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Representation of women, intersectionality and cinema: an analysis of the Brazilian movie *Aquarius*

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ABSTRACT

Considering intersectional feminism as a reference, the aim of this paper is to examine the discursive powers of the movie *Aquarius* for the representation of women. The emphasis is on Clara who is the protagonist of the plot. The study here seeks to understand how the cinematographic language represents Clara and how it interferes in the construction of this character. The methodology of this qualitative research consisted of both a bibliographic study and a movie analysis. The results show that the representation of the movie's main character does not resort to stereotypes commonly associated with women, nor with elderly women. From the perspective of intersectional feminism, the main character defines her place of speech as an empowered woman who is committed to progressive ideals. Despite being represented this way, the protagonist also succumbs to issues of hierarchy and power in her relationship with her maid, Ladjane. The discriminations and oppressions that permeate the experiences of these women mainly have to do with issues of gender, social class, and race. This shows the permanence of historical problems which intertwine in the representation of women in the movie *Aquarius*.

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Introduction

Different means of social communication, be they more traditional ones, such as radio, television, and cinema, or more current ones, such as the Internet and video games, disseminate references that add to the representation of women and men in various contexts, times, and places. Despite the many approaches used in studies, researchers commonly examine different means of communication to investigate the representation of women in varied realities. The following can be cited as examples of this: the historical study that examined the representations of the German female body in the official magazine of the National Socialist Party in the period of 1934–1944 (Sharon Ringel 2018); the research by Raquel Pastor and Tània Verge (2021), which analyzed the symbolic representation, in editorial cartoons, of women who had recently entered Spanish politics; and the study by Pete Jones (2018), who investigated gender inequalities through the

vocal representation of Diana, the protagonist of the movie *Wonder Woman*; among others. To add to this debate, research into the representation of women in Brazilian cinema—particularly in the film (*Aquarius* 2016) – is relevant and necessary.

When analyzing *Aquarius*, which is a French-Brazilian film, some extra-filmic factors surrounding its production and release were considered. These directly relate to the social and political issues that marked Brazil in 2016. In this regard, it is important to highlight that the first female president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, was removed from her position by an impeachment process. After 5 years as president of Brazil (2011–2016), she was exonerated as a result of the political strategies to remove power from the Workers' Party [*PT*—*Partido dos Trabalhadores*]. Although Rousseff was democratically elected twice in a row, she did not have the political support of the Congress and the Senate to avoid the parliamentary summit and remain as president. Noteworthy is the fact that approximately 90% of political positions in Brazil are held by men. Despite women being 51% of the Brazilian population, Brazilian politics has been historically marked by a female absence.

The film *Aquarius* was nominated for and was awarded the Palme d'Or at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, which took place against the backdrop of the impeachment of President Rousseff. Upon receiving the award in Cannes, the *Aquarius* film crew staged political demonstrations that were broadcast worldwide. This included the political protests staged by the renowned Brazilian actress Sonia Braga and by Kleber Mendonça Filho, the film's director. They highlighted the fact that Clara, the main character in *Aquarius*, resembles former president Dilma Rousseff. According to Milton Prado (2017, 488), "(...) Mendonça Filho's film is one of those rare examples of cinema that richly reflects the time in which it was released."

The purpose of this paper is to examine the discursive powers of *Aquarius* for women representation, with emphasis on the protagonist of the plot. It aims to understand how the cinematographic language represents Clara and interferes in the construction of the character. How is this character presented and constructed in this film? What are the places occupied by women in the plot? What do the social relationships established between the characters in *Aquarius* reveal about the issues of gender, social class, and race? This article seeks answers to these important questions.

Reflecting critically on the axes of subordination that influence the characterization of women in movie narratives from an intersectional perspective is a challenge considered in this paper. High-quality research has previously been dedicated to this theme; however, the arrival of such an approach in the Brazilian context is relatively recent. Therefore, a film analysis incorporating this discussion on intersectional feminism in Brazil can be seen as being innovative.

Theoretical framework

Fascination with cinema is based on already-existing models of allure, an allure that acts on the subjectivity of individuals. This enchantment is also reinforced by previous social formations. In other words, cinema is intrinsic to the construction of the social imaginary. While enchanting, it also builds thoughts and views on societal issues, such as how women are represented in cinema. Since the creation of narrative

cinema, women have been used as an intrinsic part of this audiovisual show (Laura Mulvey 2009; Teresa Lauretis 1987).

Thus, cinema constructs the way women are seen as a spectacle. In this way, they are commonly treated as the object of the male gaze, being considered the “other” (Simone Beauvoir 1949). Furthermore, any object or representation is already a sign of something else, reflecting elements of the social imaginary. The representation of women is, hence, linked to this imaginary and to social expectations directed at them.

The representation of women in cinema starts debates often based on academic research about gender relations. Judith Butler (1990) argues that every representation has a normative function. Thus, the concept of woman does not exist before its representation, since gender is performativity. Therefore, every representation produces the subject that it only intends to represent. The woman is a term in process, a becoming, a construction.

It is important to emphasize that for centuries women have had “no place,” they have been on the fringes of power due to a culture of male domination. However, with gender studies and feminist movements, the world is at a historic moment with women increasingly discussing their role and function in society. These criticisms open more space for new dialogues and social constructions. Feminist epistemology is broadening the boundaries of academic knowledge through a) reflections on history and the generation of political changes, b) the construction of knowledge from women’s perspective, c) the situation in which they are located, and d) their experiences (Natalia Fischetti 2017). With the advancement of feminist theories and ideas, many women seek to also break culturally pre-defined stereotypes.

Mulvey (2009) argues that, for a long time, women were understood and represented as the object of a phallogocentric order. Although the author’s criticism is pertinent, Mulvey (2009) contributes with a white feminist film theory, i.e., one that disregards the racial issues that are so relevant to this debate. Hollywood cinema, in particular, has certainly been influencing the representation of women in different contexts. The challenge is to avoid falling into stigmatization since cinema has the role of opening itself up and being welcoming to the world (Jean-Louis Comolli 2004).

Social and academic debates on intersectional feminism are, moreover, gaining prominence today. Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1988) argues that the concept of intersectionality expands feminism, so it covers issues of identity. Intersectionality seeks to study and understand not only the domination that women suffer, but also other issues that lead to their suffering, such as racial issues, sexual or identity orientation, in addition to nationality and income, among others. These social markers are present in the movies we enjoy during our leisure time.

The representation of women in *Aquarius* and the social relations that the protagonist establishes in the movie is studied in this article which references authors such as Crenshaw (1988), Patricia Hill Collins (1999), Elsa Galerand and Danièle Kergoat (2017). For this discussion, the concept of intersectionality is important. According to Crenshaw (1988), intersectionality relates to the way in which some types of subordination create inequalities that structure the position in which women are located. Among them, class oppression, racism and patriarchy, as well as other discriminatory systems, can be mentioned.

For Kergoat Danièle (2012, 126–127), social relations “form a node which cannot be sequenced at the level of social practices, unless it is seen from the perspective of analytical sociology.” According to Kergoat, the “social relations of class, gender and ‘race’ reproduce themselves and mutually co-produce each other.” Collins (1999) contributes to this debate as she defends the importance of understanding the interdependent phenomena of different forms of oppression, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and nationality, among other social categories. These different perspectives intertwine to structure the experiences of many women around the world.

Among the criticisms towards the concept of intersectionality, the following can be cited: its focus on subjects and identities instead of considering relationships, and the limitations in understanding the asymmetry between the various markers of difference. Some Marxist authors also criticize the emptying of the concept of social class. Yet, this criticism has often been made in the sense of complementing and making the intersectional paradigm more complex (Sonia W. Maluf 2018).

Considering the relevance of intersectionality, it is clear there are several ways of being a woman and that the oppression of women is manifested in each culture in a very particular way. From this perspective, it is important to understand the many articulated inequalities and marginalization involving gender, class, race, sexuality, and generations. Several types of discrimination and violence against women occur daily in Brazil. This movie was selected specifically because it problematizes certain relationships between these diverse types of discrimination.

Method

The methodological pathway defined for this study follows the qualitative approach. As Frances Baum (1995) explains, qualitative studies allow for a deeper understanding of human interactions and social meanings present in the study of particular cases. The choice for qualitative research was due to the need to understand the object being investigated. All discussions are elaborated having that interaction with the object in question as a basis.

The selection of the film to be analyzed followed the criteria that: a) it had to be a fictional feature film produced in Brazil, even if in partnership with another country; b) it had to have a woman (of any age) as the protagonist; c) it had to have international recognition, i.e., a film that was shown at festivals, that received nominations, awards and distinctions; d) it had to be a film made in 2016, when the broader research that encompasses this study was started; e) it had to address issues relevant to contemporary society, with women at the center of the narrative; and f) it had to pass the Bechdel test.¹

Based on the criteria above, Brazilian review websites and online newspapers were surveyed to verify which Brazilian films specialized critics most praised in the period covered by the study (Aquarius 2016). In addition to *Aquarius*, the following Brazilian films were shortlisted: *De Onde Eu Te Vejo* (director: Luiz Villaça), *Mate-Me Por Favor* (Anita Silveira), *Minha Mãe É uma Peça 2* (César Rodrigues), *Mãe Só Há Uma* (Anna Muylaert), *O Silêncio do Céu* (Marco Dutra) and *Elis* (Andrea Horta). Nevertheless, only *Aquarius* met all the pre-established criteria. In addition, its narrative highlights many gender issues.

Aquarius was written and directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho. It was nominated and won awards at renowned international festivals; being, for instance, nominated for Best

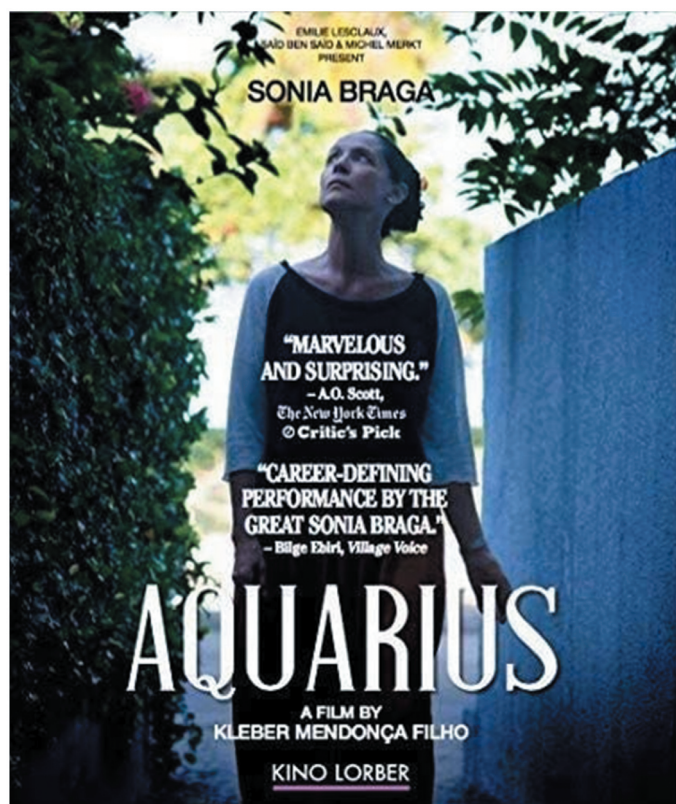


Figure 1. Advertising poster for the movie *Aquarius*. Source: <https://www.amazon.com.br/Aquarius-Sonia-Braga/dp/B075P9VPDH>

Movie award at the Cannes Film Festival and for Best Actress award at the ICS Cannes Awards 2016. The movie was filmed in Recife, capital of the State of Pernambuco, in the northeast of Brazil, and the plot is based on the clashes that Clara has with the construction company planning to demolish the apartment building where she lives. The building is on the main avenue of *Boa Viagem*, a privileged neighborhood in Recife, with Clara being the only resident left in the building, as the construction company managed to buy all the other apartments. Her daily life is presented in this context, including the relationships she establishes with her family, friends, and different professionals. In the banner advertising the movie in Brazil, shown above, it is possible to see Clara with the Aquarius building in the background (Figure 1).

Movie analysis

The methodological approach was guided by the movie analysis methodology, which also includes the specific content analysis technique. For Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie (2007), movie analysis has the function of informing, evaluating, and promoting the analyzed movies. Movie analysis is an instrument to enable a discussion about the contents of the cinematographic language. When analyzing a movie, the researcher

takes the step of trying to comprehend it critically, to understand its construction and objectives. "Analysis generally means dividing the whole to discover the nature, proportion, function, and interrelationships of the parts" (Joseph M. Boggs and Dennis W. Petrie 2008, 7). Thus, cinematographic analysis presupposes the existence of a unified, rationally structured artistic totality. This methodology is consequently relevant for the discussion of concepts, problems, and issues inherent to the selected movie.

Such analysis reveals the typical elements of a movie. For that, two steps are necessary: firstly, to decompose, which means describing the selected movie or section and, secondly, to establish and understand the relationships between these elements (Manuela Penafria 2009). The elements are decomposed in relation to the images, i.e., in a scene you can see the framing, the composition of elements, the angle used, the sound and the dialogues, if any.

In this research, the movie *Aquarius* was analyzed in a technical-discursive way, with the aim of understanding certain linguistic signs embedded in its content. The elements covered in the analysis include frameworks, types of plans, and camera and audio layout, for example. These elements are capable of constructing and conveying a message, impacting viewers, and eliciting new looks and reflections. The purpose of movie analysis is to give meaning to the cinematographic images of the object being studied.

The film analysis was performed according to 3 thematic categories related to questions guiding the research. Thus, the following categories were analyzed: a) the construction of the main character, b) the places occupied by women in the film, and c) the presence of issues pertaining to gender, social class, and race in the social relations developed in *Aquarius*. Taking into consideration these central categories, the next section was structured following an intersectional perspective.

Results and discussion

The focus of this study is to discuss how the protagonist, Clara, is represented in *Aquarius*, scrutinizing the discursive powers of this movie for the representation of women. This fictional feature movie was shot and is set in Recife, Brazil, especially on *Boa Viagem* Avenue. The viewers follow Clara's routine there, with the movie narrative being divided into 3 chapters: "Clara's Hair," "Clara's Love" and "Clara's Cancer."

Who is Clara? building the character

The movie begins with a prologue in 1980, when a younger Clara (here played by Bárbara Colen) is with her brother in a car. Then, the viewer is taken to a birthday party for Aunt Lúcia (played by Thaia Perez). This takes place in a building named "Aquarius". Some scenes reveal Aunt Lúcia's sexual past and that of Clara's too. From that, it is possible to realize that Clara is married, the mother of 3 young children, and that she is recovering from cancer. Next, the plot skips forward to 2015. At this point, Clara is already an older woman, a widow, who continues to live in that same building. She keeps "alive" her memories of the place, especially memories of all she experienced and lived through there. The older Clara is played by Sonia Braga, a Brazilian actress whose physical characteristics, such as her hair and skin color, identify her as being black.

The narrative will subsequently show moments in Clara's life that help trace the character's psychological profile through different discursive powers. The construction of the movie embeds the viewer into Clara's world. This is how fiction works in cinema—it inserts us, makes us question previous thoughts and invites us to look through the eyes of others. Fiction, according to Jacques Rancière (2003), is the work that promotes dissension, changing the modes of presentation of the sensitive, as well as the forms of enunciation, be it pictures, scales, or rhythms. This allows for the building of new relationships between appearance and reality, the unique and the common, the visible and its meaning. According to the author, fiction alters the coordinates of the representable, in the same way as it alters our perception of sensitive events, and our way of relating them to subjects.

Scanning the beginning of the film is a pertinent tool of movie analysis to address how the representation and construction of the protagonist occurs. Thus, the decomposition of the scenes that follow the movie's prologue will be based on the planning method (Aumont and Marie 2007). The section analyzed here begins at 17:33, when a fade-in occurs in which the previous image, which is that of the dance which took place at Aunt Lúcia's house, is overlaid with the image of Clara's current home. This initial part of the movie has the function of presenting Clara's current life to the viewer. The scenes are mainly focused on this character, showing her trajectory from the moment she wakes up till the end of her trip to *Boa Viagem*, including her return home. Despite the focus on this part, other segments of the movie that are related to the analysis are also cited to deepen the content covered in this paper.

The prologue to the movie introduces the plot's main character, giving a sense of what her personality was like. She was a fun young woman interested in music (she introduces a song by the rock band *Queen* to her brother using the stereo in the car they are in), she was daring and subversive (she is shown smoking marijuana with her brother), she is attentive (she takes food from the party to give to neighbors), and has a lot of admiration for Aunt Lúcia, who seems to be her role model. At that time, Clara's health was shaken by cancer. However, she survives, as is emphasized by her husband during a speech made informally to the people present at the party.

Despite these first impressions we get of Clara, we actually get to know the character better after this initial flashback. She is a woman who is the mother of adult children and has become a widow, living on her own. The movie, in a way, subverts stereotypes attributed to women when considering the age of the protagonist, which is approximately 65. The construction of the character continues in the first scene after the prologue, when we see Clara's living room in a general plan.

The house and the music: an extension of the protagonist

For Gilles Deleuze (1983), the frame has the implicit function of recording visual and sound information. Thus, even a static plan of the living room already conveys something about the protagonist, showing her tastes and personality. The frame is understood as a dynamic construction in action, depending entirely on the scene, the image, the characters, and the objects therein.

This plan shows vinyl records, a piano, a speaker, and Clara's record player, making it clear that her passion for music is part of her own history. In addition, there are several

photo frames, pictures, some antique design furniture, a television, etc. Ultimately, Clara's home is an environment that blends the past and the present. There is some nostalgia, but there is also modern comfort, an openness to new influences. The experience of the place is subjective, relational, and historical, with an enormous link between the processes of identity and place construction (Ana Cristina Mendes and Lisa Lau 2019).

Consequently, it can be said that this plan helps in the construction of the protagonist. It is possible to see her way of organizing the space, her tastes and something essential to Clara: her place, her home. Care and comfort are noticeable, i.e., it is possible to observe that someone enjoys and cares about this domestic territory.

The song from the previous plan (Aunt Lúcia's party), "*Toda Menina Baiana*" by Gilberto Gil, continues through to the new general plan that contextualizes Clara's home. This general plan starts with a fade-in, which has the role of introducing the environment by mixing past and present. In addition, the movie's soundtrack is mixed with the narrative, music being an essential part of the diegetic space of this movie.

Indeed, music has various important roles in filmic narratives (Johnny Wingstedt, Sture Brändström, and Jan Berg 2010). It can, for example, evoke certain cultural configurations or time periods. Music can also represent a character or a phenomenon, this is its informative function. It can, moreover, acquire a descriptive role, whereby it informs and describes something, be it a physical configuration, appearance, or movement. In addition, music can provide fluidity and continuity for the narrative.

These roles that music can have are evident in *Aquarius*. The continuity, for example, occurs in the transition between the past and the present, since the music is not interrupted after the fade-in and continues in the following plans after an older Clara comes into the scene. Regarding its descriptive and informative role, the union between Clara's presentation and the music is noticeable: the scene and the music interconnect as the lyrics speak of a lady, of a woman. The tone of the song gradually decreases in its last verses, though it does not cease completely, and Clara appears on screen at this point. It is possible to perceive both her connection with the music, and its use in this plane, which is to introduce her to the scene.

The movie's soundtrack is essential for the characterization of Clara, with the music also being present as a boundary for the space. The apartment is a relevant place for Clara to enjoy her music. Musicality is not only used to remember the past: "[music] takes root, but it helps to face the present and builds a bridge with the future (. . .). Music is amalgamated to her apartment; in a way, it creates symbolic forces to delineate the space" (Prado 2017, 491). This becomes clear in this first scene and in the scene where Clara turns off the record player, interrupting the music. There, the movie makes it noticeable that the music we hear is also what Clara listens to. In other words, the movie's soundtrack follows the character's personal taste, being part of her personification.

Clara: a woman who breaks stereotypes

The viewers have their first contact with Clara as she appears after the apartment is presented. The protagonist gains visibility through a general plan in which she, at 65, appears at home with her hair up and wearing a comfortable, white outfit. She approaches the camera slowly, and the viewer can clearly see that Clara's face has wrinkles and expression lines. Her hair is disheveled and, apparently, she is not wearing

makeup. In traditional cinema, everything is usually aimed at creating a supposedly “perfect” reality, but on this plane the viewer comes into contact with a woman whose imperfections are not masked. Added to this is the fact that the movie stars an elderly woman with Afro-descendant characteristics, shown as she is. This can be understood as a resistance to the hegemonic aesthetic standards.

Makeup, in this movie, is not intended to correct imperfections and rejuvenate the skin marked by time. When affirming beauty without denying age and bodily features, there is a break with the common standard found in commercial movies. As explained by Laura (2009): in cinema, it is the masculine gaze that determines its own fantasy of the feminine figure that is stylized according to the fantasy. Youthfulness and excessive makeup, among other elements, are part of this fantasy elaborated by cinema and based on the values that govern patriarchal societies.

Another important aspect is Clara’s long frizzy hair, which is highlighted in subsequent plans. Other scenes also show her interaction with her hair (for example, when she exercises facing the beach and tosses it from side to side before pinning it up into a bun). Her hair is proof she survived cancer since in the prologue we see her hair short when she is in recovery from chemotherapy, which usually causes hair loss. Several years later, Clara’s natural hair is now long, and it is highlighted in the shots, cuts, and camera movements, being the title of the movie’s first act. The protagonist is shown in the past (1980) and in the present (2015) during this act (“Clara’s Hair”). Thus, hair is a metaphor for a process of strengthening and overcoming.

The camera places us in Clara’s home in a natural manner. Each spectator is a type of guest, watching her walk between spaces. She has many vinyl records, CDs, handicrafts, and items from popular culture displayed on antique furniture. The space carries specific signs, meanings, and personal memories.

This becomes even more explicit with the use of medium-length traveling from when the camera presents Clara in the environment until she leaves the scene. Once Clara is gone, the camera turns and focuses on an old piece of furniture, a dresser. This dresser is part of Aunt Lúcia’s memories during the movie’s prologue, when there is a flashback showing her performing sexual acts on top of it. This image contains traces that, in the words of Gagnebin Jeanne Marie (2012, 27), is what marks a “paradoxical complexity: the absence of a presence and the presence of an absence.”

In the case of Aunt Lúcia’s dresser, which is still prominent in Clara’s home so many years later, speculating on what meanings that piece of furniture might have is important. Female resistance through present sexuality can be part of this emphasis on the object in question. In the prologue, the viewers see Aunt Lúcia on her 70th birthday recalling moments of pleasure that she lived with her then partner on the dresser. It highlights what is usually invisible in standard cinema: women who are fully aware of their sexuality and sensuality.

The emphasis on Aunt Lúcia sexuality is a paradox according to the perspective presented by Mulvey (2009). It is as if the woman’s body on stage had as its primary function to satisfy male scopophilic pleasure, which would be the “sexual pleasure obtained by observing erotic objects” (Mulvey 2009, 178). In other words, there is a voyeurization and objectification of the female characters. However, considering the age group Aunt Lúcia belongs to, there is a loss of the objectified and sexualized

figuration focused only on male voyeurization because the pattern of beauty based on the patriarchal society disregards older women as sources of desire.

The focus on the dresser shows Clara's connection with Aunt Lúcia, and also both elderly women's sexuality. Sexual freedom becomes a point of complicity between them. This ends up being confirmed in another situation in the movie when Clara receives a male escort at home. When dialing to hire the services of a sex worker, she leans on the dresser and, after she talks to him on the phone, the camera follows a trajectory towards the piece of furniture and focuses on it. The symbolism present in this scene is latent: it refers to Clara's attitude of affirming her desire and sexuality, besides also referring to her aunt's attitude, as she too once affirmed this.

Clara is a mature, retired, upper-middle class, beautiful, sensual, and secure woman, who affronts a society still based on a male patriarchal model. Following the principles of this model, a 65-year-old woman should stay at home, agree with her children, and accept the opinion of the majority; additionally, she should behave like a respectable lady. In the movie, the character breaks these stereotypes: Clara lives on her own, makes her own decisions, is opinionated, and her physical limitations do not prevent her from doing anything. She likes to stroll, she swims in the "dangerous" waters of the beach of *Boa Viagem*, listens to different songs, smokes marijuana, loves to see love and pleasure, tries to be a good grandmother, mother, and friend, and remains a woman who respects and values her sexuality.

Furthermore, contrary to the stereotype usually attributed to the elderly, Clara is independent, both emotionally and financially. This is reinforced, for example, when she returns home by herself after going out in the evening to a party. During her daily routine, the character takes part in group activities, has friends and flirts. She also takes care of herself, lives by herself in her own apartment, and owns her routines and desires. Thus, in the analyzed scenes, the whole *mise-en-scène* is constructed to describe Clara. It characterizes her and gives her subjectivity, strength, and identity.

Places occupied by the women in the plot: asymmetries and violence

Following the first scenes of the movie, Clara talks to Ladjane (played by Zoraide Coletto). The dialogue takes place with camera traveling being used to reach the door of the house where Ladjane is standing. The camera shows Clara's gaze on the black woman who works as a maid in her house. Clara's relationship with Ladjane, in the movie, presents paradoxes and intersectionality. On one hand, Clara seems to be a friend of Ladjane's, with whom she establishes a relationship of closeness and affection; on the other hand, the social hierarchy that separates them is evident.

Clara talks to Ladjane from a distance, demarcating a privileged place, which is Clara's own. In contrast, Ladjane is often restricted to the kitchen, a space that relates to servitude. This type of social relationship is quite common in Brazil. Stephanie Dennison (2018) states that the positioning of domestic workers in the kitchen allows them to be identified as an inexhaustible source of work. So, in one way, the maid is included in the family's daily life; in another way, she is erased, excluded from it. "(...) Mendonça Filho also reflects on the 'normalization' of this practice of truncating or erasing" (Dennison 2018, 335).

According to Pierre Bourdieu (2002), “knowing your place” is a type of symbolic violence typical of the domination of one class over the other. For the author, symbolic violence occurs when there is a lack or imbalance of capital within an environment (a field) caused by certain agents (the subjects). Thus, power relations in a given space are defined through the accumulation of certain capital (s). When violence is committed, it occurs in complicity between those who are suffering and those who practice it; in certain cases, without those involved being fully aware of what they are experiencing.

In the case of the relationship between Clara and Ladjane, both are Afro-descendants, but the former has greater economic and cultural capital in comparison to the latter, with their relationship being permeated by symbolic violence. This highlights some of the paradoxes of intersectionality. Feminist authors, such as Collins (1999) and Bell Hooks (1989, 1992), draw attention to the fact that black women occupy the lowest positions of the social hierarchy. In this complex relationship, Ladjane occupies a lower social position than Clara, despite both being identified as black women. The hierarchy between the two is typical of the relationship between employer and employee, so Ladjane would be below Clara in the hierarchy. This is evident for several reasons. The narrative structure highlights that Clara has knowledge of music, that she is a journalist, and a writer. In other words, throughout her life, she accumulates a *habitus*² that generates greater value in what concerns the space that she and Ladjane share.

Another prominent issue is the fact that Clara’s residence, an apartment in an upscale neighborhood in Recife, also highlights her accumulation of wealth in relation to Ladjane. This becomes conspicuous in several scenes. In one of them, Clara explains to a young woman who visits her that this region of the city has two beaches remarkably close by. She comments that a sewage duct separates Pina (the rich, valued, and well-structured area of the coast) from Brasília Teimosa (the poor, popular and peripheral area). Clara, of course, lives in front of Pina, while Ladjane lives in Brasília Teimosa. For Stephanie (2018), this reinforces the disparity between the quality of life of the rich and that of the poor who live in that city.

The hierarchy in their relationship can also be observed in the scene in which Clara kisses Ladjane on the cheek and gives her a cup to take to the kitchen. The scene shows an ambiguous kind of rapport as it involves both subordination and affection. Dennison (2018) explains that for demonstrations of intimacy to occur between the two, they must be initiated by Clara, who is situated higher up the social hierarchy.

Even Clara’s visit to Ladjane’s house, when she takes her nephew’s new girlfriend on a sightseeing tour, can be seen as a false progressive trend. According to Dennison (2018), this gesture might show how Clara wants to impress the visitor from Rio de Janeiro by offering her a certain “alternative tourism,” not unlike the tours to slums, which have become popular in some Brazilian cities. According to Mauríci Bragança, Tatiana Oliveira Siciliano, and Licia Marta da Silva Pinto (2019), this is related to the colonality still present in Brazilian culture. Clara comes from a wealthy family, she is an intellectual who is part of a group of Brazilian women who are emancipated, are politically enlightened, and have a progressive discourse. However, aiming to demarcate social class differences, many women end up contributing to the permanence of patriarchal, sexist, classist, and racist social practices.

Intersectionality in the representation of women

Due to her habitus, Clara promotes certain symbolic violence towards Ladjane without realizing it. As much as she is attentive to her maid, the latter is still positioned in an unfeasible, inferior place. Bragança, Siciliano, and da Silva Pinto (2019) mention that this is part of Latin America's colonial slavery heritage, and that it also coexists with modern aspirations—such as feminism—within the inequality existent in Brazil. By focusing on Clara while placing Ladjane in the background, the movie narrative reproduces behaviors that go in the opposite direction of intersectional feminism.

For Crenshaw (1988), racism is distinct from patriarchy, which in turn is different from class oppression, with oppression having different routes and axes. However, such systems overlap and intersect, creating intersections that involve two, three or four axes. Racialized women are often positioned in a space where prejudice against race, class, and gender meet. So, the oppression that they suffer will be intensified by all these axes. It can be concluded, therefore, that the type of oppression suffered by Clara is different from the one suffered by Ladjane. The invisibility of the latter means she always ends up being in the background, as part of the house or the house's servitude, potentiating class oppression.

This issue can be seen in one of the dialogues between Clara and Ladjane:

- Ladjane! LADJANE!
- Yes?
- Hi. What are we having for lunch?
- I'll make chicken.
- Oh, ok! What about some vegetables?
- Sure, I'll make some.

If the space occupied by Ladjane had yet to make her role evident, the dialogue makes it clear: the employer is giving instructions to the maid about what to make for lunch. Although the movie distances itself from some hegemonic standards of cinema, it also opens loopholes for the perpetuation of class divides. It is noticeable that Clara is a resident of an upscale area of Recife. Her clothes, her apartment, her way of expressing herself and everything around her, all refer to a status quo. In one dialogue, a lifeguard at the beach emphasizes this, explaining to her: "It's because you are important." Despite Clara being an Afro-descendant woman, she has status and social recognition.

This can also be seen in the employer/employee relationship, reinforcing the domination of one class over the other. According to Galerand and Kergoat (2017), it is the relation to work, and not work itself, that holds a subversive, or even liberating, potential for women. In this sense, it is necessary to go back to a feminist definition of work by calling into question the separation between professional and domestic work. The authors argue that the feminist movement needs to put domestic work back at the center of its reflection about both work and the emancipation of women.

The separation related to issues of race, gender and class, and the privileges of one over the other lead to inattention within the representation of gender, when it occurs in reference to the points where these politically constructed categories intersect (Lola

Young 2006). These social categories need to be taken into consideration when elaborating feminist criticisms to cinema. The analysis of these aspects is essential.

In the case of *Aquarius*, although Clara is a female character developed and considered within specificities that break the pattern of the male gaze in traditional cinema; at the same time, class oppressions are perpetuated in the movie. An example is how Clara makes Ladjane, who belongs to a disadvantaged social class, invisible (Young 2006). As mentioned, this social structure is rooted in the coloniality that persists in unequal countries like Brazil. The non-emancipated woman, in the decolonized space, is an appropriate focal point for critics of class analysis. Separated from the center of feminism, the figure of the lower-class woman is singular and lonely (Gayatri Spivak 1994).

Despite this, Clara is also a victim of systems of oppression hierarchized by the axes of power. The situations she experiences "(...) expose the lifeworld vulnerability of individuals in the face of capitalism and its possible destructive force" (Mendes and Lau 2019, 3). Clara suffers discrimination because she is a mature, older, dark-skinned person, and because she is a woman.

This is confirmed when she confronts the movie's antagonist, Diego, a young man who represents the macho business elite. The conflict between them arises when Clara complains about him authorizing a party in the building without first letting her know; with her also speaking up about him burning a mattress, which was used at the party, in the parking lot of the building. During the discussion, Diego resorts to gender stereotypes to subdue Clara. He casts her as a fragile and helpless woman, dependent on others and warns her: "the building is empty. Me, the construction company, everyone is worried about someone your age living here. I would not let my grandmother, or my mother live alone in such a place, in an empty building in Brazil."

Clara confronts him and responds accordingly, but Diego carries on using strategies to disqualify, intimidate and insult her: "I can see that you certainly came from a [poor] family that struggled a lot to get to where you got to, didn't you, Clara? A darker skinned family, who worked really hard to have what they have." According to Collins (1999), stereotyping not only reflects or represents reality, but works to mask objective social relations, making racism seem natural. This is clear in Diego's provocation.

At the end of the movie, Clara confronts the owners of the construction company with the following statement: "I survived cancer, over 30 years ago, you know? And nowadays I have decided on something: I'd rather cause cancer than have it." In the following scenes, she takes actions that subvert the oppression of gender, race, and age. Such actions also invite the viewers to empower themselves when there is a high-quality filmic plot twist. Individuals with transformed consciousness can promote insurgent writing and speech, reaching and transforming people in diverse ways (Collins 1999).

Clara's empowered attitude is authentic and determined. The representation of this woman is vastly different from what was found by Tingting Hu (2020), 753) when analyzing the way policewomen are portrayed in the universally recognized and award-winning Hong Kong movie *Breaking News*. The author concludes that the representation of these women "is presented as a cultural strategy that shows a false impression of female empowerment in which the female power is still dominated by males." In this sense, the movie *Aquarius* breaks with the representation and constitution of women's power as if it were just a strategy that, according to Hu (2020), 763), "seemingly, shows the

endorsement of female empowerment for the purpose of re-enhancing the patriarchal order without being criticized.”

Final considerations

Analyzing cinema is a way of understanding the culture and social relations present in the contemporary world because it reveals itself as a means of expressing the different content and meanings interwoven into everyday life. From this perspective, the discursive powers of the movie *Aquarius* for women representation are examined, with emphasis on the protagonist. To analyze this character, it was necessary to understand the construction of meanings of gender, social class, and race present in the movie narrative, considering the relationships between them, and the *mise-en-scène* used for this.

This character goes through subjective processes, showing her place of speech and empowerment as a woman. Clara represents an old woman, but it is a representation that does not resort to certain social stereotypes commonly associated with old age. However, issues of hierarchy and power are still present when it comes to Clara’s employer/employee relationship with Ladjane. This representation of a black and poor woman, in Ladjane, also reveals some of the historical patterns of a patriarchal culture, in terms of discrimination and oppression, which mainly affect the lower social classes.

This situation highlights the complexity of intersectional approaches. The current social and political context of loss of rights and decline of democracy aggravates the vulnerability and extreme poverty of many women in Brazil, in the rest of Latin America, and other regions of the world. Therefore, understanding how gender, race and class are articulated is “essential for the elaboration of social policies aimed at those who are the most exploited: black and poor women” (Maluf 2018, 1).

To overcome inequality and expand equality, it is essential to comprehend the intersections between different social categories. Understanding them in an articulated way is indispensable for the resistance and emancipatory struggle of women in oppressive contexts, such as the Brazilian and the other Latin American ones. The discussion generated by the movie *Aquarius* goes beyond Brazil’s borders, extending to power systems and various kinds of oppressions experienced by other women around the world.

By understanding the nuances proposed by the cinematographic narrative regarding women in the situations addressed in the analysis developed, the present study contributes to the establishment of reflections on this form of art that is much appreciated as a leisure activity. In relation to this, the research emphasizes the importance of analyzing cinematographic works as sources of discussions on the role and on the representation of women within each society. Some themes, however, can still be submitted to further analysis to deepen the knowledge systematized herein. Clara’s motherhood, for example, is a subject that another movie analysis could discuss.

In conclusion, the analysis of movies that problematize singular issues of local origin can help combat contemporary social challenges which still prevail in various parts of the world. Joice Berth (2019) clarifies that only through a profound understanding of our social place and of the role of power (while forming a social hierarchy and the relationships that are built through it) can we think about social, economic, political, cognitive, and psychic strategies to disrupt and restructure society.

Notes

1. The Bechdel test can be used to indicate gender bias, so it was adopted as one of the categories for this research. This test for films originally appeared in the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out for*, by Alison Bechdel. To be “approved,” the film must fulfill the following requirements: a) it must have at least two women in the plot, and they must have names; b) they must necessarily talk to each other, and c) they must talk about any subject other than about a man.
2. Bourdieu (2002) created the notion of *habitus* as the knowledge and conduct acquired from the accumulation of capital, i.e., *habitus* is the way in which each subject manifests him/herself in a certain field.

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