Olga Benário Prestes: The Cinematic Martyrdom of a Revolutionary Jewish Woman and the Reconstruction of National Identity in Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva’s Brazil

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Abstract
The popular success of the film Olga (Jayme Monjardim, Globo, Brazil, 2004) and the conflicting interpretations of the historical figure of Olga Benário Prestes, the Communist activist of German-Jewish background, that it inspired, indicate its relevance in current formation of Brazilian identity. This article proposes an allegoric reading of the cinematic text. The stripping of Olga's revolutionary activism of any ideological or political significance and by putting her through a process of Christian redemption reinforces traditional gender relations. Her transformation from revolutionary activist to wife, mother, and martyr represents the accommodation of Brazilian identity to bankrupted expectations as Luiz da Silva’s first presidency (2002-2006) failed to implement a radical alternative to the prevailing neoliberal system.

Introduction
On 20 August 2004, the film Olga, a biography of Olga Benário Prestes (1908-1942), made its debut on Brazilian screens. Born in Munich, Olga Benario was active in the Communist Youth since 1923 and joined in 1925 the Communist Party's military apparatus. In 1928 she organized the escape of a party leader from the courthouse and went to the Soviet Union, where she received military training, fulfilled intelligence duties and carried out political missions. In 1934 Olga was appointed responsible for the personal safety of Brazilian communist leader Luis Carlos Prestes, who became her husband. After the failed revolutionary attempt of 1935, she was arrested and deported to Germany by the Brazilian President Getulio Vargas. After giving birth in prison, Olga Benario Prestes was killed in the gas chambers.

The promotional events of the film, held in major cities around the country and attended by political and cultural celebrities, kicked off with a special screening for President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and his entourage at the government palace. Brazil
nominated the film, directed by Jayme Monjardin and produced by the media conglomerate Globo, for a Hollywood Oscar for best foreign film in 2005, but it was not accepted; whereas The Motorcycle Diaries, a transnational production based on Ché Guevara’s early life and directed by the Brazilian Walter Salles, received an Oscar for best original song. However, Olga’s resounding box-office success—1.2 million spectators in its first two weeks, and over 3 million by November 2005—testifies to the film’s relevance as a focus of identification.1 The later debut of Fabio Barreto's biopic Lula, o Filho do Brasil in 2009 points up the persistence of the symbolic battle over leftist heroes' biographies for the sake of ideological hegemony in Brazil and the relevance of the issue for history and film studies.

The movie’s plot of Olga is based on Fernando Morais’s best-selling, fictionalized biography of Olga Benário Prestes. Published in 1985, it sold 600,000 copies and was translated into several languages. Morais, nominated for a seat in the Brazilian Academy of Letters,2 has seen several of his books adapted to film; he helped promote the film and pronounced himself happy with it, although Monjardin and the screenwriter-producer Rita Buzzar introduced events that did not occur in the book. The movie’s premiere coincided with the release of a new edition of Morais’ book, a common marketing strategy in the global market, where box-office success promotes sales of related products. Similarly, a 2002 play about the life of Olga Benário received government funding to finance its production for the stage in 2005.3

This article analyzes Olga as an allegory. Instead of making the usual comparison between the cinematic version and the literary source, or seeking out distortions of documented historical events, it seeks to reveal the imprints that social processes leave on cultural products designed for mass consumption. The film sanctifies the memory of Olga Benário Prestes by putting her through a process of Christian redemption that reinforces traditional gender relations, showing her transformation from Comintern activist to wife, mother, and martyr. Stripping its portrayal of the past of any explicit ideology or political design, Olga allegorizes the identity formation of a society that, having elected a Socialist militant unionist of working-class background as president in 2002, must convert its
resolve to effect real change into mere hopes for a less unjust future, while the country’s economic policy continues to pursue the neoliberal agenda of the previous government. The conservative position on women’s status is homologous to the conservative socioeconomic discourse of the current hegemony.  

**Jewish Identity and Memory**

Olga sparked fierce discussions among members of the ethnic Jewish minority in Brazil. The historian Anita Leocádia Prestes, Olga Benário Prestes’ only child, described her mother as the daughter of a typical Bavarian Jewish family, a description that was not quite exact. Olga’s father, Leo Benário, was a member of the Social Democratic Party and a lawyer who defended workers in the courts, using his own money to assist those who needed it. Her mother, Eugenie Gutmann, was a member of the Jewish upper middle class, and did not share the social conscience that Olga absorbed at a young age from her father. Little is known of the family’s life as Jews—whether they participated in the organized Jewish community, conformed to any religious beliefs or practices, or associated with Jewish intellectuals and artists.

In 1992, invited to lecture at the Associação Scholem Aleichem (Sholem Aleichem Association, a Jewish cultural institution affiliated with the Communist Party) on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of her mother’s death, Anita Prestes denounced any attempt to “sully” Olga’s memory by attributing a Jewish identity to her. Her speech was interrupted by outcries from the audience, including veteran party activists. Paradoxically, when the film was released in 2004, the president of this Association invoked the same arguments to denounce the appropriation of Olga Benário’s memory by the Federação Israelita do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Jewish Federation of the State of Rio de Janeiro).  

The rabbi of the São Paulo Jewish community, who arranged a special viewing of Olga for an audience of 2,000, claimed that the film was more important for non-Jews than for Jews, because it exposed the Nazi atrocities in Germany and the sympathy of the Brazilian dictator Getulio Vargas for the Nazi regime. The Jewish magazine *Revista Judaica* merely reviewed the film, replicating the promotional material provided by the
distributor and interviewing the director, without adding any explanatory commentary on the hero’s Judaism. On the other hand, a well-known Brazilian novelist and essayist defines Olga Benário as a member of “a line of admirable revolutionary Jewish women” that includes the German political leader Rosa Luxemburg, the American feminist anarchist Emma Goldman, and the French anti-Nazi activist Simone Weil, all of them characterized, in his view, by “the tragic ending of their lives.” A study of women prisoners held by the Nazi regime in the Ravensbrück concentration camp mentions Olga’s assimilated Jewish family background and testifies to her fighting spirit: In just a few weeks she became the leader of the camp barracks, organizing language lessons, literary gatherings, morning exercises, and promoting good habits of hygiene. However, although she conducted herself with heroism and womanly dignity throughout her captivity, no one recalls any signs of Jewish identity.6

The only hint of Jewishness in the film appears in the first scene, which shows children playing and chanting the traditional Hebrew song “David, melech Yisrael” (“David, King of Israel”), while an adolescent Olga proves her courage to her father by leaping over a bonfire. The staging of the scene suggests that the hero was participating in an organized activity for Jewish children, while parents were arriving to pick up their offspring. The song encourages Zionist identification by evoking Judaism as a sovereign political entity, but the scene is similar to activities that non-Zionist organizations also sponsored. The song chanted in the diegetic space (the fictional world) can hardly be heard since the extra-diegetic soundtrack (outside the fictional world, speaking directly to the audience) drowns it out with nostalgic, melodramatic instrumental music. The difference in volume between these two elements of the soundtrack expresses the subordination of the ethnic voice to the codes of general society, allowing Jews and their institutions to use Olga’s memory as a tool in current processes of identity formation, in which both Zionists and non-Zionists retain Jewish idiosyncrasies congruent with Brazilian identity.7

Brazil is a multicultural, multiracial society in which democratic laws do not effectively counter discrimination against the black population, and the traditional Verde-
Amarelo discourse, which holds that Brazil is constructed by three agents external to society—Nature, God, and the State—continues to drive the policies of social demobilization. Minority ethnic and racial groups configure their identities through a constant process of accommodation with the hegemonic discourse, without engaging in confrontations that mobilize people in the public and political arena. The different trends in the ethnic Jewish community have appropriated Olga Benário’s memory and image, revived by the film, to reconstruct their own identities within the limits that the hegemonic discourse has established through the cinematic text.

**Olga, Revolutionary Activist**

Olga Benário is described by her daughter—who had not known her personally—as a young internationalist, an idealist dedicated to the cause, who later demonstrated a greatness of heart that was poles apart from the insensitivity, intolerance, and coldness of the communist stereotype. However, documents that only became available after the disintegration of the Soviet Union identify her as a professional activist who enjoyed the trust of the Communist leadership. Active in the youth movement of the German Communist Party in Munich since 1923, she later engaged in militant actions in a workers’ neighborhood in Berlin and worked in the Soviet trade legation, which was the Party’s headquarters. In 1928 she led an armed raid to liberate her lover, activist Otto Braun, from the courtroom where he was being tried for treason. The police crack-down set off by this event forced the Party to smuggle the couple out of Germany to Moscow, where they separated. Olga was elected to the Central Committee of the Fifth Congress of the Communist Youth International and later served on the Executive Committee. Trained in European languages, she carried out party missions in Germany, Italy, and France in 1931. The following year she worked in the Fourth (Intelligence) Directorate of the Red Army Staff and took flying and parachuting lessons in the air force, which according to her daughter were cut short in late 1934 when she was sent on a Comintern mission to Brazil.

The leadership put her in charge of personal security for Luis Carlos Prestes, a job that led to romantic involvement and eventually marriage. It is beyond the scope of this
article to do more than briefly describe the career of Prestes (1898-1990), a junior officer in the Brazilian army and leader of the tenente rebellion known as “the Prestes Column”—an adventure that earned him the nickname of “the Knight of Hope.” He went into exile in 1927, declining to collaborate with the newly established Vargas regime in 1930, and, invited to Moscow in 1931, he joined the Communist Party, which entrusted him with the task of spearheading the revolution in his country. After leading the Aliança Nacional Libertadora (National Liberation Alliance) in an unsuccessful revolt in 1935, he spent most of the rest of his life in jail, in hiding, or in exile. He was the leader of the pro-Moscow Communist Party, but left it in 1979, dissatisfied with the direction it was taking.\(^{10}\)

Olga took part in the preparations for the abortive uprising in 1935. In 1936, she was arrested with her husband and deported alone to Nazi Germany in her seventh month of pregnancy, even though she was a Brazilian citizen by marriage. The Brazilian communication media highlighted the Jewish backgrounds of Olga Benário Prestes and Arthur Ewert, another Comintern agent involved in the uprising. The Brazilian elites, fearful of Marxist internationalism, obsessively emphasized “the Jewish-Communist connection,” and not a few efforts were made to limit the immigration of Jews escaping from Hitler.\(^{11}\) In 1938, Anita Leocádia, born in a German prison some weeks after her mother’s deportation, was handed over to Prestes’ mother, who had headed an international campaign for the baby’s release. Meanwhile, Olga was sent to a labor camp for political prisoners at Ravensbrück, and was finally murdered in the gas chambers in 1942.

**Image and Memory**

Previous representations commemorating Olga reflected the growing influence of the Left during Goulart’s populist regime—such as the biography published in 1962 by Ruth Werner, who had met Olga Benário during her career as an activist for the German Communist Party—or else were designed to protest the political persecution by the dictatorship—notably Rachel Gertel’s play Não há tempo para chorar, which premiered in 1965.\(^{12}\) The commercial success of Morais’ novel reflects the changes in identity...
conception that accompanied the return to democracy in 1985, and the current conflicting interpretations of Olga Benário’s image in the film express the tensions that emerge from the reconstruction of historical memory and from the symbolic struggles between today’s political discourses, as the nation adapts to a working-class president in an era of globalization. The different interpretations of Olga’s image on the websites of various political and social groups testify to the depth of the conflicts that the film has brought out.\textsuperscript{13}

In early 2005, Anita Leocadia Prestes was forced to contest an article accusing the Communist Party of having tried to suppress Olga’s memory for the sake of the mythology surrounding Prestes. The article claimed that Morais had been obstructed in his efforts to obtain information for his fictionalized biography, and that the record constructed by the Party omitted the fact that Olga had defended Prestes’ life with her own body—to prevent injury to a leader who, in 1945, publicly enlisted support for Vargas. Anita maintained that her father and the Party had missed no opportunity to exalt her mother’s actions and to denounce the injustice committed against her; but the website of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) does not mention Olga in the history of the organization, and mentions Prestes only once, in connection with the events of 1935—a manipulation of history that devalues the leader who distanced himself from the party ranks.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Vermelho} (http://www.vermelho.org.br/), the website of the Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB)—the party created in 1962 from the faction in the Brazilian Communist Party that supported armed struggle—is also dismissive of Prestes, who had been the leader of the majority faction, but glorifies Olga’s memory, citing her portrayal in the 1955 novel \textit{Memórias do Cárcere} by Graciliano Ramos and in Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s 1984 film of the same name (based on the novel), as well as historian Eric Hobsbawm’s mention of Olga and Otto Braun as examples of professional Communist revolutionaries.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Vermelho} has emphasized that Olga Prestes was better remembered in East Germany than in Brazil, and it published a tribute by the actor starring in \textit{Olga} to the soldiers of the Brazilian army, hundreds of whom had appeared as extras in the film. The
female actor remarked the same devotion to discipline and sacrifice that Olga had, although in life they had been enemies.\textsuperscript{16} This tribute reflects the pact of oblivion that has oiled the relations between civilian society and the army since the return to democracy, but on the digital pages of \textit{Vermelho} it revives the tradition of a leftwing militarism that criticizes the rightwing revisionism and opportunism which the Party used to attribute to the pro-Soviet line, despite its affiliation with Lula’s Partido Trabalhista since 1989.

Olga is mentioned on the website of the “Luiz Carlos Prestes Center,” an internal faction of the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT–Democratic Labor Party) headed by veteran Lionel Brizola until his death in June 2004. Brizola had been a major player in the civilian-military conflicts of the 1960s and was a political successor to Getulio Vargas and João Goulart. The PDT website describes Getulio Vargas’s suicide in 1954 as a sacrifice for Brazil’s sake.\textsuperscript{17} Populistic paternalism remains latent in Vargas’s political heirs, who see women as inferior, while the leftwing faction distinguishes itself by remembering Olga Prestes as the wife of an admired leader and the victim of the Vargas regime’s complicity with Nazism.\textsuperscript{18}

The website of the independent leftwing newspaper \textit{La Insignia} congratulates Monjardin for reviving the image of Olga as a combatant, a role that, unlike Prestes, she never renounced. Olga was reportedly committed to the interests of the dispossessed, and had trouble agreeing to support Vargas, although the Soviets demanded that she do so.\textsuperscript{19} This vision of Olga as a sort of patron saint of the poor, analogous to the interpretation of Eva Perón by some sectors of the Argentine Peronist left wing in the 1970s, also appeared on a website identified with evangelical Christianity, which described both women as saints who died, like Christ, at the age of 33.\textsuperscript{20}

Journalist Paulo Francis’s reading of Morais’ novel, fifteen years before the movie was produced, would suggest that Olga was an agent of the OGPU (the Soviet secret police that preceded the KGB), commissioned to prevent Luis Prestes from “going over” to the Trotskyists—a mission apparently sabotaged by love.\textsuperscript{21} In contrast, the Trotskyist viewpoint that currently characterizes the portal site \textit{Causa Operaria} criticizes
the film for conveying a childish image of Olga, whose revolutionary activism is contrasted with the feelings and vital needs of human beings, including sexuality.\textsuperscript{22}

As portrayed by the commercial women’s social network site, \textit{Bolsa de Mulher}, the Prestes’ story of love and revolution is shared by equals, and motherhood is a feminine battlefront. Olga and Prestes organized the failed rebellion; Olga tried to avoid being deported to Germany in order to save her child, whom Nazi laws would classify as Jewish. The baby was born robust and healthy, Olga managed to make contact with the Brazilian embassy in Germany and request citizenship for her daughter to save her from the Jewish fate. Finally, Prestes acknowledged paternity from jail, and Anita was handed over to his mother.\textsuperscript{23} This narrative, based on Morais’ novelized version, reflects the exploitation of feminist discourse in the neoliberal era, in which many women’s social movements, trapped in the postmodern process that transforms emancipating energies into a passion for regulation, morph into non-governmental organizations that offer health and legal counseling services.\textsuperscript{24} Ultimately, this spectrum of contradictory images would not be complete without Ahmed Rami’s anti-Semitic, Islamic version, revealed in his “Little List of Jewish Communists,” which defines Olga Benário as a German Communist terrorist married to Prestes.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Social Change, Hope, and Reality}

The symbolic battles over Olga Benário’s image and memory testify to the political and cultural heterogeneity of Brazilian society and the omnipotence of the neoliberal hegemony of which Rede Globo (the mammoth Brazilian media network) forms part and for which it is a mouthpiece. By the end of the 1980s, most Latin American countries had adopted the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ policy orientation. This consisted of the combination of an effective attack on inflation through drastic fiscal adjustment; privatization of state owned enterprises; trade liberalization; the prevalence of market interest rates and the opening of most sectors to foreign investment, with substantially decreasing controls over the actions of foreign capital. Instead of the neoliberal utopia of high growth with equity, the embracement of these policies by Lula’s first government
has led to the evisceration of agrarian reform policies, a decline in employment and real wages, the slashing of pension benefits and negative per capita economic growth.\textsuperscript{26}

Neoliberalism is an ideological justification for a particular set of economic, political, and social policies. At the heart of the discourse accompanying neoliberal economic policy is a commitment to human freedom. "Freedom" becomes the uprooting of state participation in the economy, especially when this involves policies of resource distribution. The concept of the individual as a rational consumer who works and spends in order to satisfy quantifiable desires is translated, in neoliberal thought, into an obsession to liberate markets, and thus societies, from any external influence that would inhibit this rational activity. The conditions for the hegemonization of neoliberal ideology were obtained by destroying the legitimacy of socialism and developmentalism, the two Projects annihilated by the military regime. This move disorganized fields of social bond like political parties and workers unions, creating individual isolation and leaving the working class defenseless. Most of the democratic governments elected in Latin America after the dictatorships continued to carry the neoliberal policies. Even traditional institutions like family, school, and church are being positioned to increase individualism. Other consequences of neoliberal policies are fears of losing subsistence possibilities and criminality as option because the break of moral codes.\textsuperscript{27} Neoliberalism has reinforced the sustainability of the democratic systems in Latin America by undermining the leftwing movements and union organizations and weakening the demands for radical reform.\textsuperscript{28}

Brazil is a society marked by pacts among the elites, and this was the pattern followed when the Globo-dominated media touted Lula’s candidacy in 2002, expressing a new alliance between capital and labor in which the Globo Group’s financial problems played a part. Those problems led the media giant to seek new allies and good relations with the government. The Globo media’s synthesis of political discourse during the election campaign portrayed Lula as an incorrupt moderate, while delegitimizing any discussion of alternatives to the neoliberal economic model imposed during Cardoso’s presidential terms (1995-2003).\textsuperscript{29} The candidates with the best chances of winning
collaborated with this ideological censorship. The claim of uncorrupted virtue was very important in a society where more than 80 percent of the citizens considered public officials to be corrupt and close to 50 percent had lost faith in the democratic system.30

The Globo media empire, built with the blessing of the military dictatorship for which it served as a mouthpiece, contributed to the electoral victory of Lula, a labor leader who had been oppressed by that same dictatorial regime. Now Globo reconstructs an image of Olga on celluloid that is adapted to the neoliberal discourse, and imposes it as a reference point for debates, thereby setting the rhetorical agenda for ideological trends and movements.

This was happening while cases of corruption involving governmental party leaders began to emerge, and Lula’s vice-president, José Alencar, a textile manufacturer belonging to the Liberal Party, accused him of keeping a “pact with the devil” by maintaining the anti-inflationary policies of the previous government, a claim echoed, though from a diametrically opposed viewpoint, by representatives of foreign interests, such as the chief advisor of Spain’s Economic and Commercial Office in São Paulo.31 The corruptive potential of neoliberal economics began to show in the way that public affairs were handled, while various people denounced the transformation of the Partido Trabalhista and its government into neoliberals, incapable of realizing the substantial changes they had promised.32 The Lula government’s inability to implement an alternative national project is represented on film by the ideological invalidation of Olga’s militancy and the sanctification that redeems her by restoring her to the traditional role of wife and mother.

**Film, Telenovelas, and Revolution**

*Olga* begins and ends with the hero’s last hours, during which she relives unforgettable moments from her life. The brief scene previously mentioned in which she leaps over the bonfire is the first memory. Its placement in the film prior to the appearance of the adult Olga establishes a logical connection: The moment in which she rebelled against the oedipal bond and traditional femininity by ignoring her father’s warning and leaping over the fire like a boy, was the beginning of the chain of events that led her to her present
situation. Further confirmation of this interpretation is the fact that Olga next sees another prisoner embroidering a red apple, a scene that is followed by a flashback to the operation to liberate Braun in 1926. In that scene the camera focuses on a basket of red apples in the foreground, in which Olga hides a pistol. The biblical symbol of prohibited knowledge, the original sin for which Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, is thus linked with the emblematic color of communism, while the serpent, a usual phallic symbol in film, is replaced by a weapon, which is both a phallic symbol and a symbol of violence. Rebellion against the paternalistic code by a woman who asserts her right to act as a historical subject ready to commit political violence in the interests of a utopian social revolution is a sin that only death can redeem.

The significance of those first minutes is echoed by the film’s narrative structure. Knowing the end in advance eliminates the linear perception of time that characterizes the real world, reinforcing the sense of fatalism and tragedy.\(^{33}\) This gives the audience a sense of “premonition,” of being endowed with “higher powers,” that validates the ideological conclusions suggested from the beginning of the film and turns them into “common sense,” in the terms of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, or “naturalizes” them, to use Barthes’s semiotic terminology.\(^{34}\) By recreating in the audience’s consciousness the fatalistic resignation postulated by the discourse that insists there is no alternative to the neoliberal system, Olga allegorizes current reality.

The scenes from Olga’s youth show her as energetic and violent: defeating an SA Nazi with her bare hands in a street fight and carrying out an armed operation in the courtroom with great precision, not hesitating to hit the judge with her pistol. Beginning with these moments, Olga is portrayed as unfeminine, and her fictional world is shown without color. This technique, commonly used to suggest scenes from the past, has an additional effect on the minds of the audience: It is a sad world. The film symbolically discredits communism, not only by presenting the call for social justice as a hopeless cause, but also by emphasizing the parallel between the red communist symbols and the red Nazi symbols in Olga’s memories of the street battles where her activism began. Her loss of femininity is accentuated by her military uniform and mannish haircut during the
scenes in the Soviet Union. However, the film softens this androgynous image by endowing her with saintly Christian attributes: Olga rejects Braun’s offer of a permanent romantic relationship; her life is dedicated to their joint struggle for the Revolution, she asserts, as though taking a vow of priestly celibacy.

The film discredits communism by stressing its militaristic aspects, as in the sequence that shows soldiers training while the soundtrack plays “The Internationale” to the tempo of a military march. The anthem of universal solidarity between workers thus becomes an allusion to the dictatorial characteristics that Brazilian memory associates with the military. Conversely, a romantic instrumental version of “The Internationale” plays in the background as Olga first takes notice of Luis Prestes. This discrediting of the symbol is more important in the postmodern era of the “end of ideologies” than the discrediting of the actual communist theory—which is simply non-existent in the film; it has been virtually erased.

Olga denounces her father’s social democratic values, but the response of her father, who is depicted as sympathetic and dependable, constitutes an argument for politics as the art of the possible—an argument that criticizes the break-up of the social order and the revolutionary slogans that are impossible to implement. The father’s Social Democratic affiliation is a front for an underlying neoliberal discourse, a rhetorical trick that is not unknown in Brazil, where President Fernando Henrique Cardoso governed in the name of the Partido de la Social Democracia Brasileña (PSDB—Brazilian Social Democratic Party). While Olga’s mother criticizes her and abandons her, it is her father who finally understands her and supports her point of view when she leaves home. The father’s image reflects the position of the elites, who are well aware of the demands of social justice, but compromise with the economic order nonetheless.

Olga’s saintliness is rooted in Christianity and the Holy Family. When Braun suggests sexual relations, Olga asserts that family life does not lend itself to activism and that her struggle is not at the side of a man, but at the side of the revolution, a dedication to the cause that is analogous to religious vows. Color begins to spread through Olga’s world when she poses as Prestes’ wife on the trip to Brazil, and the red carnations visible
in their cabin represent the first instance in the film where the color red does not have political implications but rather reassumes a romantic significance. Olga’s saintliness is not expressed by sexual abstinence, but by a matrimonial and spiritual bond. Moments before their first sexual encounter, Olga and Prestes read a poem in Russian aloud together from a book—a poem with a Christian meaning: “to illuminate everything, until the end of eternity.” The lighting used in the scenes of their journey gives Olga an aura reminiscent of those seen in pictures of saints—a style of lighting those Hollywood films only used to use for stars and the characters who complied with the prevailing moral codes of America. The first kiss is tender, filmed in extreme close-up and accompanied by the same extra-diegetic music that was heard in the scene where Olga worried her father by jumping over the bonfire. In this way, the soundtrack returns Olga to the “right” path: the jurisdiction of another male.

During their first sexual encounter, the couple moves gently and slowly, almost ethereally. The lighting creates an atmosphere of harmony and beatitude. The use of dissolves, together with the soundtrack, suggests an experience more spiritual than corporeal. The combination of these images with the dialogue, in which Prestes remarks on the resemblance between Olga and his mother, as well as Olga’s maternal gesture in covering the sleeping Prestes with a blanket and her failure in prison to notice the symptoms of pregnancy in herself, as though she had no idea of the physical consequences of sexual love, all serve to endow her with an aura of spirituality and imaginary saintliness. From the place where they are hiding from the police, Olga watches a carnival parade passing by outside and notices a woman dressed up as a bride, whom the camera endows with the same luminous halo that surrounded Olga during the feigned honeymoon. This use of light reflects the change that has taken place inside the fictional Olga, who from that moment begins to act spontaneously like a wife and lover, no longer following the orders of the Party. This scene appears about halfway through the movie, complying with the plot rules of Hollywood-style movies, in which any major character must undergo a process of change that leaves him or her on a higher plane than at the beginning of the film.
Olga portrays Olga Benário’s death as the sacrifice of a saint, producing the catharsis that is indispensable in popular cinematic texts, but which in depictions of the Holocaust distorts the historic perception of the magnitude and seriousness of events. After arriving at the concentration camp, Olga is called a “communist pig” at one point, but the focus is on her Jewishness: The list of prisoners read out on several occasions is full of Jewish names, and the dialogue mentions that Jews are imprisoned all over Europe. The persecution of other minorities, political dissidents, and communists is not mentioned. The gate of the concentration camp is filmed in a way that recalls the entrance to Auschwitz, emphasizing the cynical motto “Arbeit Macht Frei” (“Work Shall Set You Free”), a euphemism for the exploitation and extermination carried out in the camps. The film turns to the cinematic iconography of the Holocaust to reestablish Olga’s ethnicity, linking her saintliness with the Judeo-Christian roots of the hegemonic culture and definitively destroying any memory of communist militancy.

In the concentration camp, Olga’s face reveals signs of ill treatment, weakness, and starvation. She shows solidarity with other prisoners, but despite the many forms of resistance that the real Olga pursued (as mentioned earlier in this article), the image the film constructs of her leadership merely shows her exhorting her fellow prisoners to maintain cleanliness and hygiene, a concern traditionally attributed to the female gender. When she is whipped, her posture is reminiscent of Jesus on the cross, and she suffers in silence, like the heroes of Hollywood. Her monologue, claiming that she only wants to illuminate like the sun (a reference to the poem that she and Prestes read aloud on their first night together), evokes the Christian apostles and love more than it does any political resistance. The shots of her walking toward the truck that will take her to the gas chamber suggest a Via Dolorosa that associates her with the memory of Jesus; as she passes the camera reveals naked women being beaten, a hanging corpse, prisoners marching to work and others arriving at the camp, still in civilian clothes and subjected to the violence of the guards. The fade-ins and fade-outs used to transition from one shot to the next create a sense of the Stations of the Cross. The exaltation depicted in the final close-ups of Olga
in the gas chamber is the divine grace that redeems her while around her the other victims are convulsing in the agonies of death.

Recent Brazilian cinema is full of female characters that assume their subjectivity and are punished, either directly by violence or indirectly through their families or emotional relationships, for transgressing the patriarchal code. The price paid by female characters for trying to break free of the supposedly “natural” patriarchal dominance shows how deeply rooted the rules of gender and its representation are in the culture.\textsuperscript{36} The leading woman of \textit{Olga} pays the price for her original communist sin by having to walk a Via Dolorosa that deprives her of her husband, her child, and finally her life, transforming her into an allegorical warning to anyone who seeks to oppose the supposedly “natural” disappearance of revolutionary activism.

Commentators have criticized the style of the film’s photography, with its abundant close-ups, typical of the \textit{telenovela} genre in which director Jayme Monjardin made his career. The elitist viewpoint that disparages popular genres misses the intertextual reference to \textit{The Passion of Joan of Arc} (Dreyer, France, 1928), a film brimming with intense close-ups of the hero’s features as it seeks to convey the spiritual suffering of the fighting woman who was sacrificed to powerful interests and later canonized. \textit{Olga} was an expensive production that did not practice Dreyer’s ascetic minimalism, but by using partially a similar style of photography it makes the audience identify emotionally with the hero’s suffering while draining her actions of any ideological or political significance. This photographic aesthetic also optimizes the film for television screens and facilitates its marketing in video and DVD formats, further evidence that neoliberalism uses the real—the yearning for social justice—and the imaginary—the image of the struggles for social justice—to construct a symbolic order: norms that maintain the social status quo.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The neoliberal system exercises the ideological totalitarianism that gives hegemony to consumerism and profitability as supreme values, while it manages to subvert and corrupt the state apparatus, government officials, and politicians. The sanctification of Olga
Benário Prestes in this film encourages audiences to idolize a martyr to the revolutionary cause, without clarifying either the ideological principles or the goals behind communist activism. Idolatry does its part to empty the culture of ideological significance while exploiting that ideology economically—an example is the memory of Ché Guevara, commercialized by the cultural industry in an endless stream of iconic images and in the film *The Motorcycle Diaries*. The fact that both that film and *Olga* were released the same year demonstrates the cultural processes by which the hegemony neutralizes the memory and significance of Latin American popular struggles against populism and neocolonialism while it sells—at an excellent profit, and to the very masses seeking social justice—textual artifices that cloud our perception of the mechanics of domination.

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During the 1920s political ferment spread through the ranks of the junior officers of the Brazilian army, a movement known as *tenentismo*. On Prestes's life, see Jeifets, Jeifets, and Huber, 269-271.


33 On the manifestation of philosophical ideas in cinematic esthetics, see Henry Hunger, *Film and Philosophy* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1991), 128-155.


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