



cinnanima

Perspectives on Portuguese Animation

David Doutel and Vasco Sá

1st Edition

Edited by **Pedro Serrazina**

Work and Life Animated: a Look from the Works by David Doutel and Vasco Sá¹

¹ This text is based on a presentation given at the Symposium Perspectives on Portuguese Animation, at CINA-NIMA, the 45th International Animated Film Festival, which took place on 13 November 2021 and focused on the short films by David Doutel and Vasco Sá *Augur* (2018), *Soot* (2014) and *The Shoemaker* (2011). I would like to thank Pedro Serrazina for challenging me, a sociologist who absolutely believes in the transforming power of artistic creation, and to António João Lima, for his precious reading and suggestions.

² Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. luisa.veloso@iscte-iul.pt

The starting point

This article presents an analysis of three films by David Doutel and Vasco Sá – *Augur* (2018), *Soot* (2014) and *The Shoemaker* (2011) –, a defying challenge proposed by Pedro Serrazina, since I do not master the language of animated film. This challenge complements another one I embarked on a few years ago, and which took the form of research about the representations of work in Portuguese cinema (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016). I will invoke it in this text in the sense of creating cross-readings about artistic creation.

I chose to carry out an approach that favours the elements that are common to the three films. This results from a professional practice, which leads me to look at the social regularities, rather than the singularities, but which I believe has the merit of asserting that the singularities are, in turn, social, that is, they allow the understanding of social realities.

These films are like this too: singular stories, of unique characters that mirror structural traits of the society³. Their biographies are, thus, socialised biographies.

I therefore seek to contribute with a sociological analysis of these three films, hoping to build bridges between scientific work and artistic creation, a belief that has accompanied me for several years in my personal and professional career.

Films and their rhymes

Watching the three films made me reflect on what they have in common, both from a thematic point of view and from the readings of the reality that they enhance. This reflection is based on the belief that artistic creations are not limited to illustrating reality; they actively contribute to its construction. As mentioned in the results of the research referred to above, the goal was to “analyse the role of cinema in the construction and dissemination of representations about labour in Portugal rather than a research based on the assumption of the images as illustrative of certain social realities. We believe that cinema and its relational approach through the social and human sciences and film or image studies are an extremely fruitful scientific field for understanding societies” (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016: 287).

³ For an approach to this issue, see Elias (1993a; 1993b).

As a result, I propose a look at films based on a set of axes that I explain below.

The contextualised reality

The three short films are clearly about certain configurations of the Portuguese reality. Even if it is possible to establish parallels with realities in other countries, they contain this particular dimension, and I assume that as a clear intention on the part of their authors. This is a reality that, on a first reading, does not highlight contemporaneity, but that, in a second, more intertwined reading, gives visibility to worlds which, for political and ideological reasons, have become “invisible”, regardless of their temporal anchoring. This is the case, in particular, of *Augur*, which portrays a “rural” reality marked by difficult living conditions, with a nostalgia for abandoned lives and hard work, and an association of hard work with masculinity. A masculinity that reveals its socially expected strengths, but also its weaknesses. Weaknesses that, in contrast, are transformed into strengths, because they show affection, sadness and relationships of solidarity.

In *The Shoemaker*, we discover the reality of cities in which manual labour is on the verge of extinction, abandoned to a last stronghold now transformed into a fetish and tourist business cards, as well as to journalistic pieces in the media⁴.

We find a similar approach in the live action film *Portraits* (1987 and 1991), by Alain Cavalier, which portrays manual labour exemplarily, highlighting the aesthetic of gestures.

The nostalgic train journey and all the imaginary it evokes in *Soot* is still found today in abandoned stations, some reconverted for other purposes⁵, losing their role as meeting spaces where people, stories, lives intersected⁶.

Soot is also a reflection of the closure of railway lines and train stations in Portugal, particularly from the 1980s onwards. As the authors claim in an interview: “We are not interested in being moralistic about the past, we are interested in understanding the impact of certain decisions that were made and what positive and negative things they brought to people”. And they add: “by looking at the ruins of old stations and the railway lines that were abandoned, it is easy to understand that there is something there that has not been done as it should have been, and which remains to be explained”⁷.

Past, present and future intersect in these films which, as they show a reality that is no longer identified in the present, contribute to a reading of (dis)continuous times. This suggests a contextualised reality for Portugal, a peripheral country in the European context, marked by a mosaic of professional and economic activities with structural contradictions, with clear territorial traits.

⁴ See the case of “the digital shoemaker from Campolide” – <https://amensagem.pt/2021/04/09/crise-pandemia-redes-sociais-pedro-miguel-sapateiro-digital-campolide-lisboa/> - or the cutler: <https://www.publico.pt/2022/04/29/fugas-reportagem/huno-amolador-realejo-afiafaca-porta-restaurantes-2003795> Accessed on 2 May 2022. Manual labour now done by “entrepreneurs” of post-modernity (Lyotard, 1979), in the instrumentalised exercise of memory preservation.

⁵ See, for example, <https://www.hotelandia.pt/hoteis-em-estacoes-de-comboio/>. Accessed on 2 May 2022.

⁶ See, for example, this report: <https://www.tsf.pt/portugal/sociedade/anos-depois-sem-dar-cavaco-a-ferrovia-portugal-quer-voltar-a-apanhar-comboio-do-investimento-ferroviario-13993176.html>. Accessed on 2 May 2022.

⁷ <https://expresso.pt/legislativas2015/2015-10-01-E-como-fuligem-que-se-deposita-nas-paredes-da-nossa-cabeca>. Accessed on 25 May 2022.



Augur



The Shoemaker



Soot

The nostalgic imagined reality

The films share an imaginary marked by nostalgia. A nostalgia associated with difficult lives, professions facing extinction (or already extinct), and imaginary journeys. It is not necessarily a nostalgia that is regretted or that is represented in a negative way, but something that hovers in the films, combining reality with the imaginary.

Everything revolves around a nostalgic search for a lost time (overusing the expression of Marcel Proust's masterpiece (1946), but which includes several journeys through time, a real time, an unreal time, a time of people, a time of spaces, a time of lives. As Walter Benjamin points out, "what interests Proust is the flow of time in its most real form, that of its clear articulation with memory, on the inside, and aging, on the outside" (Benjamin, 2016: 124).

This flow of time is highlighted in the stories that are told, the lives of the characters portrayed, but also in the narrative. In the narrative of the images and the text. And, I dare to add, in the tones and ways of representing the characters and nature.

In *Soot*, there is a clearly evident record of memories and remembrances that accompany the character(s), in an exercise of crossing temporalities and lives that is

not fully obvious, on purpose, highlighting the layers of real and memorable moments that convey feelings more than life trajectories.

In *The Shoemaker*, the friendly character wanders through the urban space seeking to renew his daily life, increasingly emptied of work and, consequently, filled with detailed gestures around his iconic object – the shoe – and his tools.

These are manual activities which are clearly disappearing, a result of the transformations of the capitalist systems, which, among its many and complex traits, is characterized by the primacy of purposeful obsolescence (Gregory, 1947) and, therefore, of new consumption practices based on the short duration of the products and their immediate replacement by others.

In *Augur*, nostalgia is associated with sad family stories lived in isolation, admirably narrated in difficult atmospheric conditions and in houses with very poor living conditions.

Lives, spaces, times, professional activities are narrated in a register in which the characters and their routines are intertwined and gain density in gestures, tones, movements, spaces.

As Walter Benjamin points out, Marcel Proust "is obsessed with a truth: we don't have time to live the true dramas of the existence we have been given. And it is this, and nothing else, that makes us grow old" (Benjamin, 2016: 125).

Time flows.



Soot



The Shoemaker

Time, memory(ies), space and territories

Time flows in the three films in an interconnection with space. Temporal coordinates are marked by a coexistence of past, present and future, in non-linear trajectories, because, in fact, they are not linear. This overlapping of temporalities is more visible in *Soot*, in which times are also imaginary and the characters' stories are presented in a back-and-forth manner, between (apparently) different storylines. This artistic and narrative option allows us to summon the important reflection on the obsession with the present – “presentism” – exemplarily discussed by François Hartog (Hartog, 2003; 2019-2020). The historian stresses the fact that memory is a “presentist” instrument, also because the primacy given to the past, present or future leads to different experiences of time. Equally relevant is the reflection by Rui Chafes who, in his text “Entre o Céu e a Terra” (Chafes, 2012), takes on the figure of the sculptor who crosses the ages and who calls for a reflection as a sculptor, born in 1266, “in a small village, which no longer exists, in Franconia, in Bavaria” (Chafes, 2012: 11) evoking timeless sculptures. And, also, the irresistible reference to the film by Maureen Fazendeiro and Miguel Gomes, *Diários de Otsoga* (2021), in which the directors assume time as a playful space. It is not just a matter of reversing the chronological sequence of the days, but, in this way, of creating a narrative that contradicts the linearity of time. As they say, “The pandemic and the lockdown have changed our perception of time. Upon abandoning that experiment, we had to make a film that challenged linearity and that worked with repetition, suspension, discontinuity...”⁸.

In *Augur*, time is also complex and the directors add temporal layers which mark events of the characters visible in their bodies. The family relationship between the two men is revealed after the viewer is involved in the work and living environment of the characters and realizes the intertwined relationship between work activities and personal lives, as viscerally interconnected spheres.

In this sense, the films summon us to reflect on the ways in which we relate to time. But it also calls for the reflection on space. The domestic space and the work space, visible in *The Shoemaker*, where the workshop space is a space of intimacy and the urban space, travelled by bicycle, is also a work space. The domestic space as a work space, visible in *Augur*, and space-time, or a space that is time, metaphorized in the train and train travels, in *Soot*. The films go beyond this approach to space: The balance exterior/interior is quite present in the three films. The space of nature is relevant, particularly in *Augur*, because it is associated with the rural space and what it contains of beauty and, simultaneously, of depression, abandonment, depopulation.

We should highlight the rural space, which is visible in *Soot*, clearly in population loss, although it is not at all a territorially homogeneous reality (Ferrão, 2018). As Ferrão points out, in rural societies “factors such as climatic conditions, orography, soil quality or water availability contribute in a decisive manner to delimit the conditions of possibility of occupation and use of rural territories” (Ferrão, 2018: 13).



Augur

⁸ Interview with Maureen Fazendeiro and Miguel Gomes by Cyril Neyrat and Jean-Pierre Rehm. https://issuu.com/osomeafuria/docs/diariosdeotsoga_press-kit_final_20210726_comprese Accessed on 9 June 2022.



Rural space in *Augur*



Urban space in *The Shoemaker*



Moving space in *Soot*

But rural society has been undergoing transformations and “the rural society prevailing until then [1974, the year of the establishment of democracy in Portugal] is now opposed by a dualistic society, in the words of Adérito Sedas Nunes, who confronts, on the one hand, the modern, emerging urban-industrial country, with an increasing number of infrastructures, attractive and with high levels of education and literacy, and, on the other, the country of traditional rural society, in demographic, economic and social loss, hit by emigration and the displacement of populations to cities, by the decline of agricultural activities and by precarious conditions of accessibility and physical and social mobility” (Ferrão, 2018: 15). We are in the presence of isolated, desertified rural territories (in *Soot* and *Augur*) and anonymised and depressed urban territories. These spaces are social spaces: the characters share a disadvantaged social condition from an economic, cultural and social point of view.

Work and professions

Work and professions are two of the key anchors in the three films. Traditional and handcraft activities performed by men. Men are the characters chosen to represent these realities: the farmer/shepherd (*Augur*), the shoemaker (*The Shoemaker*) and the train gate-man⁹ (*Soot*). These are professional activities in which the male body is always present, in its several ages of human life, assuming its use as a central aspect. The craftsmanship, the gestures, which are echoed in the animated films themselves, made by the hands of its creators.

Nostalgia is once again evident here, this time associated with the end of manual labour, particularly in *The Shoemaker*, in which the character ends up working on his own shoes, wearing them in a different way, that allows him to travel in time. These are lonely characters, with isolated lives, in space and time, trapped in their memories.

The Shoemaker, a film in which manual work is more evident, shows us a straight link to the profession, a sense of professional pride and of vocation. The feeling for handcraft work – even if contradicted by other readings, such as the one that Jacques Rancière portrays so well in his “Proletarian Nights”, by highlighting the horror of the “factory floor” (even if in a workshop context) and the passion for intellectual activities, food for thought, such as reading or writing, which today are (sadly) call leisure activities – is, in *The Shoemaker*, portrayed as if it were a vocation. Profession and vocation, terms often associated, are questioned here by the disappearance of the activities in which an object was produced by the hands of an artisan. As if being a shoemaker had not been a destiny, socially structured by the social condition of each one (a habitus, as proposed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, 1972), but rather a vocation¹⁰.



The Shoemaker

⁹ The presence of this professional activity is not so clear, as in the other two films, but it ends up summoning us to his existence, in particular his solitary life shaped in the space of the train station.

¹⁰ An interesting set of texts on this topic is condensed in Delicado, Borges and Dix, orgs. (2010).

The rhymes between animation and documentary: breaking boundaries

By evoking the research carried out in *O trabalho no ecrã* (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016), and producing an essay of free and speculative dialogue between the three films and a set of documentary films, I propose the reader a reflection between the rhymes that can be created between filmic registers which apparently do not dialogue between each other. The rhymes are varied – thematic, aesthetic, narrative, etc. – and enhance a reflective look on artistic creation, and, in this particular case, on cinema and its different manifestations.

To do so, I have organised the analytical axes explained above in a table and established rhymes between the films.

Table 1 | Rhymes between animation and documentary

| | <i>Augur</i> | <i>Soot</i> | <i>The Shoemaker</i> |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The contextualized reality | <i>Trigo da nossa terra</i> , Augusto Fraga and Carlos Marques, 1954 | <i>Aço Português</i> , Perdígão Queiroga, 1961 <i>Amolador!</i> , unidentified author, 1980 | <i>Sinfonia de cristal</i> , Victor Raposo, 1947 |
| The nostalgic imagined reality | <i>Diga-me o que é a ciência I</i> , Ana Hatherly, 1976 | | <i>Pescadores de Setúbal</i> , unidentified author, 20s <i>Amolador!</i> , unidentified author, 1980 |
| Time, memory(ies), space and territories | <i>Trigo da nossa terra</i> , Augusto Fraga and Carlos Marques, 1954 <i>Diga-me o que é a ciência I</i> , Ana Hatherly, 1976 | <i>Amolador!</i> , unidentified author, 1980 | <i>Pescadores de Setúbal</i> , unidentified author, 20s <i>Amolador!</i> , unidentified author, 1980 |
| Work and professions | <i>Trigo da nossa terra</i> , Augusto Fraga and Carlos Marques, 1954 | <i>Aço Português</i> , Perdígão Queiroga, 1961 | <i>Sinfonia de cristal</i> , Victor Raposo, 1947 <i>Amolador!</i> , unidentified author, 1980 |

Source: Vidal & Veloso, coord (2016). These films are part of the collection of ANIM – Arquivo Nacional da Imagem em Movimento – Cinemateca Portuguesa, Museu do Cinema (ANIM – National Archive of the Motion Picture) – Cinemateca Portuguesa, Museum of Cinema).

I emphasize that this speculative exercise is not intended to cover all the relationships that can be identified between the films, but, rather, to provide some clues for cross-reading films that generate, at the same time, uniqueness and communion.

And to contradict (or complement) what I suggested at the beginning, I now propose a look at each of the three animations, and at their rhymes with documentary films that I have analysed in the above mentioned research. The selection of these documentaries does not obey a particular research criterion. When I saw the three animation films, the documentaries that are referred to in table 1 came to my mind. Hence, many others could have been selected, in a look at cinema that crosses ages, spaces and genres.

The film *Augur* takes me back to *O Trigo da Nossa Terra*, a film associated with the Wheat Campaign that began in 1929, in Portugal, a time marked by dictatorship, poverty, illiteracy and submission to the logic of manorial power in rural contexts.

Trigo da nossa Terra portrays a scenario of joy and dedication to labour, in which women and men toil in wheat fields, a message from a dictatorial state promoting a portrait of a rural country, particularly in the Alentejo, in a sunny landscape where work is depicted as pleasurable.

It is a collective body of work of an iconographic nature (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016: 74), in which there is evidence of a staging based on the representation of the Alentejano, namely through their clothing – such as the scarves and the hats – and the work tools – such as the scythe.

In *Augur*, we find a different depiction: a wintry landscape, marked by very hard work and associated with a sad, yet compassionate, family life story.

The two films propose narratives about the Portuguese rural space, one a propaganda narrative, promoting hard work as joyful, the other a nostalgic and dramatic approach, focused on family relationships between men and in which a context of abandonment, isolation and inevitable destiny is visible.



Augusto Fraga and Carlos Marques, 1954: *O trigo da nossa terra* [col. ANIM]



Augur



Ana Hatherly, 1976: *Diga-me o que é a ciência? – I* [col. ANIM].



The Shoemaker

This nostalgia in *Augur* rhymes in a very interesting way with *Diga-me o que é a ciência I*, in which director Ana Hatherly questions cork workers about what science and technology are. Held in a historical period marked by the establishment of the democratic regime, artists and intellectuals praise agricultural work, questioning workers about elements – science and technique – that only the former are interested in. The attempt to value work and record the voice of workers, giving them primacy, a remarkable landmark of militant cinema (Stark, 2012), coexists with the imposition of a bourgeois discourse on aspects to which agricultural workers do not relate to.

There is an obvious intention to listen to the workers, because they all have a technique, even if they are not always able to verbalize it (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016:119). The artists thus seek to give voice to the workers who have physically demanding and exhausting work, as in *Augur*, and who are expected to speak out about their work, when, for them, talking is often synonymous of doing nothing. These two films rhyme, in the context and type of activities and also in their core intention of seeking a past that one hopes to recover, or that one hopes to forget, but from which one cannot escape.

I find other rhymes between *Soot* and the portrait of *Amolador!*, which highlights Portuguese realities associated with striking symbolic spaces, such as trains and landscapes of the now called historic centres of towns, as well as the idea of means of transportation that allow

travel in time and in space.

In *Amolador!*, the “spatial dimension of cinematographic representations” is evident (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016: 81) and, similarly, in *The Shoemaker*, the urban space is shown from the movement of a character (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016: 90). However, if in *The Shoemaker* it is an unidentifiable urban space, anchored in an imagined reality, in *Amolador!*, the intention to show a traditional Lisbon neighbourhood, Alfama, is obvious. Both films share the urban space as a workspace.

In *Aço Português*, there is a luminosity associated with the production process, such as the luminosity that David Doutel and Vasco Sá imprint in *Soot*. We see dirt, noise, and a long sequence dedicated to the production process (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016: 152).

More than in the work gesture, emphasis is placed on the grandeur of the production process, with an aesthetic look that is unique to the matter and the respective transformation process.

The Shoemaker rhymes with several films that, in different contexts, evoke manual professions. Glassmakers, fishermen, knife grinders, are distinctly masculine activities that shape urban, industrial and maritime territories.

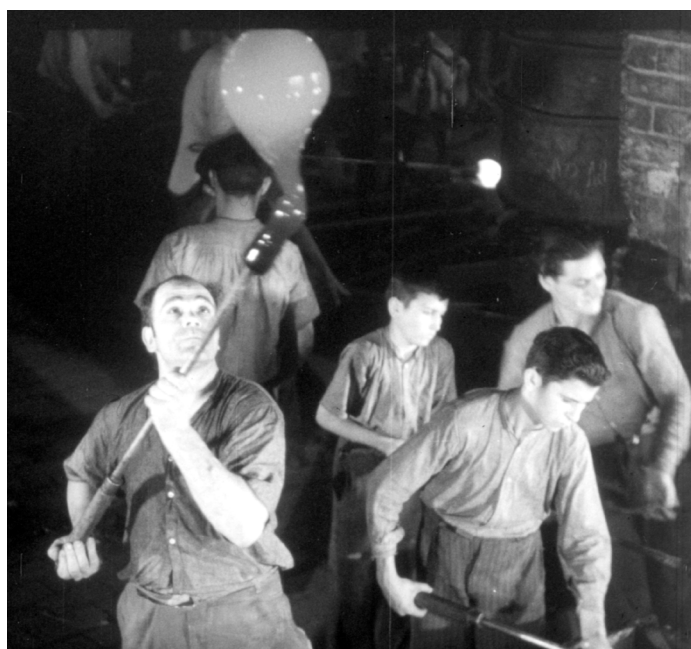
These films share representations of such activities in a register that praises the professionals, valuing their individualised representation while highlighting the work gestures, like Alain Cavalier proposed in *Portraits* (1987; 1991), in which we hear the director, explicitly asking people to make the gestures or show the work tools.



Unidentified author, 1980: *Amolador!* [col. ANIM]



Perdigão Queiroga, 1961: *Aço português* [col. ANIM]



Victor Raposo, 1947: *Sinfonia de cristal* [col. ANIM]



Pescadores de Setúbal – pesca da sardinha,
the 20s,unidentified author [col. ANIM]



The Shoemaker

In some of these cases, we have workers, such as the fishermen, who, in *Pescadores de Setúbal*, pose for the camera, creating a unique and iconic image of their work trade, with his beard, pipe and hat.

There is a nostalgia, once again, associated with an imaginary that marks professional activities associated with manual dexterity, with the craftsman's work, but also with arduous working conditions, as is the case of the glassmaker and the fisherman. *The Shoemaker* also shows clear traces of physical effort, visible in his curvature and posture.

These rhymes, proposed as “an iterative and relational process of viewing different films” (Vidal & Veloso, coord., 2016: 49), enhance perspectives on cinematographic works apparently belonging to distinct worlds, particularly from an aesthetic point of view, which allow us to reflect on their interpretative power of social reality.

The conclusion... a starting point

Cinema is a precious field of artistic creation for understanding how artists offer us a vision of our worlds that challenge us and make us reflect on its transforming power. Cinema does not illustrate reality; it builds it and, in this way, it generates change. For a sociologist, its analysis is a privileged way of getting to know the social reality, and, in this case, the Portuguese reality. And it enhances readings that cross temporalities.

The films of David Doutel and Vasco Sá share a nostalgic vision of a rural and urban Portugal that no longer seems to exist. But, in reality, in a more or less pronounced manner, trends of contemporaneity persist:

- in rural spaces, with alcoholism, loneliness, ageing, the sacred, superstitions, rationally inexplicable stories marked by an insurmountable destiny;
- in urban spaces, with the social isolation of those who do (but not only) manual labour, such as shoemakers, knife grinders, small shops;
- in travelling spaces, in which the train metaphorizes a transport of dreams and nostalgia, of the abandoned railway lines of Portugal, sacrificing the option of progress with losses, in search of an identity.

References

- BENJAMIN, Walter (2016). *Ensaaios sobre literatura*. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1972). *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique. Précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*. Paris: Librairie Droz.
- CHAFES, Rui (2012). *Entre o céu e a terra*. Lisbon: Documenta.
- DELICADO, Ana, BORGES, Vera e DIX, Stefan, orgs. (2010). *Profissão e vocação: ensaios sobre grupos profissionais*. Lisbon: ICS.
- ELIAS, Norbert (1993a). *A sociedade dos indivíduos*. Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote.
- ELIAS, Norbert (1993b). *Mozart: sociologia de um génio*. Porto: Edições ASA.
- Ferrão, J. (2018). *Despovoamento em áreas rurais: entre a inevitabilidade e a capacidade de transformação*. *Cultivar Cadernos de Análise e Prospetiva*. 11: 13-19.
- GREGORY, Paul M. (1947). *A Theory of Purposeful Obsolescence*. *Southern Economic Journal*. 14(1): 24-45.
- HARTOG, François (2019-2020). *O poder e a autoridade da memória* (interview by António Guerreiro). *Electra*. 8: 39-50.
- HARTOG, François (2003). *Régimes d' historicité. Presentism et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil.
- LYOTARD, Jean-François (1979). *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit.
- PROUST, Marcel (1946) [1913-1927]. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Stark, Trevor (2012). *Cinema in the hands of the people: Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the potential of militant films*. *October*. 139: 117-150.
- VIDAL, Frédéric, VELOSO, Luísa, coord. (2016). *O trabalho no ecrã: memórias e identidades através do cinema*. Coimbra: Edições 70.