

Katica JURČEVIĆ
Ljiljana KALITERNA LIPOVČAN
Rino MEDIĆ
Ozana RAMLJAK (Eds.)

A scenic view of a Mediterranean coastal town with a white sailboat on the blue water under a cloudy sky. The town is built on a hillside, and the water is a vibrant blue. A white sailboat with a tall mast is in the foreground, sailing towards the right. The sky is filled with large, white, fluffy clouds. The overall atmosphere is bright and sunny.

PRESERVING,
EVALUATING
AND DEVELOPING
THE MEDITERRANEAN

Mediterranean Issues, Book 4

PRESERVING, EVALUATING AND DEVELOPING THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Book consists of selected papers presented at the
4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific
Mediterranean Island Conference MIC – Vis 2022
held at the Island of Vis, Croatia, September 14-17, 2022

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Margarida MEDEIROS
NOVA Institute of Communication (ICNOVA), Faculty of Social and
Human Sciences, Lisbon Nova University¹

José PINTO
Institute of Ethnomusicology - Centre of Studies in Music and Dance
(INET-MD), Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Lisbon Nova
University²

WAGNER'S *TRISTAN AND ISOLDE* OR MONTEIRO'S *JOÃO DE DEUS* AND ROSARINHO: THE SEXUAL CHARACTER OF *JOÃO DE DEUS* IN THE FILM *GOD'S COMEDY* DIRECTED BY JOÃO CÉSAR MONTEIRO

Abstract

João César Monteiro directed a set of three narrative films called *God's Trilogy* (*Trilogia de Deus*). In this series, we get to know the quotidian life of João de Deus (a character interpreted by the director) who gets involved in peculiar relations with several women. The music in the *Trilogy* is primarily constructed with parts of pre-existing musical works. Considering this pre-existing character, we are confronted with a set of diverse contexts that coexist in the audio-visual. Following on from that, in this paper we will work on one scene of the second film in analysis, *God's Comedy* (*A Comédia de Deus*), in which the aria "Mild und Leise" from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* evoke some characteristics of João de Deus's self. To help us understand this phenomenon, it is very important to consider Freud's work on perversions and sexuality. As João de Deus has conflicting sexuality, he engages in perverted relationships of voyeurism and fetishism. We argue that music reveals some of these perturbations of his Self and therefore, Freud's theory of sexuality proves to be very useful in the analyses of the musical elements in *God's Trilogy*.

Keywords: *Film music; Portuguese cinema; Freud; João César Monteiro; God's Comedy (A Comédia de Deus)*.

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1 INTRODUCTION

God's Trilogy is a set of three films directed by Monteiro and released between 1989 and 1999. It tells the story of João Deus, a character who repeatedly engages in socially and morally wrong behaviours and lives on the fringe of society. Through these behaviours, he establishes perverse relationships with several girls which are represented in the film through visual, dialogic, musical, and sound elements.

Keeping in mind the concepts developed in Freud's work, it is possible to understand more clearly the conduct taken by João de Deus. Freud's theory had an important role in the conceptualization of human perversions, understanding them as expressions of unconscious fantasies. In this paper, we propose to articulate Freud's theory with an analysis of one of the musical elements in the film *God's Comedy*. This case study is an example of the way the character João de Deus works in the film, and, at the same time, it proves how music contributes to working out the remaining elements that form the diegesis.

In his famous article "Beyond Pleasure Principle", Freud (2010 [1920]) introduces us to the idea of life and death instincts ('trieb') and proposes to relate them through the association between sexual and conservative instincts. Here he points out the conceptualization of sexual perversions and the way they work, paradoxically creating tension and pleasure. Articulating this idea with the taxonomy proposed by the same author for the classification of the various perversions (Freud, 2016 [1905]), there is an obvious connection between those concepts and the relationships developed between João de Deus and Julieta, Rosarinho and Joaninha in the first two films of *God's Trilogy*.

2 CASE STUDY – WAGNER'S "MILD UND LEISE" IN ROSARINHO'S OUT-OF-WATER SWIMMING LESSON

In the second film of the set, *God's Comedy*, João de Deus is the manager of an ice-cream shop - "Ice-cream Paradise" ("Paraíso do Gelado") - and becomes involved with Rosarinho, a newly hired employee at the shop. One of the scenes in which João de Deus and Rosarinho engage with each other is the out-of-water swimming lesson. In this scene, João de Deus practises a ritual dedicated to Rosarinho that lays down swimming on the table framed in the centre of the image. While she swims, João de Deus moves his hands around her, most of the time without touching her, while listening to the *aria* "Mild und Leise" taken from the opera *Tristan and Isolde* (1857-9) composed by Richard Wagner³.

³ This musical theme has also a cinematographic context considering its appearance in films such as *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) or *Abismos de Pasión* (1954), both directed by Luis Buñuel.



Figure 1 – Frame of the out-of-water swimming lesson.

According to Freud's taxonomy, here we find a representation of the overvaluation of the sexual object⁴. This expression is evident through the elements that form the scene's visual, musical, sound, and narrative components. At a first glance, we have the set of an image that places Rosarinho in the centre of an "altar" (see *Figure 1*). This religious reference to the sacred table evokes the ritualistic dimension of the characters' movement that divinizes and elevates Rosarinho, transforming her into a sacred object of desire. Besides the visual frame, there is the presence of the water, invisible to the eyes, only represented through the bathing suit and the movements of Rosarinho. This ghostly presence corroborates the overvaluation of the character's body. Considering Monteiro's films, water has a very particular symbology, related to the divine, womanhood and to the power of creating. Has Muga refers: "In summary, the theme of Water crosses Monteiro's cinema from one end to the other, full of meanings." (Muga, 2015, p. 197). Furthermore, water is associated with a complex imaginary in different cultures, between the origin of life (the maternal womb, biblically materialised in Moses "saved from the waters"), and the Heraclitean aphorism of the flowing river symbolising the time passing and perpetual change ("no one bathes twice in the same water in a river"). Thus, Monteiro suggests water as a mythical matter, itself elevated and sacra-

This second film is visually cited in the first film of *God's Trilogy – Recollections of the yellow house* (1989) – and the narrative revolves around the idea of loving at the cost of one's life. This context emphasises the music's relation with mortal love.

⁴ When "the [sexual] appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object and tends to involve every sensation derived from it." (Freud, 2016 [1905], p. 42).

lised, bathing, albeit imaginarily, the character Rosarinho. In the narrative context of the relation between the two characters, it is important to consider that its sexual component is evident in other moments of the narrative, namely through the fetishization of Rosarinho's hair or through the sodomization in one of the following scenes.

During the "swimming lesson" there is a musical element that fills exclusively the soundtrack of the scene. It's constituted by the *aria* "Mild und Leise" from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and, although it is noticeably an acousmatic element, it seems to be diegetic (listened to by the characters on set) because João de Deus and Rosarinho seem to be moving at the rhythm of the music. About this musical element, the director himself states the following:

The erotic component comes from the music that acts on the bodies, whether of the girl or the character João de Deus. It's evident. João de Deus is attracted to music, and it is music that leads his performance. (Monteiro, 2005, p. 423)

The *aria* that we hear in the film is part of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and it is sung by Isolde as a lament to Tristan's death. In a way, this musical cue relates to one of the main narrative themes of the opera – the concept of *Liebested* – that was used to name the *prelude* of its concert version. In that same version, the instrumental transcription of Isolde's lament (the one we listen to in this scene of the film) is named "Transfiguration".

The relationship between love and death is one of the main themes throughout the opera, working on the idea of loving until death or even beyond death. Freud, in his article "Beyond pleasure principle" (Freud, 2010 [1920]) highlights this same relation through his thinking on life and death pulsions. The idea that love and sexual instincts might come from a desire to regress is one way to look at the concept of *Liebested* because love's drive will necessarily find a resolution in death as a way out of tensionality (as we see, for instance, in Nagisa Hoshima *The Empire of the senses* from 1976). When it comes to the musical element in question, *Liebested* is also evoked through the popular association between love and death in the romantic era. As Saul puts it: "It used to be commonplace to link German Romanticism intrinsically with a suspect ideology of love and death, and in special with the erotic death cult most prominently exemplified by the *Liebested* of Richard Wagner's doomed *Tristan and Isolde*" (Saul, 2009, p. 163).

Considering this extra-film context, it is possible to understand why the director thought this *aria* was a good fit for the representation of an "erotic component". The way this music reveals a certain idea of love, especially related to death, reminds Bataille's texts from which Monteiro admits taking several references (see, for example, the reference to the Bataillian eggs in the encounter between Joaninha and João de Deus in *God's Comedy*). The author opens his book, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, with

The image displays two musical excerpts from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Figure 2, titled 'First motif', shows the vocal line for Isolde with the lyrics 'Mild und lei-se' and 'wie er lächelt,'. The piano accompaniment includes parts for Violin (Vc.), Viola (Vc. (get.)), and Cello (Cb.). Figure 3, titled 'Second motif', shows the continuation of the vocal line with the lyrics 'wie er lächelt,'. The piano accompaniment continues with the same instruments. The score is marked with dynamics like *pp* and *trem.*, and includes the instruction 'Sehr mässig beginnen'.

Figure 2 – First motif. Figure 3 – Second motif.

the following phrase: “Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the pint, of death.” (Bataille, 1962 [1957], p. 11). This idea gives rise to the book, and it is probably the idea that came to Monteiro’s mind when he talked about the erotic component of this musical element, thus establishing a relation between *Liebestod* and Bataille’s definition of “eroticism”.

When we look at the text sung, we notice the “transfiguration” (the original title of the concert version of this piece) from grieving and sadness to peace and happiness that Isolde feels while looking at Tristan with a smile on his face which has been “swallowed unconsciously” (words translated from the sung text). In the music itself, the illustration of this same “transfiguration” is noticeable. In the first motif that we hear, constructed by a set of four notes, there is a perfect fourth that is transformed into a major third through a descending half-tone (see *Figure 2*). This half-tone creates a dark character, alluding to the *pianto* (crying) musical topic, with several references in Wagner and other composers’ musical work (see Monelle, 2000). However, the next motif has a diatonic scale of three notes that alludes to a lighter setting (see *Figure 3*). These two motifs form one of the central melodic lines of this musical piece and reflect the dichotomy (the transfiguration) expressed in the text⁵.

Among other musical characteristics that evoke this polarised environment is the woodwind motif that is heard several times through the *aria* and counterposes the voice line, relating to the divine and the afterlife, and Tristan chord. Tristan chord, one of the better-known motifs of Wagner’s opera, as Scruton (2004, p. 102) says “[...] has an im-

⁵ These motifs contemplate merely an example of the way this *aria* evokes the ambiguity of love and death and of the feelings expressed by Isolde. As it happens, this is one of the main musical themes presented in the musical element and because of that, it seemed to us that it would be one of the best examples to illustrate our argument.

portant dramatic function in connecting the subversive (chromatic) desire that has enraged Isolde with the normal and womanly (diatonic) feelings from which it arose.”

3 CONCLUSION

We believe that these mixed feelings expressed in the musical element (musically and textually) evoke the confusion evident in João de Deus’s mind. On one hand, the perverse fixation on Rosarinho points out his conflicting sexual desire for her. On the other, that same fixation creates a sort of inhibition of all his desires. This perverse fixation prevents him from touching her, for example (as you might notice, in very few moments does João de Deus touch Rosarinho in this scene). And that tension, as Freud defends, establishes pleasure and non-pleasure sensations and is one of the contradictions of the pleasure principle.

Therefore, the musical element is responsible for elucidating to the viewer and listener the mind and the emotional states of the main character João de Deus: In one way, it evokes the erotic feeling towards Rosarinho through the idea of *Liebestod*, therefore exposing the relation between love and death which, as proposed by Freud, established sexual instincts and life pulsions as part of death pulsions mainly when we consider a narcissistic libido. Also, by evoking a sexual environment, the music emphasises the representation of the sexual overvaluation of Rosarinho by João de Deus, as it does the framing and the set of the scene and the film narrative. On the other hand, the idea of “transfiguration” expressed musically and textually in the musical element highlights the paradoxes that articulate pleasure and displeasure associated with the perverse feeling that João de Deus has towards Rosarinho. This idea is also noticeable through the movements of João de Deus that chooses to keep the tension with a non-touchable interaction (mainly voyeuristic) instead of engaging in some sort of more complete sexual activity (at this point of the film). Considering this new proposal for interpreting this scene, it is possible to understand how this musical element contributes to working out João de Deus’s phantasies and understand more clearly how this scene works in the context of the overall narrative.

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