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Dennis West

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## A CRITIQUE OF BRUNO BARRETO'S FILM *DONA FLOR E SEUS DOIS MARIDOS*

Dennis West

Dona Flor's roguish first husband, the attractive, blond Vadinho (José Wilker), expired unexpectedly on Carnival Sunday, 1943, while madly cavorting with a samba group in the streets of Bahia. As carnival celebrations continue, we attend Vadinho's wake where the assembled mourners eulogize and criticize the deceased rakehell-gambler-irresponsible spouse. The young, enterprising widow continues to offer her cooking classes, but longs for a man's touch, even while stirring a dish on the stove. She marries a forty-two-year-old pharmacist (Mauro Mendonça)—as orderly, reassuring, and unexciting as the bottled remedies on his shelves. However, this union fails to quench her sexual yearning, and so she conjures up her dead spouse (unseen by the other characters); his visits become love feasts. The film's final, lengthy, high-angle long shot—Flor leaving church and Sunday-strolling with her properly dressed provider-husband on one arm, her resurrected, naked, and "invisible" lover on the other—stamps a "God's-eye" approval on the final, happy solution to her problem.

Screenwriter and director Bruno Barreto has respectfully and lovingly adapted Jorge Amado's spicy novel of life in Bahia; the result is a well-made film which has already smashed all Brazilian box-office records and seems destined for international commercial success. TV and film star Sonia Braga creates a sensual Dona Flor by understating the protagonist's shifting moods while leaving no doubt about her churning sexual undercurrents. Photography and cinematic techniques prove competent through their very unobtrusiveness; exceptional moments are imaginatively conceived, as in the case of the montage of images which compresses Amado's marinated crab recipe onto the screen as Flor's voice-over links her dual concerns: the sexual and the culinary. Musical motifs effectively punctuate the narrative's emotional highlights and Chico Buarque de Hollanda's theme song is utterly hummable. In *Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos*,<sup>1</sup> the carefully applied formulas of commercial filmmaking have yielded a most bankable product.

*Dona Flor's* bankability rests on its being so handsomely made and, more importantly, so "safe;" the serious consideration of contemporary social, political, or economic questions never intrudes in the fantasy world the film creates. This world is removed in time and space. The war stays so

far away from the Bahia of 1943 that the only foreign note ever sounded is the number "Somebody Loves Me" sung for patrons of a casino. In Duarte's classic *O Pagador de Promessas* (1962), Bahia's colonial architecture sets a propitious backdrop for conflict by establishing a visual link between the colonial heritage and present-day problems; but in *Dona Flor* the camera's appreciation of the city's bygone beauty—bright, white and pastel buildings and traffickless cobblestone streets—merely evokes a comfortable backwater of the past. The nostalgic appeal of such a setting lifts the viewer's mind from the troubles of the present and blunts his/her critical consciousness; as no contemporary issues need arise, one may relax and enjoy the movie.

The central concern of the film is slight: Flor's love life. Since Barreto focuses on a single individual's peculiar psychological condition, the film implicates no group or class and, therefore, tacitly endorses the socioeconomic status quo. Though Flor's situation, that of a middle-class widow trying to support herself, is an interesting one, we need more background to properly fit it into the social context. Fewer sequences of the protagonist caressing herself and more exploration of her work routine and peer relationships would deepen her characterization. Portrayal of her two husbands proves too cute and caricatured to recall real-life people, and so the facile red-hot lover—faithful-provider juxtaposition remains moviesque. A film seriously interested in women demands varied women's roles, but unfortunately Barreto discounts two suggestive characters present in the original novel; a progressive, critical-minded *gringa* turned Brazilian and a budding singer fighting to establish her career.

In place of believable and well-developed characters and socially significant issues, *Dona Flor* offers us entertaining, titillating, and ultimately "harmless" images. A parade of Bahian types and local color: carnival festivities, *candomblé* rites, a serenade in the street, the multifarious denizens of cathouses and gambling dens, including an adroit midget who fondles whores with his feet. Mildly scandalous (but not truly subversive) moments provoke titters: Vadinho bares his backside to a bevy of church-going women, nuns flit across a street to avoid the sounds of lovemaking erupting from a house, a priest is conned into granting a loan knowing that the money will be gambled away, Vadinho seated in his front window *coçando saco*. The film allows no honest, straightforward nudity. The camera gliding in and out of windows, the feminine body reflected in mirrors, a red-light glow during sex scenes, and shots of fleeting or partial frontal nudity all create a voyeuristic, skin-deep treatment of sex aimed at the titillation of repressed audiences. Smooth camerawork and invisible editing funnel the spectator's attention toward unthinking identification with the stars on the screen rather than any critical consideration of the film's ideological implications.

*Dona Flor* flaunts a benign tokenism in relation to urgent social and economic realities. The poverty and marginality molding the existence of

many Bahians is only glimpsed during Flor's visit to the black prostitute Dionisia. The film so avoids this character and her marginal world that one never understands how Dionisia and Flor cemented their *comadre* relationship. *Candomblé* sequences sparkle with colorful costumes, but we lack any consideration of the social import of Afro-Brazilian religion as well as a clear-cut or realistic exploration of its role in Vadinho's supernatural resurrection.

Since Vadinho's appearances remain unexplained and wholly fantastic, the lovers' relationship is most characterized by its essential unreality. Given the impossibility of the situation, the audience remains safely distanced from any need for critical or serious reflection on real-life themes. Viewers can remain superior, aloof and enjoy partaking in the visible/invisible joke—the way U. S. television audiences watched the *Topper* series years ago.

Like many "safe" films, *Dona Flor's* wish-fulfillment strategy manipulates viewers to project their dreams and desires onto the star images. Flor's relations with two husbands go beyond a *buen amor—loco amor* dichotomy to show that one can indeed have her cake and eat it too. Male spectators enjoy the entertaining fantasy of leading a rascal's life and afterlife à la Vadinho or the economic dream of breaking the bank at the gaming tables.

Inasmuch as *Dona Flor's* spectacular earnings add up to a producer's dream come true, the movie's influence on the future course of the lethargic Brazilian film industry remains crucial. The Spanish commercial cinema of the post-Franco era is consistently demonstrating that aesthetic quality, serious thematic concerns, and bankability may be successfully combined. This lesson needs to find a greater echo in Brazil. We hope that the very considerable talents glimpsed in *Dona Flor* will soon reappear in less "safe" but more substantial projects.

#### NOTAS

1. Produced by Luiz Carlos Barreto; U. S. distribution by New Yorker Films, 16 W. 61st St., New York, New York 10023.