

ECCENTRICITIES OF A BLONDE-HAIRED GIRL

(Singularidades de uma Rapariga Loura)

The new film by Manoel de Oliveira

with Ricardo Trêpa, Catarina Wallenstein

Premiered at the Berlin Film Festival 2009

Selected for the forthcoming London Film Festival 2009



Portugal/France/Spain 2009 / 64 minutes / Certificate: tbc

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Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl

Director	Manoel de Oliveira
Screenplay	Manoel de Oliveira From the story by Eça de Queiroz
Director of photography	Sabine Lancelin
Camera Operator	Francisco de Oliveira
Sound	Henri Maikoff
Editor	Manoel de Oliveira Catherine Krassovsky
Assistant Editor	João Salavizo
Costumes	Adelaide Trêpa
Set	Christian Marti José Pedro Penha
Make-up	Ignazi Ruiz
Hair	Pilartxo Diez
Producer	François d'Artemare
Production company	Filmes do Tejo II
Co-producers	Maria João Mayer Luis Miñarro
Co-production companies	Les Films de l'Après-Midi Eddie Saeta

Portugal/France/Spain 2009 / 64 mins / Digital / Colour

Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl

CAST

Macário	Ricardo Trêpa
Luisa Vilaça	Catarina Wallenstein
Uncle Francisco	Diogo Dória
Dona Vilaça	Júlia Buisel
Woman on the train	Leonor Silveira
Friend	Filipe Vargas

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SYNOPSIS

Macário spends an entire train journey to the Algarve talking to a woman he does not know about the trials and tribulations of his love life: straight after starting his first job as a book keeper at his Uncle Francisco's shop in Lisbon he falls madly in love with a young blonde, who lives across the road.

No sooner does he meet her than he straightaway wants to marry her. His uncle, totally opposed to the match, fires him and kicks him out of the house. Macário departs for Cape Verde where he makes his fortune. When he finally wins his uncle's approval to marry his beloved, he discovers the "singularity" of his fiancée's character.

Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl

Manoel de Oliveira

Born in Porto on 11.12.1908, he is the oldest active director in the history of cinema. Beginning his career as a racing driver and athlete, he made his first silent film DOURO, FAINA FLUVIAL in 1931. After a film flop in 1942 he became a port vintner. Returning to film in 1972, he has made a large number of films featuring Marcello Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve and Michel Piccoli amongst others, which have made him one of cinema's most unique and astonishingly youthful proponents.

Filmography

1931	DOURO, FAINA FLUVIAL
1942	ANIKI BÓBÓ
1972	O PASSADO E O PRESENTE
1975	BENILDE OU A VIRGEM MÃE
1979	AMOR DE PERDIÇÃO
1981	FRANCISCA
1982	VISITA OU MEMÓRIAS E CONFISSÕES
1983	NICE – À PROPOS DE JEAN VIGO LISBOA CULTURAL
1985	LE SOULIER DE SATIN
1986	MON CAS
1988	OS CANIBAIS
1990	'NON', ou A VÃ GLÓRIA DE MANDAR
1991	A DIVINA COMÉDIA
1992	O DIA DO DESESPERO
1993	VALE ABRAÃO (Abraham Valley)
1994	A CAIXA
1995	O CONVENTO
1996	PARTY
1997	VIAGEM AO PRINCÍPIO DO MUNDO
1998	INQUIETUDE
1999	LA LETTRE
2000	PALAVRA E UTOPIA JE RENTRE A LA MAISON
2001	PORTO DA MINHA INFÂNCIA
2002	O PRINCÍPIO DA INCERTEZA
2003	UM FILME FALADO
2004	O QUINTO IMPÉRIO – ONTEM COMO HOJE
2005	ESPELHO MÁGICO DO VISÍVEL AO INVISÍVEL
2006	BELLE TOUJOURS O IMPROVÁVEL NÃO É IMPOSSÍVEL
2007	CHACUN SON CINÉMA: Segment "Rencontre unique" CRISTÓVÃO COLOMBO – O ENIGMA
2008	O VITRAL E A SANTA MORTA ROMANCE DE VILA DO CONDE
2009	SINGULARIDADES DE UMA RAPARIGA LOURA

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Interview with Manoel de Oliveira

António Preto – At a certain point in, *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl*, someone says “all the evil in the world comes from the fact we care about one another”...

Manoel de Oliveira – That’s a quote from Fernando Pessoa. Well, we could think about that. But thinking about that or about anything else doesn’t necessarily mean that it would be right or good thinking, because the whole world, all of being is a mystery. That’s to say, a mystery that man really knows nothing about. It’s a question of having faith or not. Faith is essential. Everything relates to everything else. I mean, I’m not philosophising or thinking about all that when I’m making a film. But the fact that I have thought about it, does come through. I think there’s a mysterious side to this film that comes across above all through the curtains and the fan, which shows itself, in that sense, in the unfathomable secrets of life.

A. P. – The film is based on a short story of Eça de Queiroz and, more specifically, to the short story, *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl*?

M. O. – When I was filming *Magic Mirror*, by Agustina Bessa-Luís, there was a party with several extras in it who’d been invited by friends. At the end of filming, I was saying goodbye and a young man of twenty something, maybe thirty, said: “You’ve never done anything by Eça de Queiroz... I only mention it because I’m distantly related to Eça de Queiroz and I think it’s a pity you haven’t”. I told him I’d thought about it and that maybe one day I would adapt something of his. So this film is the result of such a simple act - a question asked by one of Eça’s descendants.

Eça de Queiroz was the Portuguese consul in Paris. He lived there for a long time and got to know about Zola’s realism during the time he was there. Well, he learned about that realism and then he introduced it to Portugal.

Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl is my first film based on the work of a realist writer. It was a very interesting experience. I changed the *découpage* a lot because that came before the *répérage*, which meant I then had to adapt the film with regard to the *répérage*. In any case, the real work of a director is to let things evolve, which either works and things turn out well, or doesn’t and things go badly.

A. P. – Were you aiming for realism in this film?

M. O. – I do in all my films. But I’m having a bit of a hard time because my idea of the realism of cinema is that cinema can’t film the past without going back to that time; you can’t film thought; just as you can’t film dreams. And now I find myself with *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl* where I’m filming the past...

A. P. – But the story has been brought into the present...

M. O. – Yes, it’s been brought into the present. But still, the protagonist is telling someone else what happened, and what we see is what he relates – which is what happened, it’s not the present.

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A. P. – The way the actors are introduced in *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl* – Luis Miguel Cintra, for example is introduced as Luís Miguel Cintra, when he recites a poem by Pessoa – and even the places – like at the Eça de Queiroz Circle, when the employee shows us around the building as if it's a guided tour - there's a quest for truth there.

M. O. – For realism, I mean, the present. That exists there. I went to the Circle once; I wasn't a member so of course they wouldn't let me in. I had to wait for someone to come and show me round because I couldn't be in there alone. I recreated that situation in the film, with Macário. And then I wonder if that won't restrict the artistic potential and limit freedom of the imagination, it's a problem. But –I feel more secure when I do something concrete. Anything concrete, maybe because of my background in documentary.

A. P. – There's another interesting thing about this film, the fact it has no music.

M. O. – No music at all. Films always have music to accompany them and fill them out. There's no music in *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl* except when one of the characters plays the harp. And there it can't be avoided. But there's no background music. There's no music to entertain, or to help sustain the image. It's clean. The film, as you saw, is very restrained.

A. P. – Apart from that, there's the sound of bells punctuating the film.

M. O. – It's the peal of a bell that chimes the hours of a clock with no hands. I loved seeing the clock without hands that tells the time with chimes. Ten o'clock was the time the blonde girl would appear at the window. And, in the end, the bells chime as much in reproach as in any other sense... I don't know.

A. B. – And the inclusion of two excerpts from poems by Alberto Caeiro, why is that? How did you get to Fernando Pessoa?

M. O. – There's a soiree at the house of a notary, who was an intellectual and well-known man of letters. At the soiree, a special recital from that period is played on the harpsichord, and that wouldn't have made sense, given that I'd brought it into the present. That's what made me bring in Pessoa, the fact that I'd updated it. I got one of Pessoa's books and by chance opened it at that place. I thought it was perfect, it seemed as if it was meant to be.

A. P. – How do you see this your latest film, in relation to the rest of your films?

M. O. – There's one extremely important thing that can't help but be there and that is memory. Our memory is fundamental. History is memory, the past is memory. When you come down to it, everything is memory. If we were to lose our memory we wouldn't know who we were, why we are here or what we are here for. We know we are, but we don't know what we are for. I have a great respect for history. All of my films are, in a way, historical. *Douro, Faina Fluvial* is an historical film. So historical that if we went looking for what we see in that film, we wouldn't find anything. It's completely gone. Nevertheless, that film today is extremely valuable because it shows what is no longer there to be seen.

A. P. – The ending of the film is abrupt?

M. O. – Actually, I even softened it a little because in the novel it ends very harshly, in a very cruel way against the girl. And of course, we think, "It's an illness... she's the victim of an illness and should get treatment. But perhaps in those days they didn't know about kleptomania yet". Because in the end she says, "Don't hit me here, don't hurt me" and he says, "Go away, you're

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a thief, a thief and I'm calling the police". I softened the scene a little because I felt it seemed too cruel, considering the girl is suffering from an illness... she's also a victim. But I couldn't portray her as such in the film because that's not how it is in the novel. She isn't seen as a victim: she's seen as a criminal, as a thief.

A. P. – In the adaptation, you introduce a fundamental difference: the fact that the story is told not to a man but to a woman, on a train. Why did you make that change? Why is the story told to a woman and why on a train?

M.O. – The train is a pretext for telling the story. In Eça's book, the story starts when the protagonist is old and goes to Vila Real. In the film the story is told straight after the events have taken place. Well, I remembered that his uncle sent him to the Algarve for a few days to help him get over things. I thought it would be nicer if he spoke to a woman and for one other very specific reason; that there wouldn't be any male commentary, between men, about women. This ploy pre-empts that possibility.

A. P. – This is the first time that Catarina Wallenstein, the female lead in *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl*, takes part in a Manoel de Oliveira film, unlike, for example, Leonor Silveira, who plays the woman Macário tells the story to on the train.

M. O. – I thought it would be interesting if the girl was different. I mean, if she wasn't an actress I'd used before. The fact it's the first time she appears makes the character more authentic. In other words, it's not whoever playing so and so, she's really her. And besides, she hasn't had that much exposure in cinema. It turned out well. That kind of thing doesn't depend on us, it depends on circumstances. Ortega y Gasset said an extraordinary thing : "man is his circumstance". That remark is scary, in a way, because when you say "Man is his circumstance", one might imagine that certain circumstances of birth, upbringing, or events in life could make a man become a murderer. Circumstance is something we are entirely dependent on. And the fact that it's these actors in this film, is the result of circumstance. Catarina Wallenstein's circumstance is that of a performer. Which is different. It's fiction not reality. I mean, the film is real, but the result of the actors' work is fiction. And while the window is real, and the street outside is real, the actors aren't... but the windows are.

There's an interesting point about the windows. George Orwell, the writer who wrote about the future, called the lost epoch, the age of the windows. Our world is all windows. Nowadays, there are whole facades made completely of glass, but then very often there are walls without any windows at all. But it wasn't like that in Orwell's time. Doors and windows are very significant. In *War and Peace*, for example, when the officer is wounded and on the verge of death, he says something marvellous: "Death is a door". So the doors and windows are very important. Windows are what we see through and doors are what we come in and out of. These are things that we find hard to grasp, but they take on a meaning that is distinctly their own.

A. P. – On the train it's said: "What you don't tell your wife, what you don't tell your friend, you tell a stranger". When you make a film is it like telling a story to a stranger like Eça says?

M. O. – Telling a story is a very complicated thing. I believe that everything comes from the word and by the word I also mean, image. Words were used when someone important died. At the funeral that person's deeds would be extolled, and from there those same deeds would be enacted, which led to theatre. Then came the Mystery plays, which were generally religious propaganda performed outside churches. Man likes to relate what happened, it's a way of

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preserving memory. And it's instinctive. Some men have an innate ability to relate things, to paint, to draw, to show... I firmly believe in intuition and that all men have it. That impulse to relate what happened must be something genetic; designed to preserve history. I tell a story to A, A tells B, B tells C and so it goes from generation to generation. That's why there are such very old stories. Sometimes, we might think something is Portuguese, whereas in reality it's come from China, but that origin was lost along the way. In the end, telling a story is preserving the memory of what happened. And so man has a talent for that.

A. P. – And cinema is a powerful tool for fixing memories.

M. O. – Yes, a Mexican director once told me that governments should support cinema... But support shouldn't be given as a favour, but as an obligation because cinema mirrors life. And I really don't see anything else that does. Of course, painting does too, but in a different way. Everything comes down to memory, and without memory there's no thought, there's nothing at all, there's no life. Everything is based on memory and all of this is just a way to file memories. But that impulse might be useless. I mean, you might paint a picture and that painting might never be seen.

Porto, January 24th, 2009