

IMITATION OF LIFE: *A HORA DA ESTRELA*

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The Northeast has served as backdrop and theme for a number of Brazilian films, the most prominent among them being Nelson Pereira dos Santos's adaptation of Graciliano Ramos's classic novella, *Vidas Secas*, which ends with a family of *retirantes* leaving the drought-stricken *sertão* for the south and presumably a better life in the city. Suzana Amaral's *A Hora da Estrela* (1985), based on the 1977 novella by Clarice Lispector, might be regarded as a sequel to *Vidas Secas*'s familiar tale of Northeastern poverty, hardship and flight. In a neo-realist style reminiscent of dos Santos, this film focuses on Macabéa, a nineteen-year-old *nordestina* who has left her homeland for the city, where she works for less than minimum wage as a not very capable typist. On one level, *A Hora da Estrela* is about the encounter between cultures. However, unlike Pereira dos Santos's *Como Era Gostoso o Meu Francês* (1971), about the encounter between 16th-century Europe and the New World, *A Hora da Estrela* brings together the impoverished and provincial Northeast, as represented by the malnourished and barely literate Macabéa, and the metropolitan, industrialized South, whose *lumpenproletariat* seem sophisticated by comparison. Like a stranger in a foreign land, Macabéa makes every effort to adapt to her new surroundings, but she is ill-equipped. Her painfully undeveloped sense of self and of the modern world makes her seem quaintly out of tune in a culture preoccupied with beauty, wealth, and success.

As the narrator of Lispector's story bluntly declares: "...era incompetente. Incompetente para a vida."¹

The film's introductory shot of Macabéa in a dark, dingy office, slowly typing and intermittently wiping her nose on her blouse, clearly portends a difficult life for a young woman

¹ Clarice Lispector, *A Hora da Estrela* (Rio: Editora Rocco Ltda., 1999) p.24. All subsequent citations quoted parenthetically in the text are from this edition.

who, in her one of her rare self-affirming moments in both the book and the film, proudly sums up her identity as follows: “Sou datilógrafa e virgem, e gosto de coca-cola” (36).

Both the novella and the film use the poignant figure of Macabéa to give the audience an estranged sense of modernity. Seen in relation to the “incompetent” peasant, even the most quotidian aspects of urban experience leap into troubling significance, and the gulf between the urban bourgeoisie and the provincial underclass becomes especially evident. But there are also significant differences between the novella and the film. Amaral’s project is less a straightforward adaptation than an appropriation of certain elements of Lispector’s work in the service of a more socially critical, melodramatic, and left-wing treatment of migration, poverty, and social inequality. Although Lispector’s novella focuses much more on the issue of social class than is usual for her, the novella remains fully within the main tradition of high-modernist literature. Introspective, elliptical, and self-reflexive, it is a kind of meta-fiction about the crisis of representation, centered on the uneasy consciousness of a fictional narrator. By comparison, Amaral makes a relatively straightforward realist film that is fully in keeping with the social and aesthetic aims of the original Cinema Novo movement. In fact, her film is consistent with her earlier documentary project, Minha Vida, Nossa Luta (1979), which was clearly influenced by the Cinema Novo.

In what follows, I want to explore this social/ideological dimension of the film by comparing it with the novel on several different levels. My point is neither to criticize Amaral for her lack of fidelity to Lispector, nor to argue that Lispector’s novella should have been more political. Instead, I hope to show how Amaral engaged in a productive reading of Lispector that allowed her film to transform its source and become its own distinctive statement.

Narrators

Perhaps the major difference between the novella and the film is that Amaral has dispensed with Lispector’s first-person narrator, Rodrigo S.M., who is both the author of Macabéa’s story and a character in his own right. There is a decidedly alienated quality about Rodrigo, and like the majority of Lispector’s first-person narrators (who tend to be middle-class women), he experiences a brief, rather mundane encounter that has epiphanic results: “É que numa rua do Rio de Janeiro peguei no ar de relance o sentimento de perdição no rosto de uma

moça nordestina” (12). This encounter serves as the catalyst for his philosophical meditations on life and authorship that appear throughout the book and it also provides him with a central protagonist, whom he calls Macabéa, for an imagined narrative.

Early in the novella, Rodrigo admits to a need to write this story differently from his usual style, because he feels that only a sparse, simple language will capture the truth of Macabéa’s existence. Yet the story he creates is as much his own as that of an impoverished provincial type like Macabéa, who must struggle not with large, existential questions, but rather with daily survival in the metropolis. In this regard, the novella is finely balanced between a writer’s questions observations about being and existence and an author’s tale about “as fracas aventuras de uma moça numa cidade toda feita contra ela. Ela que devia ter ficado no sertão de Alagoas com vestido de chita e sem nenhuma datilografia...”(15). It is not surprising that what French critic Hélène Cixous, one of Lispector’s greatest admirers, finds intriguing about A Hora da Estrela is not the story of Macabéa per se, but rather the questions about narration, textuality and authorship that Rodrigo (re)presents.²

Rodrigo tells the reader of his need to prune his language of “termos suculentos,” including “ adjetivos esplendorosos [e] carnudos substantivos” in order to concentrate on the ‘pedras duras” or ‘hard stone’ facts of Macabéa’s story (15). Despite this apparent devotion to aesthetic minimalism and empirical evidence, however, the novella is a verbally complex monologue by a highly self-conscious narrator who anguishes about problems of representation. By contrast, Amaral seems to take the narrator-character’s wishes literally, stripping the novella of his introspective commentaries and musings. In preferring the ‘hard stones” of Macabéa’s story and privileging straightforward photographic images over all else, Amaral has ironically produced the traditional tale with “com começo, meio e ‘gran finale”” (13) that Rodrigo set out to write but clearly did not. As he himself states early in the book: “Não, não é fácil escrever. É duro como quebrar rochas. Mas voam faíscas e lascas como aços espelhados” (19)—an image that captures the nature of the text itself, whose hard stones fragment into Rodrigo’s digressions on life, love and mortality. Amaral not only dispenses with this first-person narrator, she also makes no attempt to reproduce the self-reflexivity and other estranging techniques found in Lispector’s text. Instead, she opts for a classic-realist style that directly conveys the sense of crisis that

² See Hélène Cixous, “The Hour of the Star: How Does One Desire Wealth or Poverty?” Reading with Clarice Lispector, trans. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, pp. 143-163. One of Cixous’s most recent publications is a French translation of The Hour of the Star.

Lispector seems to have felt when writing her author's dedication ("Esta história acontece em estado de emergência e de calamidade pública" [10]) and which serves as context if not catalyst for Macabéa's story.

But even though the film has no exact equivalent to Rodrigo, it does have a kind of diegetic narrator, in the form of a radio announcer who is heard intermittently. This device seems to have been suggested by Lispector's text, which contains several references to "Rádio Relógio" and to a radio announcer whose words are indirectly reported. What is different is the privileged position that Amaral gives to the radio, whose disembodied voice opens the film as the credits appear on the screen. After stating the station frequency and wattage, a male announcer offers two full minutes of popular-scientific "facts": the number of days it takes a fly to circle the world; the percentage of body weight that a human versus a hummingbird consumes in a twenty-four hour period; the fact that women used make-up as far back as 1300 B.C. The duration is confirmed by a second, female announcer, who intermittently gives the current time in hours, minutes and seconds. Like Rodrigo, these radio announcements call attention to the relationship between time and existence, and, indirectly, to the fleeting nature of both. Notice also that the announcements prefigure themes or motifs that will be developed in the course of Macabéa's story: travel from one place to another, the need for food as sustenance, and women's make-up in an urban environment.

The themes of silence, existential nothingness and angst that loom in Lispector's fiction and that preoccupy Rodrigo as he sits down to write are all here in the film, but are presented by Amaral in a more indirect and less central way. The radio plies the listener with information that entertains and momentarily masks the silence and the void. The countdown effect of the seconds ticking away in the background as the information is relayed is a constant reminder that knowledge, like existence, is of the moment and that everything is in flux. This impermanence, which is a source of angst for Rodrigo in the book, does not seem to induce existential fear in Macabéa. In one of the most moving scenes in the film, she awakens suddenly in the middle of the night, reaches for the radio, turns the volume on low and cradles it next to her in bed. The radio is one of the few constants in her life, as important as her comb and her beloved Coca Cola, both of which Amaral shows us in a close-up shot that resembles a still-life painting. The radio provides Macabéa with both emotional comfort and the kind of information she believes will help her successfully adapt to her new surroundings. She is also enchanted by the tick-tock sound

of Rádio Relógio; and in a rare moment of self-revelation, she confides this pleasure to her “boyfriend” Olímpico, who undercuts her delight by boasting that he owns a watch. Unlike Olímpico, who is more interested in the status and commodity value of his watch (which he stole from a co-worker), Macabéa is cognizant of time itself. She regards the ticking clock as a sort of heartbeat or lullaby, whereas we, as viewers of the film, become ironically aware of industrial time’s precious and fleeting quality in the life of the individual.

The radio is of course also the voice of modernity and mass culture, plying Macabéa with announcements and commercials that are necessary to her transformation from a provincial backlander to a worker and consumer. In this sense the radio announcer is an entirely ironic narrator, creating fantasies in the mind of the young woman and constantly telling her a story of a better life. She already drinks Coca-Cola, which she prefers to the local Guaraná. As the story progresses, we watch her small attempts to beautify herself by painting her fingernails, purchasing lipstick at a store, and reading fashion magazines. Following a consultation with a fortuneteller, who gives her good news, she buys a party dress that she can ill afford, her death at the end of the film is presented in the form of a commercial that she might have seen on the television.

Let me pause for a brief theoretical explanation. In my analysis of the way the radio functions in the movie, I am diverging from David Bordwell’s premise that films do not have narrators but rather narration, preferring Seymour Chatman’s argument in support of a complex “cinematic narrator.” Chatham agrees with Bordwell that the viewer is central to the comprehension of narration, but he argues that the viewer functions less as the “enunciator” than as the entity who synthesizes the various elements (voice, noise, music, editing, lighting, etc.) that comprise the cinematic narrator.³ In Chatman’s words, “The cinematic narrator is the composite of a large and complex variety of communicating devices,”⁴ which he classifies under the headings of “auditory” and “visual” channels. Under “auditory channel” he lists not only “voice” (such as the conventional off-screen narrator or the internal, diegetic narrator), but also “noise” and “music.” Chatham’s inclusion of music is important for my purposes here because I would argue that the musical the soundtrack in A Hora da Estrela, like the radio, has a narrator’s function.

³ Ibid., p. 135.

⁴ Seymour Chatman, Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p.134.

Anyone who has seen A Hora da Estrela knows that The Blue Danube is an important motif, heard as both diegetic and non-diegetic music. Unlike Kubrick's 2001, where the waltz enhances the majestic visual image of the spaceship's powerful yet graceful landing, it functions here along with other music to comment ironically on the action on screen. The most obvious example is the scene in the drab boardinghouse room where the generally timid and repressed Macabéa dances alone and with abandon to The Blue Danube being played on Rádio Relógio. As she dances about the room in her wrinkled cotton nightdress, she holds a bed sheet, which she twirls about her as if it were a scarf or veil. There is a clear disjuncture between the image seen and the music heard. The setting is anything but grand, and Macabéa's to and fro in her dingy, rumpled nightdress has none of the gracefulness associated with the Strauss waltz. Viewers often express amusement when the dance scene begins—even more so when the inquisitive landlady peeks through the keyhole and calls out to Macabéa over the music to ask if she intends to go to work. As if caught in a sinful act, Macabéa quickly plops down on a stool and pulls the sheet tightly around her. But the music does more than provide a subtly ironic commentary, and that is precisely why the scene is so powerful. Ultimately the waltz “tells” us that despite her poverty and artless moves, Macabéa has idealistic yearnings and a kind of grace. Hers is not the physical grace we associate with the skilled dancer, but it is nevertheless a human desire expressed through music; it contrasts with her dreary surroundings and gives a certain poignancy to her momentary abandon. The scene is particularly powerful within the context of the film as a whole, because it stands out as one of Macabéa's few happy, carefree moments in a life otherwise filled with disappointment, struggle and poverty.

At other junctures in the movie the waltz is played as non-diegetic music, and it sounds as if it were being produced by a music box or a carousel. For example, in the same sequence described above, we hear a slightly discordant, music-box version of the waltz as Macabéa studies her reflection in a mirror. The viewer watches her in the mirror as she gets stands up, gathers the bed sheet into folds and holds it on top her head as if it were the crown of a bridal veil. Tarnished and imperfect, the mirror distorts this slightly sad yet charming image as Macabéa turns from left to right, admiring and smiling back at herself. While the music box tune complements the innocence inherent in Macabéa's dress-up fantasy, it also comments on the distortion by way of its discordancy. The slight drag in the tempo of the waltz also suggests that, like the music box, her “time” is slowly running out.

An equally interesting narrational use of non-diegetic music appears in a subsequent scene when Macabéa stops in front of a department store window to look at a mannequin dressed in a bridal gown and veil. The scene reminds us of the one just described above, in part because The Blue Danube is again playing in the background. However, instead of the sound of a slightly out-of-tune music box, we hear a more robust, carousel version that accompanies Macabéa's attempts to imitate the turn of the head and the gracefully extended arms and hands of the mannequin. The non-diegetic music comments on the entire display by enhancing the mechanical nature of Macabéa's movements—as if she, and not the mannequin she imitates, were the actual wooden figure. Ultimately, the music box and carousel arrangements reinforce the naive otherworldliness of Macabéa's reality; and while there is a certain lyricism and poignancy about her fantasies and innocence, the waltz also calls attention to a disjuncture between this reality and the world around her.

It is important to note that Amaral's use of music, like her use of the radio, is clearly indebted to Lispector, whose "author's dedication" includes the names of several major composers (although Strauss does not figure in her personal pantheon). Rodrigo takes up the topic of music at the beginning of the book, declaring that "esta história falta melodia cantabile. O seu ritmo é às vezes descompassado" (16); at the end of the book, he refers to Macabéa as "uma caixinha de música meio desafinada" (87). By letting us hear variations on Strauss, Amaral makes exactly the same point as Rodrigo, especially when she uses the slightly off-key rhythm and the music box, which she evokes throughout the film. Because Amaral uses music sparingly, it rarely feels "unheard;" it has an interventionist quality—somewhat on the order of a narrator who both tells a story and offers a comment or critique.

Setting

The setting in the novella, as in much of Lispector's fiction, is conveyed entirely through the subjective impressions of her narrator-character, who seems only minimally concerned with the relation between character and place. Rodrigo provides very little information about the urban environment, although we know that Macabéa finds lodging in a boardinghouse on Acre Street in Rio, which Rodrigo describes as a place "entre as prostitutas que serviam a marinheiros, depósitos de carvão e de cimento em pó, não longe do cais do porto" (30). Throughout the

novella, Macabéa's world is narrowly defined by three coordinates: 'Rua do Acre para morar, rua do Lavradio para trabalhar, cais do porto para ir espiar no domingo, um ou outro prolongado apito de navio cargueiro' (30). Interestingly, the description of Acre Street resembles closely the zona district bordered by docks in Recife, a Northeastern Mecca for thousands of migrants from the sertão, and the city where Lispector spent her early childhood. According to Giovanni Pontiero, who translated A Hora da Estrela into English, Lispector became obsessively nostalgic for Recife in the months before her death, returning to the city to visit friends and once familiar landmarks. Back in Rio, she began frequenting the São Cristóvão marketplace to observe the Northeasterners who sold foods and handicrafts there. All this was apparently in preparation for A Hora da Estrela.⁵

By contrast, Amaral is from the more industrial São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, which has always attracted migrants from around the world, especially from the Northeast. In changing the locale of the film from Acre Street in Rio to a poor neighborhood in São Paulo, she stages the action against the backdrop of an inland city which has neither docks nor ocean view. The film takes advantage of this difference, emphasizing the grey, overcast bleakness of the industrial metropolis. Moreover, because the cinema by its very nature involves photographic showing more than pure telling or narration, the sense of place is much more evident and deterministic in the film. Amaral makes São Paulo more of a character in her story, heightening the drabness of the cityscape and selecting outdoor locations that create an atmosphere of containment or claustrophobia. For example, the bridge that Macabéa and Olímpico cross early in the film is enclosed by high steel-girded sides through which they peer at the train tracks below as if they were prison inmates. The park where they first meet is surrounded by tall, dense tropical foliage; the small grassy area where Macabéa hums a Caruso tune is bordered by highways and crisscrossed by overpasses; and the zoo where Olímpico later tells her that he loves someone else is filled with cages and bars. The indoor shots are equally oppressive. The office warehouse and the dark, cramped space allotted to Macabéa's workplace contains a desk and chair; and the dilapidated room where Macabéa lives is shared with three other women. A sense of containment or entrapment is created even in the cavernous and nearly vacant underground station where Macabéa is admonished by a policeman for stepping over the platform's yellow line. Ironically, the only shot in the film where Macabéa seems totally unconstrained by her surroundings occurs

⁵ See his "Afterword" in The Hour of the Star, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: New Directions, 1986), pp. 89-90.

at the end of the movie, just before she is run over by a speeding Mercedes. The scene shows her happily walking down a street with her normally pinned hair now loose and flowing—an image that is replayed in her mind as she lies on the street dying, although this time she is running and smiling openly.

Characterization

By dispensing with the narrator Rodrigo, who mediates the tale of Macabéa and who thinks of himself as an important character, Amaral is able to develop more fully other individuals who figure in the background of the novella. She also adds characters to the story, including the landlady who rents Macabéa a room and counsels her to be cautious in the city; and Senhor Pereira, who is the boss of the small company where Macabéa works. Senhor Raimundo, who appears in the book as the boss of the company, is far more interesting in the film as a white collar employee of Pereira, who works as Macabéa's direct supervisor. Unlike Pereira, who is crude, chauvinistic, and as critical of Macabéa's appearance as of her typing errors, Raimundo plays the role of the compassionate middle manager. Although he agrees with Pereira about Macabéa's lack of skills, he prefers to call her "desajeitada" and he seems ill-at-ease with Pereira's remarks about her physical appearance. (Pereira's reference to her as a "maracaju de gaveta" is in keeping with Rodrigo's observation in the novella that "tinha ovários murchos como um cogumelo cozido" [58-59]). More importantly, Raimundo reminds Pereira that she is paid less than the minimum wage—a fact that keeps Pereira from dismissing her on the spot when she hands in a rumpled, stained and error-filled documents. To a certain extent, Raimundo stands in for the audience: he is sympathetic toward Macabéa and wants her to succeed, pointing out her typing errors and telling her to wash her hands. Despite Pereira's complaints, he manages to keep Macabéa employed and despite her less-than-satisfactory performance, he agrees to her requests for time off. At the same time, he is aware of her lack of education, her poor hygiene and her inability to master skills that are necessary to her success. Like the figure of the landlady who advises Macabéa to be less trusting and more cautious, Raimundo is a representative of the compliant but good-hearted petty bourgeoisie: he assumes a protective stance and is unhappy when Pereira finally orders him to fire her—an order he never carries out, since later that day she is killed by a hit-and-run motorist. Entirely Amaral's creation, in some ways he serves as the

social conscience of the film; he is clearly concerned about Macabéa and he is moved by her humility and innocence.

Macabéa's roommates also receive much more attention in the film as compared to Rodrigo's brief references to them in the book. There is no question that Amaral is far more interested in the lives of women and in their relationships with one another than Lispector, whose characters, like her narrator, are relatively solipsistic, living in a world of their own. Thus, several important scenes in the first part of the film occur in the boardinghouse, showing Macabéa's initial interactions with her roommates, whose lives are only marginally better than her own. The book barely refers to the boardinghouse, but Amaral explores the poverty of the women's lives, depicting them as a class. In particular she focuses on the daily routines dictated by their cramped and dingy living space, which has neither bathroom nor kitchen. She also emphasizes the way in which they are mesmerized by dreams of a better life. In one scene, the three roommates huddle at the window to look through the window of the house next door, where a telenovela is playing on the television set. Suddenly the camera angle changes and the viewer is outside the boardinghouse, watching the three women who are joined by Macabéa at the window. The shot emphasizes the theme of capitalist entertainment as a manipulative culture industry, revealing expressionless faces caught behind a window whose small panes of glass look like prison bars. Amaral aptly conveys the Brazilian obsession with the telenovela, which over the years has become an integral part of the population's daily routine; and she sets the drabness and poverty of the roommates against the television images of middle and upper-class lifestyles that the women follow closely and try to imitate. In fact, the televisual image become so intrinsic to their ideals of wealth and happiness that one of the roommates, who is later shown reading a dime-store women's romance, complains that the book has no pictures and that she is forced to look repeatedly at the image on the book's cover in order to follow the plot. Meanwhile, the women paste fashion-magazine pictures on the walls of their room in order to provide relief from the dark and depressing atmosphere, with its hot plate, its makeshift clothesline, and its dripping and rusted sink.

One of the supporting characters in the book is Macabéa's co-worker, Glória, whose buxom and "boa parideira" (59) figure is repeatedly contrasted with Macabéa's undernourished body with its "shriveled ovaries." The film makes the same distinction between the two women, but Macabéa as portrayed by Marcélia Cartaxo is more dumpy than rachitic, and her dowdiness,

extreme in itself, is more pronounced in scenes where she appears with the brassy and voluptuous Glória (Tamara Taxman), who favors heavy make-up, tight skirts, and low-cut blouses. Amaral also goes much farther than Lispector in exploring the differences between these two, and a good part of the film focuses on their relationship as office co-workers and single women. Of particular interest are Glória's exchanges with Macabéa on the subject of men, and her desire, if not desperate need, to find a husband. One of the most striking scenes in this regard takes place in a neighborhood snack bar. As Macabéa delicately chews on a hot dog (the main staple of her diet), Glória proudly recounts her sexual adventures as a teenager, her various romantic attachments, and the fact that she has had five abortions to date. When Glória asks Macabéa how many abortions she has had, Macabéa at first fails to understand her question, then, realizing what is being asked, declares with considerable consternation that she is a virgin. Glória is genuinely surprised at Macabéa's response and she twice utters with a certain incredulity "Você é virgem mesmo?" She then proceeds manner-of-factly to describe the abortion procedure, telling Macabéa's that it is like a tooth extraction, but more expensive.

What is particularly compelling about this scene is the *gusto* with which Glória eats as she talks and her fondness for men and sex seems somehow linked to her appetite for meat ("Adoro carne."). It should also be noted that the controversial topic of abortion never appears in Lispector's book. Amaral's decision to address the topic despite the fact that abortion is illegal in Brazil is consistent with the film's greater social realism and sense of political activism. Thus, in the snack-bar scene, Glória is shown finalizing a brief business transaction with her ex-lover, a married man, who begrudgingly gives her cash for another abortion. Shortly after he departs, she openly flirts with the young fellow behind the lunch counter--an act which is both humorous because of her apparent insatiability when it comes to men and unsettling because she seems not at all deterred or affected despite her upcoming operation.

Later in the film, as in the book, Glória easily takes Olímpico away from Macabéa--the final act in a fortuneteller's prescribed ritual designed to help Glória find the man of her dreams. In the book, Olímpico tells Macabéa that he has fallen in love with her co-worker. Macabéa's self-esteem is so low that she understands his desire for Glória and gradually accepts the relationship. The book also emphasizes Olímpico's attraction to Glória's "boa qualidade," based on her "carioca de gema" background, her fair skin, her well-nourished body and the fact that her father is a butcher (59). The film is less explicit in this regard. Olímpico seems truly enamored of

Glória; he buys her a large stuffed animal as a present, an act that contrasts sharply with his “courtship” of Macabéa, for whom he once bought a cup of coffee. The film also modifies the plot. For example, when he breaks up with Macabéa, Olímpico does not mention Glória by name as his new love interest. It is as if Amaral were unconvinced that, despite her self-effacing personality, even Macabéa would accept such a betrayal and continue to work side by side with Glória without deeply resenting her. In the film there is also a kind of poetic justice: Glória ultimately meets her “ideal” man and breaks up with Olímpico, who has just brought her the oversized stuffed animal as a gift. The film shows a chastened Olímpico’s attempt to find Macabéa and reconcile with her after he has been dumped by Glória. Ironically, just as he leaves the stuffed animal at the boardinghouse entrance, Macabéa, who has just consulted the fortuneteller at Glória’s suggestion and is told that she will soon meet the man of her dreams, is on her way to being run over by a foreigner in a Mercedes.

Amaral eliminates one of the characters in the novella--the nameless doctor, whom Macabéa visits after one of her frequent bouts of nausea in the book, and who diagnoses her with early pulmonary tuberculosis. In some ways Lispector’s doctor is quite similar to Amaral’s Senhor Pereira. Grouchy and intolerant, he despises Macabéa’s poverty because he himself is barely in the middle-class and must rely upon the poor to earn his livelihood. “Trabalhava para os pobres detestando lidar com eles. Eles eram para ele o rebotalho de uma sociedade muito alta à qual também ele não pertencia. Sabia que estava desatualizado na medicina e nas novidades clínicas mas para pobre servia”(67-68). Interestingly, both Senhor Pereira and the doctor take Macabéa in, but they also dismiss her from their offices—as if her proximity were somehow contagious and perhaps even lethal. One might also speculate that the unsympathetic doctor, who appears just briefly in the book, is related to Lispector’s personal situation; a few years prior to writing *A Hora da Estrela*, she received extensive treatments for burns to her hand suffered as a result of having fallen asleep with a lighted cigarette. While writing the book, she was dealing with the cancer that soon thereafter caused her death. The scene with the doctor involves a sickly woman consulting a male physician who, unable to understand her responses and fed up with her “histórias,” recommends that she see a psychiatrist. At the same time, the narrator informs us that the doctor’s face is distorted by nervous tics. Although the scene is ostensibly about the cultural and economic distance between the doctor and Macabéa, one cannot help but view the

“dialogue” between them as a comment on the lack of communication between men and women in general--a motif that is everywhere present in Lispector’s works.

Perhaps Amaral thought that the scene in the doctor’s office would seem too sentimental if it were dramatized in the film, or perhaps she felt that it was unnecessary because the lack of communication between men and women can already be seen everywhere in the film. Pereira doesn’t speak to Macabéa at all, except to order her away from his doorway; and although he seems compassionate, Raimundo never actually converses with Macabéa. Olímpico is an even better example. In scene after scene, we see Macabéa admiring his bravado but failing to respond “properly” to his dreams about the future. For example, when he proclaims that he will be a politician one day, she immediately asks if his wife will be a politician as well. He becomes easily frustrated and short tempered whenever she asks him to define words and explain facts she has heard on the radio--and no wonder, because to respond at all would be to reveal his own ignorance.

Unlike the novella, which provides considerable biographical information on the chief characters, the film does not provide any details about Macabéa’s or Olímpico’s past. At no juncture in the film is there any mention of Macabéa’s stern, spinster aunt who raised her, her weekly trips to the movies and her fascination with horror films, musicals, and women’s melodramas. Nor is there any commentary on Olímpico’s violent youth in Paraíba, his penchant for attending funerals, and his talent for carving wooden effigies of saints. We simply know that both characters come from the Northeast and that Macabéa is an orphan, and no other background seems necessary.

There is however an interesting scene in the film that doesn’t appear in the book, in which Glória taunts Macabéa by referring to her “cabeça chata” and calling her a baiana--a classification that Macabéa resents because of its negative connotation. In an interview, Amaral spoke to the meaning of this term:

“Baiano” is the term we use to describe the Northeastern migrant who leaves the North and goes to the South. Sometimes it is a pejorative term; sometimes it is used in a kinder way. At any rate, baianos are affected by prejudice, discrimination and segregation. Northeasterners themselves have internalized this prejudice, or it was caused by Brazilians who live in the South. The existence of this prejudice means that baianos

undergo a very painful and complicated period of adaptation when they move to the industrialized South.⁶

Amaral's decision to identify Macabéa in this generic way (as opposed to telling us, as in the book, that she comes from Alagoas), seems consistent with her decision to make Marcélia Cartaxo, who plays Macabea, look unusual. As Amaral states: "I gave Macabéa a very different physical appearance. No Brazilian has a hairdo like hers. No Brazilian dresses like she does. In short, I attempted to situate her completely outside of reality because she is a great metaphor, a logotype."⁷ Macabéa therefore seems a newcomer not merely from the provinces, but from an utterly different world. Even Olímpico, who is also a migrant, appears urban in comparison--and this despite his brilliantine hair, his gold tooth and his lack of formal education. The first encounter between the two in the park shows Olímpico preparing to have his photograph taken in a borrowed jacket and tie while Macabéa, who has been watching with a flower in her hand from a nearby park bench, gets up and strolls directly in front of the camera. Her action, which stuns Olímpico as well as the photographer who is about to snap the picture, makes clear the degree to which she is oblivious of even a technology as old as the camera.

This scene in the park, which is not found in the novella, has still other implications. Throughout the film there is a strong association made between Macabéa and nature. The flower that she carries in the park is symbolic of an ephemeral beauty and fragility in a modern world of devices and gadgets. After Olímpico introduces himself to her, he gestures toward the flower. Taking out a switchblade, he deftly removes the excess leaves and, with a final flourish, trims the stem. In the eyes of Olímpico, the flower is imperfect in its original form and, like Macabéa herself, is in need of a make-over. Olímpico takes great pride in his handiwork; although Macabéa is initially troubled by his switchblade, she graciously receives the flower from him as if it were a present. Back at work, Macabéa places the flower in a glass of water at the side of her typewriter. It is the only attractive thing in an otherwise dank and dismal office. Glória walks over to Macabéa's desk, picks up the flower, shakes off the water and places it in her décolletage as she leaves the office to go out on a date. The symbolic point is clear: for Macabéa, the flower is something to be treasured and admired for its beauty, whereas for the narcissistic Glória, the flower is a commodity like lipstick, to be used as a personal adornment. Macabéa does not protest Glória's action, but her despondency over the loss is all too apparent. Slowly rising from

⁶ "The Hour of the Star: An Interview with Suzana Amaral." By Dennis West. *Cineaste* XV, 4 (1987), p. 43.

her desk, she proceeds to pour the water from the glass into a nearby potted plant, as if the pain of the loss of the flower's tenuous beauty required her to erase all traces of its existence.

Reproduction, Imitation, and Performance

The park scene described above sets the stage for the brief and less than romantic courtship of Olímpico and Macabéa, but it also participates in an indirect commentary on reproduction, imitation and performance that is much more pronounced in the film than in the novella, and that has both cultural and political implications. Olímpico has lived in the city for some time and he decides to document his successful integration by having his picture taken. We first see him in jacket and tie, articles of clothing that give him a middle-class aura despite his oily hair and shiny gold tooth. Only after the picture is taken do we realize that the jacket and tie are borrowed from the photographer. Upon returning the clothing props, Olímpico's image changes dramatically; he is instantly recognizable as a working-class type from the Northeast who carries a switchblade, and he is later revealed to be a thief. Shortly after they meet, Olímpico offers Macabéa the tiny photograph taken of him in the park. The photograph shows Olímpico not as he is, but as he wishes to be and to be seen. For the viewer, however, he is simply engaging in a bad imitation or performance of the dress styles and posture of the middle class--just as later in the film, he imitates the grand gestures and promise-them-anything speech of a politician on the stump. This later scene, which takes place on the steps of a government building, is wonderfully satirical not just for the bombast of what is said and how it is delivered, but also because Olímpico's hair, which is normally slicked back, has been carefully coiffeused in ringlets about his face, making him look from the neck up like a caricature of the Roman orator, on the order of Zero Mostel in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.

Amaral's interest in the idea of imitation manifests itself in different ways throughout the film, whereas Lispector makes only two references to the subject in the novella. At one point in Lispector's text, Macabéa becomes curious about the word "ephemeris," which appears in a handwritten document that she is told to copy. A bit later, she tells Olímpico that she is puzzled by the word "mimetismo" that she heard on Clock Radio (55). When Macabéa makes a similar comment about "mimetismo" in the film, her words have a more obviously ironic resonance

⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

because we've seen her constantly copying what she hears and sees from the moment she arrives in the city. For example, she follows Glória's less-than-sterling example of lying to Senhor Raimundo in order to get time off, and she even repeats the same words of gratitude when Raimundo agrees to her request. She listens to and copies out information given on the radio, and subsequently repeats it verbatim to Olímpico. Like her roommates, she watches the telenovela's dramatized prescriptions on love, wealth and success; and she imitates her roommates' attempts at their own home decoration by cutting and pasting fashion ads on the wall above her bed. She buys nail polish and lipstick even though she is not particularly adept in their application. She attempts to reproduce a song sung by Caruso on the radio, and she mimics the pose of the department store mannequin dressed as a bride.

Most of the examples listed above demonstrate the film's interest in urban mass culture and the effects of commodification on Macabéa, whose assimilation depends upon her ability to copy or imitate what she hears and sees. The telenovela, the fashion ads, the radio, and the department store display are not only entertaining fantasies but also ideal images created by the modern culture industry—images that ultimately help to produce reified subjects. In effect, the capitalist dream factory is the means by which the ideology of capitalism is reproduced and sustained. The close-up shot of the radio and the bottle of Coca-Cola are metonymic images, representative of the entire sign system that Macabéa encounters when she comes to the city and is drawn into the system of labor and consumption that transforms people into things. Even her roommates, who own very little, note her lack of material goods. Macabéa hopes to correct that lack and says with conviction: “Tenho emprego e vou comprar coisas.” Because she earns less than minimum wage, she is unable to afford much beyond her room, her daily diet of hot dogs and Coca-Cola, and her occasional ticket for the public zoo or for a ride on the metro. She ultimately hires a taxi and pays a huckster-fortuneteller whose style seems almost benevolent in comparison to today's psychic hotlines; the fortuneteller's predictions about love, wealth and happiness are obvious replays of the same messages that capitalist modernity repeats on the radio, on television and in magazines, yet the message here is so urgent that Macabéa immediately heads to a department store and buys a fancy dress that she can ill afford. The fortuneteller's prediction that she will meet a wealthy, blond-haired, blue-eyed foreigner does come true, but not in the way Macabéa had hoped. Despite the hit-and-run by the foreigner in a Mercedes, Macabéa still holds tight to the happy-ending story that is played out for her again and

again in the media. Her final thoughts take the form of the famous slow-motion Clairol hair commercial that played on US television throughout the 1970s. Even in the death throes, Macabéa cannot help but embrace the dream of her own success and happiness, and like the young woman in the commercial, she eagerly runs toward it.

Conclusion: Politics and Self-Reflexivity

Despite its symbolic conclusion, the film version of A Hora da Estrela has a new-realist quality that makes it seem quite different from the modernist literary text upon which it is based. In fact, the two versions of the story come out of quite distinct traditions: the novella belongs to a kind of modern literature that rejected nineteenth-century realism, and the film belongs to a kind of modern cinema that rejected Hollywood fantasy.

Lispector has been frequently criticized for writing literature that has little or no social consciousness, and to some extent that criticism is true. Along with her posthumous story, “A Bela e A Fera,” about an encounter between an upper middle-class woman and a street beggar, A Hora da Estrela is perhaps her most direct commentary on social relations in Brazil, even though the emphasis in the book is on the act of writing (as suggested by the title page which lists, alongside A Hora da Estrela, thirteen other possible titles), and even though Macabéa is not a character in the traditional sense, but rather a fiction forged by an angst-ridden author who is himself a fiction. Yet the book was written at a time of tremendous economic upheaval in the country and it is difficult to imagine that “the state of emergency and public calamity” mentioned in the author’s dedication clearly points to the desperate situation of an entire nation. The right-wing military dictatorship that had ruled Brazil for over a decade and was instrumental in transforming the country into a modern industrial state was now a visible economic failure. Just as Rodrigo fails to resolve questions about life’s great mystery, the novella itself provides no solution to the difficult existence of the retirante. What the novella does accomplish is a critical self-reflexivity that works through aestheticism toward social consciousness.

In a sense, the film moves in an opposite direction. Clearly indebted to neo-realism and the Cinema Novo, it appropriates a modernist text, finding dramatic equivalencies to Lispector’s narrative techniques and leading themes. Amaral’s film is itself critically self-reflexive, but the criticism is directed outward, toward media representations of a quite different kind. What makes

the film especially interesting in relation to the novella is that it does not attempt a slavish translation of Lispector. Instead, it finds the socially critical material at the core of the novella and transforms this material into a new kind of text—a text unusually sensitive to Lispector’s thematic, but also attuned to a different medium and a more direct political aim.