes*. Although the phrase *brandos costumes* has long held currency in Portuguese discussions of national cultural identity, its use in journalism and popular parlance is rarely accompanied by any precise definition; suggesting the presupposition of a general comprehension or consensus regarding its meaning. By 1975, the phrase was sufficiently well established to be used, with obvious ironic intent, as the title of one of the earliest and most influential cinematic denunciations of the newly deposed *Estado Novo*. Alberto Seixas Santos’s *Brandos Costumes* uses a claustrophobic domestic drama – as José Neves summarizes, ‘um aniversário, a televisão, a doença do pai, uma tentativa de suicídio’ [‘a birthday, television, the father’s illness, a suicide attempt’] – intercut in the manner of Brechtian theatrical direction with footage of military parades and other ‘rituais do regime’ (in Neves et al. 2014: 2) [‘rituals of the regime’] to expose the moral hypocrisy and barely dissimulated physical and psychological violence of Salazarism in the era of the colonial wars. Yet while Santos’s film defines the titular *brandos costumes* only by negation, the critical bibliography on the film exemplifies how scholarly analysis of the phrase, its discursive history, and flexible semantics has also been sparse.<sup>10</sup>

One recent and perceptive appraisal did appear, improbably perhaps, when in 2011 journalist Pedro Almeida Vieira sought definitively to explode what he considered a specious national myth by publishing *Crime e castigo no país dos brandos costumes*, a compendium of vignettes from Portuguese history, detailing centuries’ worth of the brutal exercise of power by authorities civil and religious, and throwing in, for good measure, a store of tales of ‘crimes hediondos, bandidos

sanguinários, [e] serial killers’ (Marcelino: 2011) [‘heinous crimes, bloodthirsty hoodlums, and serial killers’]. Prefacing this rather lurid exercise in historiographical journalism was an essay by Rui Cardoso Martins, suggesting that *brandos costumes* was not an age-old concept, but ‘mais uma invenção da ditadura salazarista que se arrastou até hoje’ (2011: 9) [‘another invention of the Salazar dictatorship that has hung around until today’]. One might demur from Cardoso Martins’s claim, inasmuch as the notion of the Portuguese as a pacific, sentimental (and even effeminate) people can easily be traced back as far as the end of the nineteenth century (in, for example, the poetry of António Nobre or the essays of lusophile Miguel de Unamuno).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, one cannot overlook either the prominence of the concept in the image of Portugal that the *Estado Novo* projected, or its fundamental importance as ‘evidence’ both for the trans-historical ‘difference’ in Portuguese colonialism, and for the alleged stability and harmony of both metropole and ‘overseas provinces’ under Salazar’s rule.<sup>12</sup>

Cardoso Martins traces the concept’s Salazarist origins back to the eve of the Second World War, and the search for ‘a “aldeia mais portuguesa de Portugal”, com gentes humildes e trabalhadores vestidos de serrobeco’ (2011: 9) [‘the “most Portuguese village in Portugal”, with humble inhabitants and workers clad in fustian’]. The 1938 Most Portuguese Village contest was, as Kimberley da Costa Holton (2005: 25-26; 36-37) and others have explored, but one expression of an official cult of traditional rural domesticity, which sought to redefine Portugal in alignment both with the peasantry’s circumscribed aspirations and economic means, and with their apparent deference to the conservative ideology and hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The continuing significance of *brandos costumes* in the post-war era, as a concept intrinsic to this cult, and as a powerful device for delegitimizing

popular discontent, is exemplified by Reinaldo Ferreira's lyrics for Amália Rodrigues's evergreen hit 'Uma casa portuguesa' ['A Portuguese Home'], one of the songs most frequently broadcast by the dictatorship's Emissora Nacional (Torgal 2009: II, 173). Such images of village life, projected as a synecdoche of the life of the nation (Holton 2005: 34), were populated by the domestic, civilian counterparts to the mythical Portuguese adventurer, who conquers with minimal violence, and colonizes through love. It should be noted that the Portuguese *povo* featured in these images is one not only possessed of a native genius for peaceful coexistence, but also immunized against suffering by their humble, amorous disposition and their delight in simple pleasures. Just as contemporary reports of the 1938 contest had celebrated the identification in the winning village, Monsanto, of the "homem mais alegre de todos" ["happiest man of all"] as the local gravedigger, so untouched by his everyday encounters with life's most inevitable source of sorrow that he 'tocava o seu flautim pelas ruas' (Cardoso Martins 2011: 9-10) ['would wander the streets playing his flageolet'], so, in 'Uma casa portuguesa', the idealized national home, animated by a 'fartura de carinho' ['wealth of affection'] and the Catholic values of humility and charity, is the bastion of a contented fatalism, the 'alegria da pobreza' ['joy of poverty'] that arises from 'esta grande riqueza/ de dar, e ficar contente' ['this great richness/ of gaining happiness from giving freely'].

*Capitães*'s emphasis on Portugal's revolution as exceptionally peaceful mobilizes the myth of *brandos costumes* against Salazarism by precisely the opposite strategy to that of Santos's film. In place of Santos's 'negative' exposure of *brandos costumes* as the dictatorship's discursive tool for dissimulating corporatist and colonialist violence and discrediting protests against socio-economic inequality, *Capitães* decries the same violence and inequality as commensurate with the regime's

violation or negation of traditional ‘national’ customs. As is explored below, *Capitães*’s denunciation of the *Estado Novo* is advanced through a depiction of its leaders that is ‘ora caricata, ora minimalista’ Lopes (2000) [‘at times pure caricature, at times minimalist’] and disfigured by historical implausibilities and factual inaccuracies. The full significance of *Capitães*’s appropriation of *brandos costumes*, and the political complexion of its retelling of national history, become more apparent, however, in the film’s more nuanced depiction of the MFA captains, of their supporters, and indeed of the city of Lisbon itself. It is here, in scenes that modulate sometimes awkwardly between narrative modes of historical drama and situation comedy (Coelho 2000; Grilo 2000), that one can assess how *Capitães* revises – or sometimes merely reiterates - the constructions of gender and class identity that the *Estado Novo*’s model of *brandos costumes* served to reify.

The idea of Salazarism as the antithesis of *brandos costumes* is graphically established in the film’s first frames. In a sole departure from continuity editing and the format of ‘reconstructive’ historical drama, the establishing scene of Rosa and Daniel’s impassioned farewell, and the opening credits sequence that follows it, are preceded by 30 seconds of unidentified, soundless monochrome footage of the grotesque aftermath of war crimes in a rural African community. Scavenging birds peck at the burned, mutilated, and bloated bodies of civilians, sprawled where they died outside their former dwellings. The tacit allusion to the inexpressible violence and horror of the *Estado Novo*’s military campaign against pro-independence insurgencies in its continental African colonies is later made explicit in scenes where Manuel and his comrades allude to the post-conflict trauma and guilt that dog them. Meanwhile, the actions attributed to the regime’s leaders and defenders leave no doubt that inflexibility, arrogance and ruthless brutality epitomize the regime’s modus

operandi as much at home as in the theatre of war. This is equally true of the calculated violence of the PIDE officers who strip diabetic Emílio of his medication before beating and waterboarding him, of Filipe's willingness to risk mass civilian casualties in order to escape his MFA captors, and of the uncontained outrage of the Seventh Cavalry's (fictional) commander Brigadeiro Pais (Luís Miguel Cintra), who dismisses the request for a parley with obscene and homophobic insults, punches Daniel to the ground, and fires on Maia with his pistol.<sup>13</sup>

### **Gendering *brandos costumes*: Humour, pacifism, and 'heroic' male femininity**

Given that *Capitães* deploys its principal female characters, and their romantic connections to the military, to articulate Medeiros's claim that women featured among the driving forces for non-violent regime change, it is notable that both female characters and romance are wholly absent from depictions of the *Estado Novo* establishment; an absence that occludes the contribution to the regime's longevity of figures such as Maria Baptista Guardiola or Cecília Supico Pinto.<sup>14</sup> The characterization of regime figures as embodiments of a malevolent, decadent masculinity, soon to be defeated by men who, while displaying valour and initiative, also respect and uphold traditionally 'feminine' virtues, is reinforced through casting, make-up, lighting, and camerawork. Shots of Accorsi and Pierrot – actors whose looks have lent themselves to a series of romantic or erotic lead roles – are generally flatteringly lit, and often filmed fully-frontal from an angle just below head height, suggesting heroic authority. By contrast, Canto e Castro, playing the spiteful and aggressive PIDE chief Salieri, and Joaquim Leitão, playing Defence Minister Filipe, are mostly shot under harsh white light that emphasizes skin lines and blemishes, and often lit from lateral angles, which creates a sinister and untrustworthy impression by

casting one half of the face into shadow.

This dehumanization of the regime's leaders is further compounded by the absence, in any of the scenes in which they feature, of the devices of situation comedy that, elsewhere, temper and 'personalize' the retelling of 'acontecimentos emblemáticos' (Lopes 2000) ['emblematic events'] of the coup. Interviewed at the time of the film's release, Medeiros admitted that the film 'anda na fronteira do burlesco desde o início' (in Ferreira, 2000) ['borders on the burlesque from the outset'] by claiming that this bathos and humour merely translated the 'veia cômica e [...] auto-ironia extraordinárias' (ibid.) ['extraordinary vein of comedy and self-mockery'] that she had encountered in the memoirs of Maia, Otelo and Dinis de Almeida, sources that 'deu muito humor ao filme e garantiu uma reconstrução fiel ao [...] espírito [da revolução]' (Anon. 2000) ['brought a lot of humour to the film and guaranteed a reconstruction faithful to the spirit of the revolution']. If – as Medeiros also asserted – the 25 April coup had an inherently 'Shakespearian' quality, as 'uma situação limite de grande dramatismo que revela um grande sentido de humor' (Ferreira 2000) ['a pivotal situation of high drama, in which a great deal of humour can also be found'], this 'Shakespearian' dialectic between gravitas and humour, absent from the depiction of the dictatorship's defenders, is essential to the association of the MFA captain's actions with *brandos costumes* as a national ethos. Wherever they are not confronting the regime at its most aggressive, the captains must operate in a material and cultural environment that is comically unpropitious for military operations, and where gentleness, affection and good humour succeed where anger and aggression are unavailing.

The first of many comic incidents that threaten the MFA's plans comes when Maia musters and addresses the conscripts at the Santarém barracks. As re-imagined



(and re-written) by Medeiros and Duboise, Maia's well-known exhortation to his men to 'acabar com o estado a que chegámos' ['do away with this state that we're in'] is initially taken as a joke. In a telling shift of focus, Maia successfully recruits the men to his cause only by moving from talk of ideology and regime change to the simple pursuit of peace, affirming the need to 'pôr fim a esta maldita guerra colonial' ['put an end to this damned colonial war'], and insisting that '[t]emos de evitar a todo custo o derramamento de sangue' ['we must avoid bloodshed at all costs']. The Cavalry School column's subsequent advance on Lisbon is a comedy of errors. Mishaps including the breakdown of a tank epitomize both the military's unpreparedness to stage a coup (and much less to defeat well-equipped guerilla insurgencies in Africa), and also Maia's reliance upon ingenuity, improvisation and humility as much as military discipline. The column reaches Lisbon only with the help of Gervásio, who belatedly joins up to lead the way in his red sports car, and – still more improbably – with a tourist map of the city. Down in Lisbon, meanwhile, Manuel and his companions manage to lock his keys inside the car loaded with their uniforms and weapons, and can proceed with their mission thanks only to the intervention of a fortunately gullible police officer.

Even where superior numbers and organization inevitably prevail, the MFA captains are depicted as uncomfortable with using force, and achieve the least success in the few instances when they act aggressively. Manuel, on arrival at the Rádio Clube, for example, knocks at the main door and politely asks 'Este é um levantamento militar. Pode-se entrar?' ['This is a military uprising. Can we come in?']. He impatiently reprimands the most pugnacious of his companions, the notably diminutive and asthmatic staff officer Botelho (Emmanuel Salinger), who, on forcing an entry, levels his gun at the startled elderly porter (Carlos César). Silva

(Marcantonio del Carlo) hereupon adopts a contrastingly amicable approach, draping his arm over the porter's shoulder and changing the subject to that night's football game. Cordiality and affection also obviate aggression and neutralize conflict seconds later, when the group arrests the DJ (Marcello Urgeghe) and sound technician (José Boavida) who are broadcasting a programme of late night romantic easy listening, 'A noite é nossa' ['Ours is the night']. Presuming Manuel and his comrades to be agents of an ultra-right-wing putsch, the DJ attempts to raise the alarm, yelling 'Lembre-se o que se passou no Chile!' ['Remember what happened in Chile!'] into the microphone before Manuel cocks his pistol behind the DJ's shoulder to compel him to continue his broadcast, claiming that 'não se passou nada' ['nothing has happened']. The DJ covers up his earlier outburst by confessing to listeners his love for an unnamed Chilean girl; a tribute to romance that Manuel's comrades swiftly reciprocate. On discovering, in the Rádio Clube's record collection, an album by Botelho's wife's favourite singer, Madalena Iglesias, the uniformed officers burst into a rendition of Iglesias's 'Ele e Ela', a classic account of innocent puppy love. Subtly parodying Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Jules Munskin's melodious sailors in *On The Town* (1949), the song's performance to the bemused Rádio Clube captives, now lounging and reading the sports newspaper *A Bola*, ends the sequence in the least militaristic spirit imaginable.

While this sequence connects the peace-loving MFA captains to a purported national genius for, and faith in, romantic love, other, related episodes demonstrate that, in Portuguese society, anger must be always be controlled, since even where acts of violence and aggression are not tragically deplorable, they are usually ludicrously counter-productive. This point is first made in the scene that introduces Manuel's companions, in one of the film's slickest switchbacks from sober historical drama to

situation comedy. As the three await Manuel in a cocktail bar, Fonseca (Manuel João Vieira) listlessly recounts the shameful acts of terror in which he was ordered to participate in Africa, and confesses the alienation and guilt that has haunted him since. Later, after Manuel joins them, the group is confronted by Antónia's friend, graphic artist Virgílio (José Eduardo), who mockingly denounces them as 'assassinso profissionais' ['professional murderers'], and launches a furious, but comically inept, assault, obliging Manuel to intervene and quell the ensuing brawl. Manuel's exalted role as peacekeeper, and the need for his companions to learn that aggression and macho posturing do not pay, are demonstrated in the following scene. The four co-conspirators are changing into their uniforms in Manuel's car, and are propositioned by two gay men cruising in the nearby park, who mistakenly presume that an in-car sex party is getting under way. Chaos ensues, and Silva's homophobic outrage and threats of violence are so voluble that he and his comrades almost miss the sound, from the car radio, of José Afonso's 'Grândola, vila morena', being played as the MFA high command's final signal for the assault on the Rádio Clube to proceed. Virgílio, for his part, will however not enjoy a similar second chance to learn his lesson. He is last seen amid a crowd besieging the PIDE headquarters, from where a cornered Salieri and his fellow PIDE officers precipitate the only bloodshed of the coup.<sup>15</sup> As Virgílio hurls accusations and stones at the PIDE's windows, they spray the crowd with machine-gun fire, hitting Virgílio twice in the chest.

**'Que o poder não caia na rua' ['So that power doesn't fall into the streets']:**

***Brandos costumes and working-class agency in Capitães de Abril***

If Virgílio thus becomes the vehicle for the idea that violence does not pay, he is also the most tragic example of the film's suggestion that most Portuguese, civilians and

army conscripts alike, inherently lack the aptitude for aggressive confrontation or military engagement. The heroism of Manuel, Maia and Maia's lieutenants Lobão (Fele Martínez) and Fernandes (Manuel Lobão) combines 'feminine' values of pacifism, compromise and affection with the exemplarily 'masculine' traits of courage and leadership. The inexperienced conscripts serving under them, however, display a contrasting lack of military grit, focus and discipline, which repeatedly threatens the progress of the coup, as most dangerously when Maia's order to cease firing on the Carmo barracks is ignored by the company's gunners, until Lobão physically kicks them away from their weapons. This likeable, but unheroic, rank-and-file Portuguese masculinity calls to mind a second implication of Medeiros's conception of the 25 April coup as 'Shakespearean'. The film follows the convention, famously observed in Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, of making heroic-tragic agency the exclusive preserve of 'person[s] of high degree' (1949: 19), and it associates characters of different social classes with distinct modes of humour. Consequently, it represents only the social elite – and perhaps their personal protégés, such as Antónia's working-class student and lover, Emílio – as possessing a worthwhile understanding of the nation's predicament, or a credible vision for its future. This marginalization of working-class political agency arises particularly from the status of Daniel, as almost the film's sole representative of the lower army ranks, and also its principal comic fall guy.

Daniel shows no aptitude for army life: his self-discipline and performance are compromised by his passion for Rosa from the outset, when, to Maia's exasperation, he reports late for duty after visiting her in Lisbon. In his first military engagement, Daniel fails to defend himself against the pugnacious Brigadier Pais, and cannot even smoke a cigarette, which he is subsequently given to recover his nerve, without

coughing. However, while Daniel may strike his commanding officer Lobão as a ‘mosquinha morta’ [‘drip’ or ‘shrinking violet’] and a hopeless soldier, he is a contrastingly accomplished lover. He and Rosa come to embody the pacific and loving spirit of the April Revolution in a scene where Rosa, who has just been gifted a red carnation by an elated flower-seller, encounters him, still bearing a prominently bleeding lip and blackened eye from Pais’s attack, awaiting orders in an army jeep. Rosa rushes to embrace Daniel, and becomes the creator of the Revolution’s most iconic image when she places her red carnation in the barrel of his rifle, shouting ‘Viva os soldados! Viva a revolução! E viva nós!’ [‘Long live the military! Long live the revolution! And long live us!’] as the crowds cheer her and as the flower-seller distributes armfuls of carnations. Rosa and Daniel’s association both with the values of love, peace and liberty, and with an endemic aversion to militancy is implausibly spelt out in their next appearance, when they stall the MFA column’s advance by making love in Daniel’s stationary tank. After an exasperated Lobão tells Daniel that ‘és o único que conseguiu fazer o que a malta inteira queria fazer hoje’ [‘you’re the only one who managed to do what all of us wanted today’] and dismisses him from further duties, and as Daniel’s company mocks him by chanting Wagner’s ‘Bridal Chorus’, he and Rosa kiss passionately once again, before disappearing from sight, and from the remainder of the film.

The MFA captains who find their plans complicated by such unsuitable conscript material must also contend with the civilian population’s disregard for the grim realities of an army coup, and even the inherent unsuitability for military manoeuvres of Lisbon’s streetscape. A combination of wide-angle tracking shots and dense, occasionally unfocused, panning close-ups depicts the crowds - who ignored the MFA’s broadcast appeals to civilians to stay at home - as a jubilant mass in

constant movement. This emphasizes not simply the elation of the crowd, cheering, chanting, singing, and spilling into every available space, but also its more troubling volatility, which provides much of the tension of the scene outside the Carmo Barracks, as civilian demonstrators climb over the tanks, and comply only reluctantly and chaotically with Maia's order to clear the square before the bombardment commences. Crowd scenes are crucial to the depiction of an organic unity developing between the MFA and civilians, as notably in shots of the tank column mobbed by crowds reaching perilously close to salute and embrace the soldiers. Furthermore, they illustrate the MFA's concern for 'a segurança dos civis' ['public safety'], which Maia stresses when his tank column halts at a red traffic light while traversing one of Lisbon's *bairros históricos*, or medieval districts (46:58).

Clearly, this and similar images of the comical incongruity of the army's presence in the city, contribute to the film's elicitation of its Portuguese audience's nostalgia for their recent past; an indulgence that is also strongly encouraged by the film's soundtrack, combining iconic songs by José Afonso and his contemporaries with melodramatic incidental music scored for a large orchestra, piano, and accordion. Yet they also suggest that an essentially 'mild-mannered' Portuguese disposition is manifest even in Lisbon's antiquated and villagey built environment, which sets the terms for the coup's progress, slowing its pace to that of neighbourhood traffic. As a contribution to the film's appropriation of the notion of *brandos costumes*, however, one image assumes a particular significance. As a tank negotiates a tight corner, its gun barrel advances inexorably towards a casement window, which is thrown open, just in time, by a smiling female resident who cheerfully hails the soldiers. As commandeered by the MFA, and subject to the physical constraints and civilian laws of the city, the tank is no longer an instrument

of aggression and destruction. Rather – in a scene immediately preceding that of Daniel and Rosa’s lovemaking in another tank - its unexpectedly harmless, and apparently consensual, penetration of the woman’s living space creates an expressly erotic and affective frame for the conventional phallic symbolism of the gun barrel. Hence, the scene creates an improbable symbolic counterbalance to the exploration, through Manuel’s painful confession to Antónia, of Portuguese military personnel’s war crimes and murky extra-marital relations in Africa. It suggests the unproblematic reconciliation of an errant phallic masculinity to a ‘feminine’ domestic space, where it is welcomed in as a gentle and loving - yet also protecting, and potentially fertilizing - agent.

Here, as elsewhere, *Capitães*’s refashioning of conventional gender archetypes and symbols serves to counter the androcentrism and epic machismo of the hegemonic narrative of national history, but it nevertheless remains problematic. By presenting *Estado Novo* violence, and the atrocities of the African campaigns, as an aberration, or dereliction of traditional values, and by implying that the MFA’s deference to ‘feminine’ *brandos costumes* purged the nation’s politics and military of Salazarist aggression, the film risks painting a fresh coat of whitewash over a longer national history of colonial violence. Moreover, while the foregrounding of women’s influence affirms their right to equal participation in politics, the delineation of female characters simultaneously contributes to a more conservative depiction of social class as a determinant of identity and agency. *Capitães* never fully challenges the *Estado Novo*’s attribution to different social classes of subtly distinct models of *brandos costumes*, with the elite tasked with balancing humility and affection with courage, leadership, and political judgement, while the appropriate agency of the lower classes is confined to the realm of the local community, and to acts of nurturing, loving and

peace-making. This becomes particularly evident through analysis of the figures of Antónia and Rosa, as upper-class heroic-tragic female lead, and working-class comic-romantic female support, respectively.

Antónia is the most rounded and complex of the film's central characters, but nevertheless interactions between her and Rosa (and other working-class female characters) establish them as effective ciphers for 'progressive' and 'traditional' aspects of an imagined national community. Antónia's credentials as a dynamic progressive force are her vocation as a teacher, and her crucial position of influence: in her personal and political relationships, she connects the ruling elite to both the civilian opposition, and, through Manuel and Maia, the MFA. In scenes where she and her activist friends discuss New Left theory and international politics and listen to Beethoven sonatas in her beautifully appointed contemporary interiors, Antónia epitomizes an educated and cosmopolitan Portugal, participating fully in a modern Europe and its culture. Rosa, in contrast, entirely lacks not only Antónia's education and network of influence, but also her ideological engagement: her political understanding is wholly contingent on affective relations and on personal experience, whether of Daniel's conscription, or of her father's prosecution for stealing a pig. Moreover, while Antónia sports iconic 1970s fashions – boldly multicolour abstract designs, flared trousers, stack heels and a suede maxi-coat – Rosa's rural working-class origins and more conservative outlook are suggested by homespun chunky-knit wool sweaters and scarves, cotton print dresses, and a more conventional three-quarters length coat. An urban working-class counterpoint to Rosa is provided by the Rádio Clube's cook, Natália, a 'mulher de armas' ['formidable woman'] who barges past the MFA's armed guard protesting that 'Eu faço aqui falta' ['They need me here'], and proves her point by fussing over the captains and Rádio Clube staff with



hot drinks and ‘sandochas’ [‘sarnies’]. While demonstrating both disdain for martial directives, and an affectionate, nurturing disposition, in less deferential style than Rosa, Natália is similarly detached from the broader political issues that preoccupy Antónia, Manuel, Maia, and Emílio.

## **Conclusion**

The appropriation of the *brandos costumes* myth ultimately summons a patrician and elitist image of post-dictatorship in Portugal. Setting aside the characterization of Emílio, the film’s representation of the working classes seldom advances beyond reiterating the Salazarist celebration of the ‘conforto pobrezinho’ [‘humble comforts’] of their ‘existência singela’ [‘simple life’] in their support for the coup. Where popular rebellion against state authority is depicted, the emphasis is either on the volatility and indiscipline of an inchoate social mass (with leadership from above required, in order that power, in Marcello Caetano’s words, ‘não caia na rua’ [‘doesn’t fall into the streets’]), or on a plebeian hunger for pleasures amorous or gustatory (like Rosa’s family’s purloined pig, which ‘muito bem gostou’ [‘tasted delicious’]). Despite Maia’s claim, as he places his commanding officer under arrest, that ‘há momentos em que a única solução é desobedecer’ [‘there are times in which the only answer is to disobey’], *Capitães*’s final sequences suggest that the politics of civil (and military) disobedience, even waged against a brutal dictatorship, should be the preserve of elite coteries. Rosa, Daniel and Natália all fade into the background of scenes of celebratory singing, folk-dancing, *sandochas*, and/or love-making. By contrast, the personal dramas of Antónia and the three men in her life (Manuel, Emílio and Maia) remain integral to the representation of Portugal’s political transformation, in a concluding sequence that adds some welcome grit and ambiguity

to its vision of 25 April as the restitution of a gentle, loving *ethos* that will reunite the nation and underwrite its progress. Manuel, Maia and Amélia drive to Caxias prison, to witness the liberation of the many opposition activists there incarcerated.<sup>16</sup> A pastiche of historical footage of the prisoners emerging to the questions of waiting journalists concludes with a shot of Emílio being interviewed, as Antónia rushes to his side. After Antónia completes the exhausted Emílio's statement, by affirming their new-found freedom to 'viver às claras as nossas opiniões [...] assumir novas responsabilidades' ['act openly upon our own opinions [...] take on new responsibilities'], the couple embrace and kiss, the camera cuts back and forth to close-ups of Manuel, anguished and humiliated, and Maia, shocked and saddened. This belated emphasis on the shortcomings of peace, love and moderation as a political manifesto is followed by a fresh, and much more forceful, warning of the volatility of the popular forces that the coup has unleashed. As the downcast captains and Amélia drive away, they are mistaken for fugitive PIDE operatives, and Manuel's car is mobbed, pounded, and rocked by hostile demonstrators. Before this misunderstanding is corrected, and the crowd resumes its chant of 'o povo está com o MFA' ['the people are with the MFA'], a close-up of a terrified Amélia, cowering on the car's back seat, serves both to emphasize the potential threat of popular unrest and conflict in the volatile post-dictatorship environment, and simultaneously to introduce a voice-over intervention, by an adult Amélia, looking back and summarizing the fate of her family in the intervening years up to her present time. Antónia leaves Manuel for Emílio, but after two years the lovers part company both emotionally and ideologically, moving on to distinguished political careers, she in the centre-left Socialist Party and he in an unnamed centre-right party. Manuel succumbs to alcoholism, liver cirrhosis and chronic depression. Of Maia, Amélia says only that he

adopted two children, and succumbed still young to a long, painful illness. The lack here of any reference to Maia's rejection of political appointments, or to his subsequent distinguished military career, cut short by cancer three years before his death in 1992, sustains his depiction in the film as icon of a seemingly impossible socialist utopianism. Yet the film's ending implies that the right of a 'mild mannered' population to take their own decisions – a right that Maia affirms in the teeth of Gervásio's pervasive cynicism - cannot be established through grass-roots mobilization, but rather through the intercession and guidance of public-spirited members of the elite such as Antónia. It is, after all, figures like Antónia who, having never wholly cut their ties with slippery *Estado Novo* bureaucrats like Rui Gama (Rogério Samora), are best placed to contend with them as they forsake one version of 'o nosso futuro' [our future], the loathsome hardliner Filipe, to exert a moderating influence on another, newly emerging, political order.

This reading of *Capitães de Abril* commenced by asserting the film's continuing cultural significance, as an unabashedly partisan intervention in a conflict of national historical memory that has, over the last sixteen years, become not necessarily more acrimonious, but certainly more animated and more enmeshed in the debate about present-day policy options. At the end of a decade of economic crisis and stagnation of parliamentary democracy, Medeiros's film also seems notable for anticipating the manner in which *brandos costumes*, forty years after the *Estado Novo*'s demise, has gained a new prominence in public discourse, as a kind of political football, used variously to affirm or refute the moral and civic acceptability of unremitting fiscal austerity, to defend or discredit those who mobilize resistance to it, or to account for the relatively peaceful, muted nature of anti-austerity protests, in comparison with contemporary Greece or Spain.<sup>17</sup> Medeiros's appropriation of

*brandos costumes* is essential to *Capitães*'s moral vindication of the (almost) bloodless coup of the MFA captains and of the supporting role of their revolutionary socialist civilian allies. Yet, unless one concludes that her film is directing this particular political football towards its own goal, it cannot be read as a vindication of a post-dictatorship politics of popular mobilization.

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## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> See Pereira (2001), and Ferreira (2000).

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<sup>2</sup> On the desirability, and pedagogic potential, of further treatments of 25 April in Portuguese cinema, see Coelho (2000) and Ramos (2000).

<sup>3</sup> One should also note Edgar Pêra's avant-garde documentary short, *25 Abril: Uma aventura para a democracia*, which appeared shortly before Medeiros's feature.

<sup>4</sup> On early twenty-first century Portugal's 'democratic deficit', and on its social and economic 'deconvergence' since joining the European single currency, see Hatton (2011) and Royó (2010) respectively.

<sup>5</sup> See Ribeiro (2013: 4).

<sup>6</sup> See also Talete (2000) and Yoldi (2000) for details of Medeiros's work with these MFA veterans and their published memoirs.

<sup>7</sup> Set up in 1934, Salazar's *Polícia de Vigilância e Defesa do Estado* or PVDE (Surveillance and State Defence Police) was reformed in 1945 as the *Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado* or PIDE (International State Defence Police) (Pimentel 2010: 156). In 1969, it was renamed the *Direitório Geral de Seguridade* (General Directory of Security), but still commonly referred to as the PIDE (Pimentel 2010: 166).

<sup>8</sup> The capture of the RCP is entirely fictionalized: in reality, this operation was led by the aeronautical engineer Major José Manuel Costa Neves (Santos 2004: 16). The key premises captured by the MFA in the early morning of 25<sup>th</sup> Abril also included the RTP and Emissora Nacional headquarters, Lisbon Airport, the General Barracks, the Estado Maior do Exército, the Armed Forces Ministry, the Banco de Portugal, and the Marconi headquarters.

<sup>9</sup> Ribas (2000) notes how interviews with individuals demonstrating in the streets are copied from footage in Rocha et al. (1975), while those with political prisoners from

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the Caxias prison are identical to excerpts of RTP's television coverage of their release.

<sup>10</sup> See Neves et al. (2014), Ramos (1989: 63), and Pina (1986: 183-84).

<sup>11</sup> See Nobre (1898), and Klobucka (2011)'s remarkable exploration of Nobre's imbrication of a literary performance of gender queerness with the discourse of Portuguese identity; see also Unamuno (1941: esp. 10-11).

<sup>12</sup> On the emphasis in *Estado Novo* discourse on Portugal as a haven of peace and harmonious relations between classes and races, and on the regime's claims for the organic and consensual nature of its colonial presence in Africa and Asia, see Castelo (1998: 97-101) and Madureira (2006: 108-15).

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the role of the Seventh Cavalry regiment, its real-life commander, Colonel António Romeiro Júnior, and his deputy, Brigadier Junqueira dos Reis, on 25 April 1974, see the chronologies of the coup available at the Associação 25 de Abril database, at, and at the website of the Centro de Documentação 25 de Abril.

<sup>14</sup> Miranda (2012: 269) explores the significance of how Antónia is depicted as 'out of place' in the ministry reception.

<sup>15</sup> On the violence at the PIDE headquarters in the evening of 25 April, see Porch (1977: 92-93), and the chronologies at the websites of the Associação 25 de Abril and the Centro de Documentação 25 de Abril. Most sources agree that four civilians were killed (Porch (1977: 93) says five), and another forty-five injured.

<sup>16</sup> Here, Medeiros and Duboise exercise dramatic licence with the timing of events: as noted in the on-line chronology at the Centro de Documentação 25 Abril website, the release of the Caxias prisoners actually took place on the evening of 26<sup>th</sup> April.

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<sup>17</sup> Examples of these conflicting mobilizations of the concept are provided by, amongst other texts, Jesus (2012), Gaião (2012), anon. (2011) and (2012), and Mata (2013). For an analysis of patterns of popular mobilization in anti-austerity protests in Portugal since 2010, see Accornero and Pinto (2015).