

## THE COMING OF AGE IN LAÍS BODANZKY'S *CHEGA DE SAUDADE*

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### RESUMO:

Através das últimas décadas, a teoria crítica sobre o envelhecimento (critical age theory) vem questionando a narrativa da senilidade (narrative of decline), a qual tem dominado os debates sobre o processo de envelhecimento ao longo do século XX. A pesquisa recente sobre a interseção entre idade e gênero nas ciências sociais sugere algumas mudanças na maneira pela qual as mulheres na terceira idade se veem e como são vistas por *outros*. No campo das humanidades, porém, as narrativas literárias e cinematográficas oferecem um terreno fértil para estudar o impacto da idade e do gênero na subjetividade. Este trabalho analisa a construção de idade e sua interseção com o gênero no filme *Chega de Saudade* (2008) de Laís Bodanzky.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Laís Bodanzky, *Chega de saudade*, envelhecer, tempo

### ABSTRACT:

Over the past several decades, critical age theory has begun to question the narrative of decline that dominated discussions of the aging process throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recent research on the intersection between age and gender in the social sciences points to ongoing changes in the ways women in the third age see themselves and how they are seen by others. By contrast, in the domain of the humanities, literary and film narratives offer fertile terrain for the study of the impact age and gender have on subjectivity. Hence, this paper examines the construct of age and its intersection with gender in Laís Brodanzky's film narrative *Chega de saudade* (2008).

**KEYWORDS:** Laís Bodanzky, *Chega de saudade*, aging, time

Critical age theory delineates the development of the narrative of decline that took over as the dominant discourse on matters of age throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The slow but steady erasure of age that resulted from pseudo-scientific theories concerning the medicalization of the body led to changing attitudes concerning the life cycle in western cultures. What's more, the belief in the primacy of youth has caused changes in the ways those in the later years of the life cycle are viewed and treated. As numerous critics have demonstrated, the social isolation and invisibility experienced by those in the third and fourth ages have been widely misunderstood in Western societies.

In her 1970 groundbreaking work *La Vieillesse*, Simone de Beauvoir characterizes age as the internalization of difference: "Since it is the Other within us who is old, it is natural that the revelation of our age should come to us from outside - from others. We do not accept it willingly" (*The Coming of Age*, 1996, p. 288). Nearly two decades later, the North American feminist Betty Friedan dedicated the extensive volume *Foun-*

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*tain of Age* (1993) to the process of aging. Arguing against viewing this phase of the life cycle as a form of decline, Friedan saw the third stage of life as a time when opportunities to discover new possibilities of intimacy might ultimately open the way to a further dimension of personhood. Contemporary age studies theorists, including Kathleen Woodward, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, and Mirian Goldenberg, have insisted on the importance of resisting Western cultural myths that associate aging exclusively with disintegration, in other words, as a process that is inherently and necessarily one of decline.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Amelia DeFalco (2010) points to literary theory's blind spot to the influence of age on subjectivity and calls for further examination into the ways that "cultural texts, literature and film, construct multiple narratives of aging that intersect and sometimes conflict with existing critical theories of aging" (*Uncanny Subjects*, p. 4). As the work of the above-mentioned critics makes clear, the growing awareness across the humanities and social sciences of the otherness within that occurs during the process of aging has resulted in the treatment of age as a category of difference that is integral to a contemporary understanding of identity and alterity.

Identity and alterity are the stuff of Laís Bodanzky's (2008) film narrative *Chega de saudade*. Nominated for various awards at the Film Festival of Brasília in 2007, it won the prize for best film of the year and was subsequently screened at festivals throughout Europe and North America. The daughter of filmmaker Jorge Bodanzky, Laís has directed three successful feature films: *Bicho de sete cabeças* (2002), *Chega de saudade* (2008), and *As melhores coisas do mundo* (2010). Of these, *Chega de saudade* can be placed alongside a growing number of recent international productions that address questions of changing identities throughout the later years of life. Not surprisingly, Bodanzky's film stands out among the others for its unique treatment of the social, emotional and psychological aspects of the coming of age.

*Chega de saudade* evokes the title of Antonio Carlos Jobim's *bossa nova* recording as well as the melancholia of Vinícius de Moraes' song lyrics, both of which punctuate the narrative in provocative ways. At first glance, the setting, music, lyrics, lighting, and cast of characters suggest the theme of nostalgia for an unrecoverable past. For example, the décor of the dance hall echoes a bygone era from the mid-twentieth century. In addition, the acclaimed sound track features vintage songs from previous eras, including *samba*, *farró*, *choro*, *samba-canção*, and *música pop*. Moreover, the cast includes some of the most respected veterans of Brazilian cinema who, together with approximately one hundred and fifty nonprofessional actors ranging in age from mid-life to advanced age, glide across the dance floor with sensuality and grace. Yet, as the narrative progresses, a very different reality unfolds. While there are moments of nostalgia interspersed throughout the narrative, the characters show little remorse for an unrecoverable past. Notwithstanding their chronological age, they are intent upon enjoying the pleasures that persist and, in some cases, even flourish, over time. Their uninhibited resistance to the narrative of decline signals their desire to live life to the fullest or, to employ the terminology of the interpretive gerontologist Jan Baars, to live *in time*, or *live time* (p. 57).<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the characters' resistance to the behavioral expectations for those in mid-life and beyond, the narrative is structured around chronometric time and the action follows a linear path. The opening scene establishes the existence of chrono-

<sup>2</sup> See Gullette's *Declining to decline* (1997), *Safe at Last in the Middle Years* (2000), and *Aged by Culture* (2004), Woodward's *Figuring Age* (1999), and Goldenberg's *A Bela Velhice* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Jan Baars, *Aging and the Art of Living* for an in-depth discussion of the concepts of *living in time* and *living time*.

metric time: it is precisely 4:35 in the afternoon as the young sound technician Marquinhos (Paulo Vilhena), accompanied by his young girlfriend Bel (Maria Flor), arrives to set up the sound equipment for the evening's event. The other lead characters are introduced in sequential fashion and the action unfolds in linear time up until midnight when the music stops. Bodanzky alludes indirectly to this structure when she recounts the exhaustive search she undertook to identify an appropriate space for the production (*Academia Brasileira de Cinema*, n.d.) Upon locating the old-style ballroom at *União Fraternal* in the Lapa district of São Paulo, the director made some minor structural and decorative modifications to the interior of the club so as to transform the space from a mere background into a supporting character that, along with the lighting and music, would serve as the single narrative space for the action of the film.<sup>4</sup> With the exception of the initial and the final scenes, which take place outside the entrance to the club, the entire narrative unfolds in linear fashion between 4:35 in the afternoon and midnight in the same space.

After the youngest couple arrives, a taxi pulls up with the oldest and most endearing characters in the narrative. Tônia Carrero, who was 85 at the time of production, plays the part of Alice and Leonardo Villar, 83 at the time of filming, is cast as her longtime romantic partner Álvaro. While Marquinhos and Bel make their way hastily up the stairs with numerous pieces of equipment, Alice and Álvaro need time to exit the taxi. When Alice bends over slowly to slip into her dancing shoes before getting out of the cab, the camera focuses on her swollen feet before moving to the cast on Álvaro's foot that impacts his mobility and balance. As Eudes (Stephan Nercessian) helps Álvaro and Alice up the stairs, Elza (Betty Faria) and her companion Nice (Miriam Mehler) push their way through the others on the stairs, as if in a hurry to get a piece of the action on the dance floor. Marici (Cássia Kiss) and Aurelina (Conceição Senna) arrive and generously take the young Bel under their wings. The females chat at their table while waiting for an invitation to dance while the males circulate freely around the club with the freedom their gender accords. One male character, sporting a bright colored shirt and a protruding belly, dances by himself throughout the evening with no apparent inhibitions. The pulsating beat of the musical group *Luar de Prata* (Silver Moonlight), starring the aging samba-star Elza Soares and singer and composer Marku Ribas, resounds throughout the club while the song lyrics disclose relevant information about the identity struggles the main characters confront as they live time while the action unfolds on the dance floor.

During the initial phase of production, Bodanzky experienced a technical problem with the engineering of images caused by the size of the club, the number of dancers and the amount of bulky film equipment. To solve the problem, she roped off a smaller, dedicated area where the dancers would perform unencumbered by the equipment. However, this modification forced acclaimed director of photography Walter Carvalho to manipulate a hand-held camera and literally weave his way among the dancers who were in perpetual motion (*Academia Brasileira de Cinema*, n.d.). Given the limited space, the images of the leading characters, in particular, focus primarily on the head, face, neck, and shoulders rather than the full body. What's more, the director

<sup>4</sup> Bodanzky's full commentary can be accessed at the following link:

[http://www.academiabrasileiradecinema.com.br/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=606&Itemid=510&limit=1&limitstart=2-%23http://www.academiabrasileiradecinema.com.br/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=606&Itemid=510&limit=](http://www.academiabrasileiradecinema.com.br/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=606&Itemid=510&limit=1&limitstart=2-%23http://www.academiabrasileiradecinema.com.br/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=606&Itemid=510&limit=)

intentionally avoided the use of make up to disguise the physical markers of chronological age. These two techniques result in a catalogue of images that magnify the aging process. The somewhat alarming effect these images produce, especially in the early scenes, places the spectators in the role of the *others*, those on the outside, whose reactions, according to Beauvoir, are what make the subject aware of the aging process going in within.

While aging begins at birth and ends with death, the medicalization of the aging process supports specific distinctions between the elderly and other adults. These include:

losses in physical and cognitive capacities; increased likelihood of failing health and a centrality of health concerns in self-definitions; a shorter time horizon and a more pressing need to come to terms with one's mortality; personal loss, bereavement, and more restricted social networks; being perceived and treated by others in ageist ways; a greater acceptance of things that cannot be controlled *in* life, coupled with a greater fear of losing control over one's life (Settersten, cited in BAARS, p. 54).

Bodanzky's characters do not show an acute awareness of the emotional or existential vulnerability that accompanies this discourse. For the most part, the regulars at the *gafieira* exude a remarkable vitality that becomes evident not only in their ability to move gracefully around the dance floor but also in their spontaneity, in the way they conduct their social and personal relationships. Bodanzky observes that her pre-production research at local *gafieiras* opened her eyes to the fact that the emotional needs of the population she was observing were not simply the result of their chronological age:

Claro que você sente os fatores do tempo no seu corpo, mas é a percepção externa que faz nos sentirmos velhos. Os personagens do filme não se entregam fácil. Eles se mantêm em movimento e fiéis aos seus desejos. Não perdem de vista a busca do prazer, sem ignorar a passagem do tempo. (Academia Brasileira de Cinema, n.d.).

Baars addresses related aspects of this experience and adds that there is no homogeneity to the ways individuals react to chronometric time: “[W]e cannot step out of time or aging to observe it purely. . . . Time slips away because *we are living in it* (p. 52). As a result, “aging can only be experienced or studied in specific persons and specific situations or societal contexts that influence and co-constitute the processes involved” (53). Accordingly, the identity struggles of each of Bodanzky's characters must be viewed as a revelatory personal narrative instead of a measure of homogeneity of a particular category or class of people.

Even though the personal experiences of both women and men of various ages contribute to the discussion of age in the film narrative, the interplay between gender and age is not more transparent in the female characters. Furthermore, the female gaze adds significant texture and complexity to the diegesis. Bodanzky also elaborates on this aspect of the film: “[E]ste filme é feminino, e se relaciona muito com este público. Aborda questões universais, mas de um ângulo próprio das mulheres. Trata de situações alegres e dolorosas” (*Academia Brasileira de Cinema*, n.d.). Within the urban space of the Brazilian cultural context where women's physical appearance is so highly prized, cultural texts frequently relegate women in mid-life and beyond to a position of greater invisibility. Yet, Bodanzky does not present the leading female characters as victims of a solitary environment that isolates and marginalizes them from the rest of society. Ra-

ther, as Martins de Mendonça and Motter Dala Senta (2012) point out, “o que se apresenta na tela é uma atmosfera calorosa, envolvente, onde as distinções entre “mundo jovem” e “mundo velho” se tornam tênues” (paragraph 5). As the characters engage with others of various ages, marital status, and social class, they strive to preserve their emotional wellbeing and remain open to new possibilities of meaning. To put it differently, their enthusiasm and spontaneity reinforces Hannah Arendt’s belief that human beings are defined first and foremost by their natality rather than the path to decline (cited in BAARS, p. 241). For Arendt as well as for Baars, the concept of natality is the single thing that “qualifies human lives from birth to death, inspiring life with hope, creativity, critique, rebirth, and the emergence of new horizons” (BAARS, p. 241). To be sure, as we sneak a look at how Bodanzky’s characters respond to a range of joyful and painful situations, there is every reason to celebrate what Lya Luft (2003) calls the losses, but also the gains of the life cycle. The following discussion takes a closer look at the individual experiences of the cast of female characters as they move from ambivalence towards creativity.

An upbeat character, the recently widowed Nice intentionally ignores Elza’s denigrating remarks about Ernesto’s (Luiz Senna) poor grooming and marital status when she accepts his invitation to dance. In a moment of exhilaration on the dance floor, Ernesto asks her to associate the evening with a film and she blurts out *Juventude Transviada (Rebel without a Cause, 1955)*, Nicholas Ray’s provocative film about the tragedies that befall several adolescent males and, equally important to Nice’s context, the female protagonist’s passage from adolescence to womanhood. Nice’s allusion to this particular film does not convey the behavior expected of a recently widowed woman in the middle years in the Brazilian cultural context. However, when she lets go on the dance floor to the beat of a fast-paced *frevo*, she reconnects with joyful memories and these, in turn, amplify the exhilaration she experiences in the moment. Later, when she and Ernesto exchange phone numbers, he inquires if she has a cell phone in addition to her landline. While the open-ended nature of her faint response, “No, not yet,” is barely audible over the chatter of the regulars gathered by the coatroom, it certainly leaves the door open for new possibilities and horizons.

Unlike Nice, who comes to the club with no expectations, Elza knows exactly what she wants. The purity and innocence her new white dress signals in no way fits the role of seductress she performs as she struts back and forth, impatiently, waiting for someone to take her onto the dance floor. As the evening progresses and Elza’s frustration over her invisibility increases, so does her lack of emotional stability. Her vulnerability is palpable and, in desperation, she resorts to violence on two occasions: first, when she confronts another woman over a paper flag in a game that allows the women to cut in on someone else’s dance; and later when she steals money from a friend’s purse to pay for a dance with one of *the bailarinos de aluguel*. In a last ditch attempt to live out her erotic fantasy, Elza manipulates her dance partner into the corner, ostensibly to settle the bill but when she surprises him with a passionate kiss her vulnerability increases. Emotionless, the dancer walks away as onlookers at an adjacent table comment on Elza’s lack of shame. In the final analysis, the role of seductress Elza performs does not correspond to the social system of meaning that regulates sexual behavior for women in the mid to advanced years. According to this system, Elza’s aggressive response borders on the pathological.

Although of similar age, the exotic Rita, played by Clarisse Abujamra, is a maverick. Rita leaves her husband at home and has her driver take her to the mall, where she hires a taxi to go to the *gafieira*. Rita performs a sensual tango with ‘the Argentine,’ played by the musician Raúl Bordale, and immediately afterwards the camera follows

her to the ladies room where she masturbates in a closed stall as Alice and Marici touch up their makeup and chat casually about their relationships. Minutes later, we watch her engaging in intimate conversation with the Argentine at a corner table that remains partially out of view. When a fuse goes out and the room turns black, Rita slips furtively onto her dance partner's lap and, in the moments of darkness that follow, the Argentine experiences his own sexual pleasure. The series of close ups of Rita's face, mouth, and breasts in the first scene highlight Bodanzsky's penchant for tackling subjects considered taboo—in this case female masturbation and sexual desire in the third age. In like manner, the furtive nature of the her dance partner's self-gratification moves the discourse of sexuality and aging from the margins to the center.

The raw sexuality of the scenes between Rita and the Argentina, both on and off the dance floor, stand in sharp contrast to the tender quality of the relationship between Alice and Álvaro. Their story not only touches the heart but underscores the notion that pleasure, romance, and hope are just as crucial in advanced age as they are during other stages of the life cycle. Throughout most of the evening Alice remains by her partner's side to keep him company and nurture his bad temper, allegedly due to the cast on his foot that keeps him off the dance floor. However, when Álvaro's irascibility turns to verbal abuse, Alice leaves the table to socialize with friends. Despondent and alone, Álvaro experiences two dreamlike sequences. In the first, his deceased wife accuses him of selfishly ignoring her emotional needs during the years he placed his own fulfillment before the needs of his family in order to spend evenings at the *gafieira*. The disquieting nature of this memory is followed by a second trancelike state in which he recalls the pleasure he derived from his passion for dance over the years. While, on the one hand, these dream sequences emphasize the need for connectivity between past and present, they also bring to the surface competing memories of guilt and pleasure that cause anxiety and discomfort. Contemplating a picture of his deceased wife, Álvaro is crippled by the unsettling feelings that hold him captive to the past and, therefore, unable to move away from ambivalence.

Alice, on the other hand is fully in the present moment. When she notices that Álvaro has paid the bill and started down the stairs without assistance, she quickly moves to the top of the staircase, chastising him authoritatively for his cowardly behavior and ordering him to come back up the stairs and dance with her. At this point, the camera shifts direction, from Álvaro's location on the lower end of the staircase to Alice's elevated place at the top of the stairs. The juxtaposition between the spaces they occupy—upper and lower—reinforces Alice's position of power in this scene. Her courage combined with the resolute tone of her voice are somewhat surprising given the traditional nurturing role she enacted in earlier scenes. In effect, the sheer power of Alice's enunciation highlights the importance of voice in film narrative. Moreover, as the film critic Gravagne (2013) points out, authority is rarely attributed to aging female characters in narrative:

[T]he filmic treatment of older women often encodes a problematic relation to speech as integral to a woman's gender and age, awakening unbidden in the listener stereotypical notions of older woman as not worth listening to, as culturally irrelevant — dead or alive. (p. 66).

It is also important to note that voice can be used as a tool to diminish or enhance a particular speaker in relation to an implicit hegemonic norm and thereby establish unspoken connotations of inferior or superior status (DITTMAR, p. 392). Thus, the forcefulness and moral authority of Alice's rebuke can be seen as a challenge to the

ageism and sexism that would relegate her to a position of silence and invisibility, both in her relationship with Álvaro and in her cultural context.

Shamed and obviously roused from the past by Alice's reprimand, Álvaro makes his way up the stairs, this time without difficulty and, taking Alice in his arms, guides her around the dance floor with agility and style. The juxtaposition of the images—close ups of the couple's satisfaction as they dance cheek to cheek and two full body shots accentuating their skill on the dance floor—are perhaps the most captivating moments of the film. While Álvaro's trembling hands and Alice's fading memory may suggest an unstable future, the couple's longtime passion for dance coupled with their genuine affection for each other connects them physically and spiritually and inspires hope as they live time.

In addition to the identity struggles that mark the mid to advanced years, the narrative exposes a love triangle between Marici, Eudes, and Bel that strikes a contrast between the innocence of youth and the more mature form of self-knowledge that results from lived experience. This situation develops when Eudes, who is more than a casual friend to Marici, becomes infatuated with Bel and, subsequently, ignores Marici throughout the rest of the evening. Unlike Elza who responded aggressively to her invisibility, Marici's reaction to rejection bears out a healthier sense of self. Taking it in stride, she observes that while men are good, especially on a rainy day, the sources of real pleasure in her life are her hobbies and her relationships with family and friends. The youthful Bel, on the other hand, is torn by feelings of insecurity that frighten and confuse her. She expresses her inability to make choices and her fear of following her heart in a note to Eudes that Marquinhos intercepts. In a fit of jealousy and impulsivity, he attacks Eudes verbally and physically. The difference in the way Marici reacts to her feelings of jealousy and Marquinhos' immature acting out of his insecurities constitutes a critical reflection on the nature of self-knowledge in the different stages of human development. The dynamic between Bel and Marquinhos continues as he loads the sound equipment into his car at the end of the evening. However, Bel breaks through her insecurities as they argue and, taking her first steps towards a more mature self, makes the decision to cancel her plans with Marquinhos. As she walks off into the night by herself, Marquinhos calls out to her in confusion but ultimately lacks the self-assurance and maturity to go after her.

As Bel walks into the night in one direction, the camera shifts to Marici who walks in another direction. Suddenly, Eudes pulls up alongside Marici in his truck, pleading with her to stop while he recites one of Camilo Pessanha's romantic poems about the illusive nature of nostalgia:

Se ela andava no jardim/Que cheiro de jasmin/Tão branca do luar/Eis, tenho  
a junto a mim/Vencido, é minha enfim/Depois de tanto a sonhar/Por que me  
entristeço assim?/Não era ela, mas sim o que eu queria abraçar/A hora do  
jardim/O aroma do jasmin/A onda do luar.<sup>5</sup>

Showing passive resistance at first, Marici ultimately capitalizes on the possibility before her. When Eudes comparing her womanhood to Bel's immaturity: "Doce, pura, começando a vida/Mas a mulher é você, Marici," Marici accuses him of being a fast talker. Despite her disappointment, however, she walks around to the passenger side

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<sup>5</sup> Pessanha's poem "Se andava no jardim" appeared in *Clepsidra*, 1920. The English translation appears in the subtitles: "What smell of jasmine/As white as moonlight/I hold her so close/Defeated, now she's mine/After such dreams/Why make me so sad?/It wasn't her but what I wanted to embrace was/The hour of the jasmine/The aroma of the jasmine/The wave of moonlight."

and hops into the truck while the two drive off together into the night. At the end of the day, both Marici and Eudes profit from their flexibility, self-acceptance, and maturity while Bel and Marquinhos remain trapped by insecurities and lack of self-knowledge. In this case, lived experience, albeit with some bumps along the way, triumphs over the benefits of youth.

As we have seen, Bodanzky's aging characters experience passion, joy, jealousy, humiliation, isolation and rejection in much the same way as those passing through other stages of life. Their stories, some of which are based upon real life situations the director witnessed while carrying out pre-production research at clubs throughout São Paulo, lend an air of authority to Bodanzky's observation that the realization of one's hopes and dreams requires not giving up on the search for pleasure, regardless of the passage of time. Moreover, if chronological age does not prohibit the fulfillment of emotional needs, as Bodanzky, Arendt, and Baars observe, Simone de Beauvoir's reflection on the nature of pleasure during the aging process takes on greater significance: "There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work" (*The Coming of Age*, p. 540).

In effect, pursuing the ends that give life meaning constitutes a powerful antidote to an unrecoverable past and feelings of uncertainty about an unstable future. However, as Baars point out, fulfillment and connection throughout the life cycle must be accompanied by an attitude of openness to new horizons in the future:

It is apparently beyond many people's scope that older persons also live in the present, that these days are also their days, and that they might even be interested in the future. There appears to be a widespread conviction concerning the life course that young people and "normal" adults would be prospectively oriented and make plans for the future, whereas older people are thought to have exclusively retrospective orientations: as if they have lived their lives and should keep themselves occupied with memories. For all of them, young people, so-called normal adults and the old, living in the present tends to fall out between these two preoccupations; a present which is not just a punctual now, but saturated with the past and the future." (p. 191).

There is no doubt that Bodanzky's characters struggle to maintain this orientation between the past and the future. In the final analysis, the film narrative reminds us that those in the third age and beyond can successfully resist the discourse of decline inasmuch as they establish continuity with the past and, while living in time, remain open to the possibility of renewal in an unpredictable future. Seen from this perspective, *Chega de saudade* offers a new metric for living out the third act in the second modernity.

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