

SOAP: critical review

By Tiago Mesquita

Tamar Guimarães' *SOAP* (2020-2023) sets off from a series of defeats. In Brazil, there was the victory of a denialist president with longings for the military dictatorship in an international moment of deepening social inequality during the Covid-19 pandemic. Disoriented, Guimarães' characters try to understand what happened, what to do and what has changed in the social body; how to remake the connections between different groups and rebuild new forms of communication. Above all, the film inquires how to infiltrate the social networks of those that supported the other side.

These debates don't happen in the open air. They take place during a period of isolation and misencounter. Filming began in 2020, the beginning of lockdown. For this reason, the film is more than an essay on different political or social positions, in different languages and national experiences. It is also a trauma narrative, where not only relations with social struggles need to be remade, but ways of living together and affects between individuals as well.

In the first episodes, daily life, filmed with attention and constraint by Tamar, is divided into partial views of apartment windows, and visions of the other are limited to rooms framed far away. This compartmentalization of the social field paradoxically amplifies discourses. In episode 5, for example, Australian historian Dirk Moses sees his consistent critique of nazism as a phenomenon of colonial violence becoming distorted by German holocaust deniers.

Seeking to remedy this collective unraveling, characters decide to create videos, elaborated by committee, that would enter into content spheres consumed by the far right and contaminate them, betting on a "viral" propagation that echoes Coronavirus itself. They think up a screenplay, a soap opera, the ideal vehicle to undermine reactionary discourse. The piece would simulate Christian conversion videos, in the words of the character Roseane: "a spiritual zone that guides youth from a dark place to the light".

It becomes necessary to understand the limits of each character's understanding of the situation, as debates around the soap opera become heated. "We have to discover what is being staged", says Camila Motta's character in the sixth episode. The "death of the white left" is announced, in the second episode, for a character to later announce: "I am also the white left". People's sense of personal identity and belonging to a common effort form constant tensions, and much of the work's drama springs from this confrontation between the public sphere and the dimension of personal convictions.

As the debate around the soap opera advances, we see intellectuals, artists and activists replicate solipsistic debates typical of politics after social networks. These disagreements, including technological problems, are staged, as well as the forms of coexistence that are rebuilt and resignified throughout the film. Tamar Guimarães transforms the production effort, the conviviality and the controversies surrounding it into the subject of another program: *SOAP*.

In addition to juxtaposing different perspectives, the project also combines different image composition structures. The argumentative structure of the film-essay and modern cinema's compositional rigor together with the dramaturgy of Brazilian soap operas. Such ways of making images are not always harmoniously related. For this reason, scenes are full of inequalities, disagreements, and forms that coexist tensely. The most ironic symbol of these mismatches is Camila Mota's character attempting to understand Brazil, in the country, reading by Gilberto Freyre, 's *Casa Grande e Senzala* in German.

In the last episodes, as well as in the Synopsis, we realize that the soap opera is yet to be finished, while the characters move on to remake their lives and interpersonal relationships. Reinforcing contradictions, there are those who need to rebuild their professional life despite their convictions, others who find other purposes in their actions, people become closer, affection happens. Trauma, despite the simple forms of companionship, stubbornness, friendship and love that emerge in the last episodes, does not heal. It remains open, raw.