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## The Gendered Revolutionary Body: Memory and Resistance in *Torre das Donzelas*

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### Abstract:

In her 2018 documentary *Torre das Donzelas (Maidens' Tower)*, Susanna Lira explores the experiences of women who were political prisoners during the dictatorship via interviews and a spatial recreation of the women's cellblock of the Tiradentes prison, known as the Torre das Donzelas. Lira creatively employs set design and sound as discursive elements that complement the women's testimony and broaden its portrayal of memory and haunting; moreover, as this article argues, the older women (*senhoras*) who embody past and present political resistance enable the film to contest conventional expectations regarding guerrillas, political prisoners, and the romantic, masculine notion of revolution.

### Keywords:

*Torre das Donzelas*; Susanna Lira; Dilma Rousseff; Political Prisoners; Dictatorship; Brazil.

## The Gendered Revolutionary Body: Memory and Resistance in *Torre das Donzelas*

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In her 2018 documentary *Torre das Donzelas* (*Maidens' Tower*), Susanna Lira explores the experiences of women who were political prisoners during the military dictatorship in Brazil via interviews and a spatial recreation of the women's cellblock of the Tiradentes prison, known as the Torre das Donzelas. The film drew media attention due to the participation of ex-president Dilma Rousseff, one of the activists imprisoned in the cellblock; all the participants, however, collaborate in reconstructing memories of this period, in which they suffered torture and oppression, but also developed strategically useful forms of solidarity and resistance.

This article approaches *Torre das Donzelas* as an important political intervention at a time in which right-wing forces in Brazil have regained political power and have sought to vindicate the military regime and its repressive ideologies and policies. As the film makes clear, gender is central to this political and ideological struggle, in which women's bodies are a particular kind of battleground. I thus contextualize Lira's film in relation to women's experiences of repression and in resistance movements, and briefly note its intertextual engagement with earlier films by Brazilian women as well as a wider field of post-dictatorship cinema. In particular, it recalls Lúcia Murat's documentary *Que Bom Te Ver Viva*, made in 1989, scant years after the end of the dictatorship. While Murat's film depicted the immediate process of readapting to civilian life after the brutality of imprisonment, *Torre das Donzelas*, with greater distance from the original events, explores the realms of memory and the spectral. The difficulty of transmitting experience between generations is addressed creatively using set design and sound as discursive elements complementing the women's verbal testimony. Moreover, I argue that the older women (*senhoras*) who embody past and present political resistance enable the film to contest conventional expectations regarding guerrillas, political prisoners, and the romantic, masculine notion of revolution.

In delving into the intimacy of women's experience in prison, *Torre das Donzelas* posits a feminist understanding of the gendered revolutionary body. Notions such as that of the detainees as "maidens" or "virgins" are exposed as a misogynist conceit; in fact, many of the women were mothers of young children, some with nursing babies taken from their breast at the time of arrest, others even giving birth in prison, producing new life despite the necroregime of torture and violation. The intelligence and conviction with which these subjects recreate their imprisonment allows spectators to appreciate the multiple operations of creativity in resistance, even as the ghosts of the past come to haunt the present: an extratextual redoubling tangible in terms of Rousseff's 2016 dubiously justified impeachment and, by the time of the film's 2019 release, the ascent of right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency.

## Women and the Dictatorship

In 1964, Brazilian military leaders overthrew the government of João Goulart and imposed a dictatorship that would remain in power during the next twenty years. Goulart's presidency, though marked by conflict, had allowed for certain gains by women, labor, agrarian and other social movements. High-level business executives and other conservative figures aligned themselves in organizations such as the Instituto Brasileiro de Ação Democrática (IBAD) and the Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais (Ipês), promoting a Cold War agenda that culminated in the coup and its takeover of the nation and its institutions:

Era un golpe derechista, organizado por militares y políticos, apoyados fuertemente por empresarios, inquietos ante las conquistas populares y, sobre todo, por la retórica izquierdista de muchos sindicatos y entidades formados en una sociedad cada vez más consciente y organizada, y asimismo muy preocupados por los discursos populistas del gobierno.

(Iglésias 1994, 191)

Issuing decrees that weakened congress and the judiciary, the military regime promoted policies that favored transnational business and were devastating for the country's impoverished majority. In 1968, the regime further tightened its control with the Ato Institucional No. 5 (AI-5) that suspended congress, abolished the right of *habeus corpus*, increased press censorship, and gave military tribunals jurisdiction over prosecution of political offenses, among other disciplinary mechanisms. As Lilia M. Schwarcz and Heloisa M. Starling summarize, the "AI-5 era una herramienta de intimidación a través del miedo, no tenía plazo de vigencia y fue indiscriminadamente empleada por la dictadura contra la oposición y el disenso" (2016, 290). The left was a target of persecution, and as protests and civil dissidence were crushed, opponents turned to clandestine organizations to fight the dictatorship through direct action and guerrilla violence.

Women and men, many notoriously young, participated in these organizations. Dilma Rouseff, for instance, joined the Organização Revolucionária Marxista-Política Operária at age 16; three years later, she became part of the Comando de Libertação Nacional, and later helped to form the Vanguarda Armada Revolucionária Palmares (Ortiz de Zárate 2016). In Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, these and other groups carried out acts such as bank robberies and kidnappings with the aim of financing their movement, freeing political prisoners, and frontally challenging a regime that they felt had left them no non-violent avenue of action.

Iglésias notes that despite these groups' activity, little was known about them because of the cloak of silence maintained by the press (1995, 208), a mechanism of discursive control that inhibited popular support for the armed resistance. The regime nevertheless responded with the creation of ever more repressive apparatuses such as *Operação Bandeirantes* (OBAN), established in 1969 in São Paulo, and the Departamento de Operações de Informações-Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna (DOI-CODI), interrogation centers that operated in São Paulo and other locations beginning in 1970. These sinister acronyms recur in the testimonies presented in *Torre das Donzelas* as referents of torture and dehumanization, the "hell" that, in comparison, made the tower seem a "paradise."

In her extensive study of women and the transition to democracy in Brazil, Sonia Alvarez points out that, during the dictatorship, “the closure of institutional channels for political representation and the suppression of oppositional movements of all sorts precluded the development of gender-conscious social and political movements among Brazilian women” (1986, 2). Leftist groups like the Women’s League, in existence since 1960, privileged class over gender in their analysis of the socioeconomic oppression suffered by working women (Miller 1991, 153). The right, on the other hand, mobilized middle and upper-class women who emulated leftist protest tactics, marching in defense of conservative religious and social values against the “Communist threat”; these mobilizations received support from the CIA via front groups such as the IBAD (Miller 1991, 154).

Both the leftist focus on class, which upheld the notion of socialism as a broad-spectrum solution to social oppression in general, and the rightist exploitation of women’s traditional roles worked against the development of a specifically feminist understanding of or resistance to the dictatorship. Yet women who participated in resistance movements challenged their male comrades’ ingrained sexism even as they battled institutionalized gender discrimination. These experiences would lead to the advancement of positions that may be described as feminist, in which elements considered to be “private,” such as sexuality and maternity, are reconceptualized as public and political. As we will see further on, *Torres das Donzelas* powerfully demonstrates this process.

### **Filmmaking in and after the Dictatorship**

In its focus on women’s militancy and repression at the hands of the regime, *Torres das Donzelas* transmits experiences that could not be articulated at the time of the events in question, and in this way intersects with the history of women’s filmmaking in Brazil, which, like film and cultural production in general, was shaped by the political context of the dictatorship. Censorship, as Randal Johnson and Robert Stam write of the initial phase of the military regime, was neither immediate nor total:

Although the left, unprepared for armed struggle, was politically and militarily defeated in 1964, its cultural presence, paradoxically, remained strong even after the *coup d’état* [...]. Marxist books proliferated in the bookstores, anti-imperialist plays drew large audiences, and many filmmakers went from left reformism to radical critique.

(1982, 35)

The Cinema Novo movement matured in this context, producing films that moved beyond social realism toward a dialectic praxis aimed at deconstructing dominant narratives regarding class, race, and nation.<sup>1</sup> However, by 1968 and the period of AI-5 artistic expressions of all kinds were met with repressive measures (Borges 1984, 38; Iglésias 1995, 206). Those filmmakers who remained active in the country resorted to allegory and other

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<sup>1</sup> Zuzana Pick’s analysis of Ruy Guerra’s *Os Fuzis* (*The Guns*, 1964) exemplifies this transformation (Pick 1993, 110-117).

forms of indirect communication, developing “a coded language of revolt” (Johnson and Stam 1982, 38).<sup>2</sup>

Despite (or in response to) such adverse conditions, filmmaking by women emerged in force in the 1970s, led by directors who had previously worked as actresses or, in some cases, in technical roles on productions by male Cinema Novo filmmakers (Munerato and Darcy de Olivera 1982, 341). Leslie Marsh observes, “It is remarkable that women working in film and video demanded rights and privileges as citizens of Brazil at a time when fundamental democratic freedoms did not even exist” (2012, Introd.). Within this small realm of possibility, the “coded language of revolt” allowed for the production and dissemination of critical interventions from female and feminist perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Films like Ana Carolina Teixeira Soares’s *Mar de Rosas* (1977) deployed strategies such as carnivalesque satire to call into question gender roles and other political imperatives of the rightist regime (Rashkin 1994, 34-36; Marsh 2012, chapter 2).

With the period of “political decompression” (Schwarcz and Starling 2016, 298) that began in 1975 and culminated in a transfer of power from military to civil leadership a decade later, it became possible to speak more openly about what had happened in the country. In 1989, Lúcia Murat directed *Que Bom Te Ver Viva*, about women who had survived incarceration and torture as political prisoners. Murat herself was a veteran of the armed struggle and a survivor of the dictatorship’s policies of terror. Her film explores the posttraumatic process of adaptation to “normal” life, using a mixture of documentary and fiction: on the one hand, eight survivors speak of their experiences, and on the other, actress Irene Ravache gives voice to resentments and other complex feelings that are not easy to express, making us aware of cannibalism and self-cannibalism as paradigms of behavior in authoritarian situations.<sup>4</sup> The title *Que Bom Te Ver Viva* (How Nice to See You Alive) invokes the uncertainty that political prisoners experienced in isolation, when communication was shut down and they had no way of knowing who among their companions had survived the persecutions and who had not. Under such circumstances, the best they could hope for was to reencounter a comrade later in freedom and confirm her continued existence: to be free, to be alive.

Interestingly, both Murat’s and Lira’s films deploy alternative performative strategies alongside their interviews: Ravache’s monologue in the former, the reconstructed prison with its phantasms in the latter. These elements expand the films’ more straightforward documentary aspects, adding layers of affective intensification to the verbal testimonies. In

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<sup>2</sup> Although scholarly attention has focused on the left, it is important to recognize the use of film and other media by the right as well. Denise Assis studies film propaganda produced by the Ipês in *Propaganda e Cinema a Serviço do Golpe, 1962/1964* (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Marsh’s book studies women’s film production of the 1970s onward, contributing useful analyses based in part on interviews with key directors like Ana Carolina and Tizuka Yamasaki. Several of the essays in Karla Holanda and Marina Tedesco’s edited volume *Feminino e Plural: Mulheres no Cinema Brasileiro* (2017) also focus on this period, indicating its importance in the history of Brazilian cinema as well as in that of national and international feminism.

<sup>4</sup> Reverting early Portuguese colonial characterizations of Brazil as a land of cannibals, twentieth-century Brazilian cultural movements took up cannibalist tropes to confront contemporary problems. Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, in “Cannibalism and Self-Cannibalism,” a text accompanying his 1969 film adaptation of Mário de Andrade’s 1928 novel *Macunaima*, wrote, “Victims and executioners are one and the same: devouring themselves. Everything, whether it be in the heart or in the jaw, is food to be consumed. Meanwhile, voraciously, nations devour their people” (Andrade 1982 [1969], 83). Such views are productive in their refusal of dichotomies and consideration of complicity and contradiction within social critique.

the case of *Torre das Donzelas*, these are enfolded in a framework that emphasizes the construction of memory as a collective undertaking. Here, those who were in prisons like Tiradentes as teenagers and young women are now mature; one, Dilma Rousseff, lived the whirlwind of early-twenty-first-century politics, reaching the presidency only to confront insurmountable obstacles, and finally be removed from office by men who made fun of torture and vindicated the dictatorship as if it were a Brazilian Golden Age, the salvation of the nation from leftist subversion. These present-day politicians have shown open disdain for women and especially for women as caregivers; Hamilton Mourão, retired general and vice-president at the time of writing, claimed during his campaign alongside Bolsonaro that the homes in which mothers and grandmothers raise their children and grandchildren without paternal participation are “fábricas de desajustados,” absent fathers apparently bearing little responsibility in the equation (Sudré 2018).<sup>5</sup>

Lira’s film, made before the 2018 elections, speaks of the past but also takes a stand with respect to this new conflict unleashed with particular intensity against women, feminism, and the left. Critic Cecilia Barroso writes, “Em um momento onde se questiona a existência da ditadura militar que tantos torturou e matou, é fundamental que resgates como esse aconteçam, pois uma história esquecida é uma história pronta a se repetir” (2018). *Torre das Donzelas* takes up this task, utilizing both testimony and the cinematic evocation of “ghostly resonance” to address an increasingly contested chapter of the past that has returned forcefully in recent years to haunt the present (Cuñado 2016, 38).

## Memory and Resistance

After an introduction employing black-and-white historical footage of state repression of urban guerilla members, accompanied by explanatory text and voice-over testimony from Dilma Rousseff highlighting her experience of torture and resistance, *Torre das Donzelas* takes as its starting point an exercise in memory: the collective effort to reimagine the women’s wing of the Presidio Tiradentes prison, demolished in 1972. The women gathered for the film, imprisoned there in the late 1960s and early 1970s during the dictatorship, attempt to draw the site in chalk on a blackboard. Some do so with great precision, while others struggle, as if it were information that had become blurred over time, or that they would prefer to forget. Close-ups of their hands, some adorned at the wrist with bracelets, give way to shots that reveal faces and bodies, as the sketches too grow in complexity and are intercut to form a collective work. The sequence ends with an older woman whose pensive comment suggests both the distance and the uncomfortable closeness of the memory: *não posso lembrar mais* (I can’t remember anymore).

This exercise, which foregrounds the role of subjectivity in historical reconstruction, leads us to the detailed yet theatrical set designed by art director Glauce Queiroz, based on the women’s recollections. Here, the different spaces of the prison—undoubtedly less sordid than in reality—are marked on the floor according to their function and adorned with representative objects such as cups, pots and pans, jewelry hanging from a rod, as well as

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<sup>5</sup> See also, for instance, “Hamilton Mourão: ‘¿Investigar qué?’” 2022. As it turns out, Bolsonaro would narrowly lose the 2022 presidential elections to former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), in a hotly contested second round. The reconfiguration of political power that this implies in a divided country is a complex drama unfolding as this article goes to press.

insects and dripping water. These spaces constitute the stage on which the women reencounter one another and revisit this moment of their shared past. At the same time, they are evocative landscapes in which, from time to time, young women appear, behind semi-opaque curtains as if to suggest shadows or ghosts, although they do not represent the dead. Rather, these stylized figures stand for past selves, younger versions of the women at the time of their imprisonment, their ethereal quality reflecting the passage of time and the elusive nature of memory.

This usage of semi-spectral figures to bring together past and present onscreen recalls the discussions presented in *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives*, edited by Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda Petersen (2016). In their introduction, the editors write, “Spectrality or haunting rises as an aesthetic opposed to conditions or moods generated by military, political, or economic violence in the context of modernity. It is an aesthetic that seeks ways to counteract erasure, silencing, and forgetting that eschews melancholic attachment to loss. It seeks to construct itself as an alternative to the linear, hierarchical, and rationalistic” (2016, 6). In the film, spectrality broadens the scope of the narrative: not only do we see and hear the survivors’ testimony, but we are also exposed to the suggestion of unfilmable traces, that which remains unspoken, including the presence of those prisoners who did not survive the experiences of torture and incarceration.

The doubling within the reenactment—the present-day subjects and their reconstituted younger “selves”—also relates to Gonzalo Aguilar’s discussion of Argentine documentary films about that country’s military dictatorship made by children of the disappeared. Aguilar suggests that these films “muestran a la vez que radicalizan la relación fantasmática entre la imagen y la persona,” and that “la puesta en cuerpo de estos documentales genera *un yo vicario* en el que se piensa la posibilidad de la memoria y lo político (2015, 94, italics in original). *Torre das Donzelas* does not address, per se, a second generation affected by the forced disappearances of its forebears, although the loss of comrades, lovers, parents, and children is one of the torments inflicted by the regime on the surviving women. Rather, the “vicarious self” it constructs for the spectator is collective, the sum of all the women interviewed, who remain unidentified until the final credits, along with the actresses who populate the reconstructed prison spaces in the stylized real time of the past, coexisting with the present as silent but tangible memory.

Although I use the word “reenactment” to describe the film’s approach to past and present, the term is inexact. Unlike conventional restaging of events whose original manifestation (as murders, accidents, and the like) escapes the news or documentary camera’s gaze, *Torre das Donzelas* does not recreate the prisoners’ experiences through dramatization. Rather, the artifice of a physical set is deployed as a stage on which memory is activated. Thus, our first glimpse of the reconstructed prison is an exploration of the space itself, followed by a dramatic display of affect: an older woman (later identified as Dulce Maia) is the first ex-prisoner to enter, and the camera registers her emotions, including a close-up of her face with eyes tearing up as she begins to remember.

As she moves further into the prison-set, the filmic gaze turns toward the figure of a young woman sitting on a cot. The shot then loses focus and becomes blurred to abstraction. The young woman, and the others who will join her in occupying the set, cannot be said to *reenact* the experience of the now-mature ex-prisoners, although sometimes their positioning, costume, and movements illustrate aspects of the latter’s testimony, notably in a scene describing the hardships of pregnancy in the prison. Rather, images of both generations are edited in such a way as to suture the connection between them, resulting in the

configuration of a liminal space in which past and present converge and demand accountability.

Sound design also participates in the construction of this liminal space that oscillates between stark realism and oneiric evocation. For a while there is silence, interrupted by sudden, disturbing noises, such as a heavy door closing, a lock clicking into place, blows. As a counterpoint, the voices of the women subjects break a different kind of silence in their review, some fifty years later, of the myriad emotions associated with their prison experience. The interviews take place within and outside of the film set. In some sequences, individuals are shown speaking while seated in chairs against a plain black background, sometimes with books or other personal items that impede any reduction to affectless talking heads. Their voices are then interwoven with images of the spaces activated by the female figures of past and present.

In other sequences, the speakers converse with the camera and/or each other within the set. Their accounts of arrest and torture are horrific, but their testimony is not limited to denunciation. As the composite discussion unfolds, they work to reconstruct and make sense of what they went through, to explain it with the analytic clarity that characterizes this group of individuals imprisoned, in the first place, for having dared to question and rebel intellectually as countercultural youth of the 1960s, even before making the decision to take up arms against the regime.

Their testimony also highlights the creativity, empathy, processes of mutual support and self-discovery that emerged in the prison context. As political prisoners, each woman arrived at the tower—site of long-term preventative detention following initial arrest and interrogation—having survived extreme brutality. Direct violence exercised against their bodies, with particular viciousness due to their male torturers' resentment and hatred of them as rebellious women, is compounded by other tortures: actions taken against their families; not knowing the fate of their comrades; guilt over possible errors and the terrible consequences these may have had for others; rejection, even, within the space of confinement, of those seen as possible traitors or collaborators—however unwittingly, during the unbearable pain of interrogation—with the enemy. Under such extreme circumstances, the women's physical and psychological rehabilitation could only be possible through collective self-care and solidarity.

Rousseff, whose lucidity and insights are impressive even among this group of highly articulate women, expresses it clearly: prison is control of space and time. It is what determines the organization of your daily activities, what you do and how you do it, and its aim is isolation. To resist, therefore, the prisoners seek to break their isolation and reclaim, to the extent possible, control of their space and time. To this end, they tell how they cleaned the sordid cells to the point that the tower became a showplace for authorities to demonstrate—hypocritically—to outsiders the conditions in which the prisoners were held; those who were architects redesigned the space to make it more socially functional, those who could cook improved the food, and those who enjoyed resources brought by their families from outside shared with those who did not. Books, stored under a floorboard in the hopes of avoiding confiscation, were a treasure, and the women, many of whom were college students or professors before joining the guerilla, also shared their knowledge in makeshift workshops and discussion groups.

One memorable session was led by biology student Arlete, who challenged her comrades to examine, for the first time, their "intimate parts" with a shared mirror. As they did so, she explained the heretofore-mysterious components of female sexual organs. In this



part of the film, the woman later identified as Guida Amaral begins the story in interview mode against a neutral black background. Her narration is intercut with shots of a small mirror being retrieved in close-up, then medium shots of a woman lowering her undergarments to position it between her thighs. This scene is filmed in a way that seems protective: in soft focus, the body shown from chest to knees without revealing a face, and further distanced by incidental objects that protrude into the frame between camera and subject. A second speaker, photographer Nair Benedicto, enters the discussion, explaining the liberatory effect of approaching collectively a topic that had been off limits even from private reflection. The camera hovers around the mirror, unobtrusive, respecting the embodied memory. The vulva that then appears, framed in the mirror's square surface, becomes a manifestation of intersubjectivity: rather than the sexual organ of one person, it is a powerful emblem of the group's shared journey.

By this point in the film, we know that some of the prisoners are married and/or mothers, and that all have endured rape and other sexualized forms of torture; it is thus profoundly moving to realize that, in spite of all of this, they are more familiar with the teachings of Marx and the handling of firearms than they are with their own bodies. Insofar as it isolates them from the activities of the outside world and compels them to develop a supportive learning community in order to survive and resist its punitive logic, the confinement of the prison paradoxically provides a scenario for new forms of liberation.

As the discussion develops around these collective experiences, the filmic component seems to support the notion of collectivity in its framing of the women in the reconstructed spaces, including more rapid interchange between the young actresses representing the past and the historical subjects in the present, as if the latter were gradually becoming more secure in their ownership of the terrain and their shared memories. Their testimony is interlaced with songs and poetry read aloud, photographs occasionally appear, and recollections of specific events multiply. We learn of strategies for obtaining prohibited books, and of the time when Brazil's participation in the World Cup meant that the prisoners were granted a television, which in turn opened a window, however distorted, on the world outside.<sup>6</sup>

A key moment in the narrative involves an odd gift bestowed on the inmates by the wealthy family of one of them: two suitcases that arouse hopes of reading material or other useful items, but that turn out to contain formal dresses, as if for an elegant ball rather than prison life. The group recalls how they donned these unlikely accouterments and began to parade about the cellblock, transforming their disappointment into carnivalesque celebration. The incident coincided with a visit from society women brought in by authorities to observe the prisoners, but who were quickly shown the door when it was found that the objects of their charitable attention had strayed from the script and were behaving in ways that seemed to indicate collective psychosis, or at least a deteriorating grip on reality. This performance, distinct from both the stern role of militant and that of the docile, humiliated captive, is subversive in its embrace of complicity between women and the capacity for joy under the unlikeliest of conditions.

Another important moment occurs when the women, in the present, begin to reflect on the act of telling and the political consequences of silence. At the time of their

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<sup>6</sup> Earlier in the film, the women discuss the role of the mass media as a weapon of repression. The characterization of the militants as terrorists served to justify their torture, imprisonment, and murder in the court of public opinion, and in the presidio, their initial work with the general population required confronting this view of themselves in the eyes of other prisoners.

imprisonment, to avoid speaking of the tortures endured (and whether or not they had succumbed to them) helped them to regain strength and move forward. Yet over time, reflect several of the ex-prisoners, silence became a form of defeat: “the great triumph of the dictatorship.” This repressive effect is both personal and social: first, in not verbalizing their experience, the “torturer stays inside you,” capturing the victim from the inside. Second, in not transmitting this history to spouses, children, students and others, a short circuit is created in which suffering is not acknowledged and the state is not held responsible for its crimes against these women and against the Brazilian people. That the erasure of history permits the repetition of atrocities is not a mere cliché, as we will see shortly with respect to the current political context. Breaking the silence, in this sense, becomes a form of political participation in the present.

### **“Donzelas” and “Senhoras,” or, the Gendered Revolutionary Body**

The question of generational silence may be linked, moreover, to that of gender. As young militants, the women featured in *Torre das Donzelas* wore boots and miniskirts, lived—however tentatively—the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and challenged the assumptions of their male comrades regarding women’s abilities to engage in guerrilla activity. Years later, these same women are professionals in various fields, and most are mothers and grandmothers. With their smart glasses and hairstyles, elegant scarves, sweaters and jewelry, their outward appearance has little in common with revolutionary stereotypes; rather, their meeting might be mistaken for any other middle-class feminine gathering, amongst laughter, embraces, and reminiscing, if only it did not take place in a reconstructed prison.

This depiction of the gendered revolutionary body is perhaps the film’s strongest contribution to a feminist retelling of guerilla history, as well as denunciation of the repressive apparatus of the dictatorship. The spectacle of revolution in Latin America has long been associated with virility, from the iconic representations of Villa and Zapata in Mexico to those of Che Guevara in Cuba and as a transcendent symbol of Third World resistance in general. In the wake of the “Dirty Wars” and dictatorships in the region, women have often assumed an activist role as an extension of other gender-coded roles, in particular that of mother, in the quest for information and accountability regarding their disappeared, imprisoned, or murdered loved ones. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina are a paradigmatic example, one taken up more recently by collectives confronting the ongoing crisis of involuntary disappearance of persons in Mexico. These groups strategically invoke the moral authority grounded in the notion of the “Mother” (though rarely granted to actual flesh-and-blood women, as ongoing struggles for reproductive and parental rights reveal) in order to press for justice. Women as activists in non-maternal roles are both less visible and more likely to be discursively coded in ways that arouse suspicion rather than sympathy.

The protagonists of *Torre das Donzelas* are daughters, mothers, wives, lovers and so on, but their presence in the film is due to their shared trajectory as leftist militants and intellectuals. This focus implies a subversive understanding of women, especially older women, as revolutionary subjects. In her study of women intellectuals in Mexico, Emily Hind writes insightfully about the “negative connotations of the word *señora*” (*senhora* in Portuguese), a term that denotes a married or otherwise grown woman, yet is frequently used to imply such qualities as frivolity, hysteria, and/or incompetence as innate attributes at the intersection of age and gender. For example, “in heavy vehicular traffic a male driver can

express the inferiority of a female driver by groaning *¡Ay señora!*” (Hind 2010: 75).<sup>7</sup> With age, women do not acquire gravitas; rather, once past the age deemed as sexually desirable, they no longer hold interest for phallogocentric society. Other than their utility in the maintenance of the patriarchal home and family, they are relegated to the margins of social relevance.

As Hind notes, “Calling an unknown, youngish-seeming woman *señora* can imply that she looks old(er), an insult in a society that, all things being equal among strangers, pays greatest respect to youthful looking women” (Hind 2010, 75). Brazilian media, like those of Mexico and elsewhere, exacerbate the hyper-valorization of youth by promoting “ideal”—thin, hairless, etc.—bodies, accessible only within certain class-ethnic strata and carefully cultivated therein via the use of costly products and procedures such as surgical intervention. Young women are also perceived as frivolous, and indeed, nearly all the terms referring to the feminine gender in all stages of life can be used to denigrate and trivialize female subjects, as the idea of the “Maidens’ Tower” again illustrates. At the end of the film, this title is removed from the chalkboard by the former inmates who reject it as a name for a place in which people arrived after suffering extreme sexual violence and from which they might be seized at any moment by their jailers and exposed to continued rape and torture. “Ali não tinha donzelas,” remarks history professor Iara Glória Areias Prado, and writes in a more accurate, non-gendered designation: *Torre do Tiradentes*.

The tower, as I have mentioned, was occupied by many women who were mothers, in some cases mothers of infants practically seized from their breasts at the moment of arrest, or those who were forced to give birth in prison. These vividly recall how the misogynist rage of the jailers led to new sadisms, such as a dangerous injection given to stop the flow of milk. The counterpoint is the solidarity between women that made the prison a survivable space, a space in which feminine daily life could be recreated: the kitchen well or poorly attended; or handicrafts to occupy time, to generate resources and, at times, even to express themselves subversively under the noses of the censors, inserting subtle leftist references into decorative objects. On family visiting days, the women pool resources to present themselves to their loved ones in the best possible light. These festive occasions bring with them the bittersweet sensation of what life outside the prison might be like.

Women cooking, women knitting, embroidering, getting exercise, some with enthusiasm and others less so, like Rousseff, who tires of volleyball, prefers reading... *Senhoras*, revolutionary women, imprisoned for having conspired against a dictatorship, for having taken up arms for an ideal and in doing so, defying patriarchal notions of women’s place in the home and in the public sphere. Reuniting them in a space whose physical existence has been erased but that their recollections have helped to reconstruct, Lira’s film becomes a celebration of women’s political agency. The attitude of renunciation self-imposed during the guerilla struggle gives way to a holistic view of the gendered political subject, including the broad spectrum of emotion. Ilda Martins da Silva, widow of the well-known militant Virgílio Gomes da Silva, who received especially harsh treatment in the prison for that reason and suffered from the separation from her four young children,

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<sup>7</sup> As a reviewer of this article pointed out, the masculine *senhor* may also be used to convey a variety of meanings, including sarcasm and contempt. However, I would argue that the class-centered connotations of *senhor*, like the English *sir*, are distinct from the class- and gender-based stereotypes attached to *senhora*.

remembers a debate from that era: do revolutionaries have the right to cry?<sup>8</sup> The answer, in the film, is affirmative, and Ilda's account suggests that empathy and solidarity, rather than adherence to an ideal of ideologically correct behavior, are the ingredients of resistance.

### Reckoning with a Haunted Present

In 2016, amid social tumult, the Brazilian congress voted to impeach President Rousseff. She was charged with concealing information about the state of public finances and thus violating fiscal responsibility laws; these accusations were milder than many of those leveled at her by political opponents, who had sought to link her to other financial irregularities and scandals. The process was clouded by the obvious political intentions of many of those involved: Eduardo Cunha, president of the chamber of deputies, for instance, led the impeachment effort while himself facing charges of corruption and money laundering (he was removed from office later that year).

In the Tribunal Internacional pela Democracia, organized in Rio de Janeiro by Brazilian academics and activist groups in 2016, specialists from Mexico, Italy, France, Spain, Costa Rica, and the United States declared that the *impeachment* was “uma ferramenta golpista utilizada por forças anti-democráticas e conservadoras para derrubar o governo legalmente eleito” (Sankari 2016). In this view, Rousseff was targeted in order to destroy the long-lived but already unstable hegemony of the Partido dos Trabalhadores, place Vice-president Michel Temer in the presidency, and open the doors to the far right in the 2018 elections, which, in effect, would result in Jair Bolsonaro's victory.

Bolsonaro, since then responsible for outrages such as mismanaging the Covid epidemic and promoting unprecedented levels of deforestation in the Amazon, was also outrageous in his vindication of the dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 until 1985, when the popular campaign for direct elections (*Diretas já*) generated critical mass in favor of a return to electoral democracy. In August 2019, Bolsonaro met with the widow of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, director of DOPS-CODI from 1970 to 1974. As the women in *Torre das Donzelas* make clear, DOPS-CODI was one of the main torture centers of the dictatorship, described as “um sucursal do inferno ou o inferno mesmo,” where prisoners were received with cruel sarcasm: “Você conhece os direitos humanos da ONU? Esquece.” Bolsonaro, however, characterized Colonel Ustra as a national hero who kept Brazil from falling into the clutches of the left.<sup>9</sup> This was not the first time that the president had made comments in favor of torture and repression. In fact, as a congressman during the 2016 impeachment process, Bolsonaro had dedicated his vote in favor to the torturer, referring to him with glee as “o pavor de Dilma Rousseff.”<sup>10</sup>

The revisionist rhetoric of the contemporary right in Brazil is the background against which *Torre das Donzelas* takes place, even though the film is not specifically about

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<sup>8</sup> Nádía Mangolini's 2017 short film *Torre* uses animation and personal testimony to tell the story of Ilda's four children and their experiences during their mother's imprisonment, as well as their perceptions of their father's prolonged absence and belated confirmation of his death. *Torre* and *Torre das Donzelas*, as Barroso (2018) points out, focused filmgoers' attention on the Tiradentes prison just when the Brazilian right was rewriting history to idealize and justify the crimes of the dictatorship.

<sup>9</sup> Widely reported by international media; see, for instance, N. G. G. in *El País*, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Gearing up for his reelection campaign, the president reaffirmed this opinion: for example, “Bolsonaro elogia coronel condenado por tortura,” 2022.

Rousseff.<sup>11</sup> As Sudré (2018) notes, in spite of the former president's high profile relative to the other participants, "as presas políticas são apresentadas de forma horizontal e nenhuma delas é creditada durante o filme." Lira is thus careful to privilege the collective, even as she allows us to become familiar with individual subjects, including cultural producer Dulce Maia and educator Maria Luiza Belloque (both deceased by the time of the film's completion); conflict mediator Guida Amaral; visual artist Rioco Kayano; retired workers Ilda Martins da Silva and Ieda Akselrud Seixas, among others, all of whose resilience is underlined by the personal and professional self-identifications that accompany their photos in the end credit sequence.

That many of the women went on to specialize in fields such as law, human rights advocacy, or teaching suggests the continuation and renovation of past ideals. "O filme não faz nenhuma abordagem clara sobre a onda conservadora atual," observes Lira in her 2018 interview with Sudré, "mas quando narra em detalhes o que houve na época da ditadura, tudo parece muito parecido com o discurso fascista que ouvimos agora. Nesse sentido, vejo o filme como um alerta. Precisamos reagir e a história de luta dessas mulheres nos inspira." At a time when the nation as well as women's bodies are a terrain of struggle, *Torre das Donzela's* testimonies, reconstructions, and lucid reflections not only shed light on a haunted past, but also contribute to feminist visions of democracy for a troubled present.

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<sup>11</sup> Her testimony is set off from the others by the fact that she does not appear in the reconstructed set but rather in a separate interview setting; nonetheless, the interview is candid and extensive.

[https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2022/03/27/interna\\_politica,1355776/bolsonaro-elogia-coronel-condenado-por-tortura-lutou-por-democracia.shtml](https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2022/03/27/interna_politica,1355776/bolsonaro-elogia-coronel-condenado-por-tortura-lutou-por-democracia.shtml).

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