

Filmes do Tejo II, Eddie Saeta, Les Films de l'Après-Midi & Mostra Internacional de Cinema present

Ricardo Trêpa

Pilar López de Ayala



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FESTIVAL DE CANNES

# the strange case<sub>of</sub> Angelica

a film by  
**Manoel de  
Oliveira**



# synopsis

Isaac is a young photographer living in a boarding house in Régua. In the middle of the night, he receives an urgent call from a wealthy family to come and take the last photograph of their daughter, Angelica, who died just a few days after her wedding.

Arriving at the house of mourning, Isaac gets his first glimpse of Angelica and is overwhelmed by her beauty. As soon as he looks at her through the lens of his camera, the young woman appears to come back to life just for him. Isaac instantly falls in love with her.

From that moment on, Angelica will haunt him night and day, until exhaustion.

*Une nuit, Isaac, jeune photographe et locataire de la pension de Dona Rosa à Régua, est appelé d'urgence par une riche famille afin de faire le dernier portrait de leur fille Angélica, une jeune femme morte juste après son mariage.*

*Dans la maison en deuil, Isaac découvre Angélica et reste sidéré par sa beauté. Lorsqu'il porte à son œil l'objectif de son appareil photo, la jeune femme semble reprendre vie, pour lui seul. Isaac tombe instantanément amoureux d'elle.*

*Dès lors, Angélica le hantera nuit et jour, jusqu'à l'épuisement.*



*A conversation with Manoel de Oliveira - Lisbon, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2010.*

# the metaphysics of angels

**António Preto** The film stems from an old project of yours dating back to 1952. Is this the first time you've recycled something from so long ago? What led you to make the film after 60 years?

**Manoel de Oliveira** I have a lot of projects I never went ahead with and never went back to. But years later, in the case of *Angelica*, I authorised the release of a decoupage in France, which used photos and drawings I provided. At the time I was sure I'd never do anything with the project. I had several reservations about the idea of filming a dream, given that the camera films neither dreams nor thoughts. Somebody says they had a dream or a thought but we can't be sure about what they say. It becomes distorted or it could even be a lie. We have no guarantee that a person has dreamt what they say they have or thought what they say they thought. Thoughts and dreams are entirely subjective and the camera has no way of verifying them. That's why I say theatre is more

honest than cinema. Because it's realistic, the film *Eccentricities of a blond-haired girl* is, on that level, much less problematic.

**A.P.** But there are differences between the original 1952 screenplay and the film you've just made. In this film, we could almost say you've adapted yourself.

**M.O.** I adapted the project to present circumstances. The project was conceived after the Second World War in which, if I'm not mistaken, six million Jews died. It was a time when the Jews fled to Spain and Portugal, and from there they took planes to America. Isaac, the protagonist of my film was one of those Jews fleeing the Nazi persecutions who had settled in Portugal as a photographer. But the war was a long time ago, last century. And the vineyards in the Douro are different and the bridges and the houses are different. Some things are the same, but others have changed.

**A.P.** But in the film, that past and the present coexist. The characters wear '50s style clothes and the social ambiance takes us back to that period too. But the setting clearly indicates we're in another era, the present.

**M.O.** No. All those elements are current. I didn't try to recreate the '50s. There's evolution. Despite the fact the setting is provincial, old-fashioned even, I evoke the present. What led me to adapt the original project is that persecution today is of a different nature. The world's problems are different. There's a chaotic tension underlying things; economic problems and many more difficulties. In an earlier version of the film there was a dialogue that debated the reasons which led to the persecution of the Jews, from ancient Egypt to today. But then I thought it would be more relevant to reflect on other matters. I brought the original screenplay up to date and switched from reflection on a political level to deduction. What must Isaac, a Jew, have gone through before and what is he going through now? His visions and dreams of Angelica are, as he says himself, something that relieves the pressure of persecution. That's an indication that Angelica provides a sort of release from his demons.

**A.P.** The part where he's about to take the photograph of the dead girl and sees a spirit-like image detach itself from the corpse has an autobiographical feel to it. Is that something you experienced, personally?

**M.O.** I'm using something that happened to me in completely different circumstances, and that inspired me to think of a persecuted photographer who sees in Angelica a form of release; in the way she smiles at him and in the way he sees her spirit detach itself from her body. In the first version, there's still a doubt because the photograph Isaac takes of Angelica when she smiles, is spoiled before he can develop it. In this new, more realistic, version, the photographs neither confirm nor refute Angelica's smile. But, as Isaac confesses, it's the recollection of the smile that makes him happy and frees him of all his traumas. Interestingly, the decorated ceiling in Angelica's house with the dove (representing the Holy Spirit), is a Jewish ceiling in the shape of a star. And there's the dialogue with the nun, who in the first version was just a very religious woman, but not a nun. Those two elements serve to show that the relationship between Catholics and Jews was not antagonistic, not exclusively argumentative but one of comprehension and exchange.

**A.P.** By establishing, somewhat insistently, a relationship between Isaac and olive trees – like when you frame him in front of an olive tree, or when he falls in the olive grove and some children appear singing a folk song about olive trees –, are you not thinking about your own possible Jewish origins and, to some extent, reinforcing your identification with the character?

**M.O.** Well, the business with the olive trees is very important... I'm Oliveira (olive tree).... My paternal grandmother was very religious and my grandfather always gave his children two of his surnames instead of one and their mother's maiden name, which was from a different line from his. Two of his children became priests because my grandmother was so religious. There wasn't a trace of Judaism on that side. Someone told me

that after the French revolution the Jews were forced to adopt new family names: Isaac, son of..., Israel, son of... something like that. And among the names they chose were the names of trees: Oliveira, Pereira (pear tree) ... and so on. So it's a possibility, but the truth is I've never come across any real evidence of Jewishness in my family. So it's not very likely.

**A.P.** In a way, *Angelica* is also a tribute to the workers of the Douro. The old ways of working the vineyards, which still exists today alongside modern mechanical methods, is something you evoke in this film. And what's the "essence" of the film? Isn't it, in fact, transformation?

**M.O.** The essence is Isaac's destiny, his fate. It's all about Isaac, the photographer, right from the start of the film. He's a cultured, spiritual man, which perhaps explains his propensity for the metaphysical and so justifies the end. There's only one very big compromise that I'm aware of: when Isaac dies, his spirit lives on. That ending is the riskiest aspect of the film. If he died, the film would end. But he survives. His soul meets up with Angelica's spirit. At the same time, his fate could mean that Man's only true release is through his own death, like you see in Dreyer's *Gertrud*. The search for absolute love that can only be found in death itself. Then there's the gravediggers' hostility. Their song is a stark contrast to all the pessimism, and that lightens a certain negativity that could otherwise surface through the film and especially at the end. Though of course, some strange things are strange simply because we can't get past them. St. Paul said that if Christ hadn't resurrected, all our faith would have been in vain. So we're always left with the uncertainty: "to be or not to be"...

**A.P.** Isaac is a photographer, an artist. He works a lot, as the landlady at the boarding house never tires of saying. He lives on the margins of a cohesive society.

**M.O.** His work is about antagonism. The very fact that Angelica smiles at him is an act of extreme antagonism. And that's what disturbs him - life's antagonism. The antagonism represented by the gravediggers despite their merry singing.

**A.P.** Isn't *Angelica* as well a film about the clash between artistic creativity and resistance or, if you like, the antagonism between the social side of things and the work of creating.

**M.O.** Yes, it is a work of resistance. All work is resistance. Nature is devious. She gave Man hunger to make him work, to make him survive and work. Hunger is the law of Man. If you have ten men and put two hundred bread rolls beside them they'll be fine. But if you put just one roll, they'll kill each other. Hunger is a phenomenal power.

**A.P.** This film leads once again to the controversy of "frustrated loves" that has figured in all your films.

**M.O.** Love is abstract and it's absolute. True passion between two beings is so violent that it doesn't even admit children. They would be disruptive to absolute love. Absolute love craves

androgyny, it's the anxiety of two beings to become just one. It's an impossible desire, but it's real. Here, everything is violent. This is a terrifically violent film and much more violent than my films about war, which reveal a more or less calculated violence. This is real, it kills. It comes from the individual, the person. The act of filming is... I mean, of photographing, is in itself violent.

I once said that a director is like a murderer. And just as a murderer can't avoid killing, the director can't avoid the act of filming. It's its own attraction and it's fatal because it has nothing to do with life. Life is something else.

**A.P.** But when you film life aren't you really filming death. Isn't it death that you're continually filming?

**M.O.** Well, I presume to know a bit about life, but I know nothing about death. I've never tried it, no one has. So it's a puzzle: we don't know anything.

**A.P.** What is cinema for you today?

**M.O.** It's the same as it was for Lumière, for Méliès and Max Linder. There you have realism, the fantastic and the comic. There's nothing more to add to that, absolutely nothing.

**A.P.** And the tragic?

**M.O.** The tragic is in realism. Reality is tragic: Man dies. That's Man's limitation: in the end he's just a photograph. What has truly evolved is the technical side of things. But the technical side belongs to science and art belongs to expression. The technical side isn't expression, it can help it but it's something else. The essential is in the realism, in the fantastic and in the comic.

**A.P.** *Angelica* is also a film about progress and technology, about technical changes. There's a shot of a tractor shifting earth. The land is eternal: it's there, before and after the technology, like the wine.

**M.O.** The land doesn't change. Art doesn't change. Because Man's psychology doesn't change either. It learns and it prepares itself but it doesn't change. Man is invigorated by hope.

**A.P.** The land, like art, doesn't change and Isaac, being an artist, is someone who has no land, someone who doesn't work on the land.

**M.O.** The Jew has no land and nor does the artist. But he's rooted in his instincts, in his gift as a creator, just like the painter is or any other artist. I believe in fate, in the metaphysics of angels, let's say.

Rembrandt painted throughout his whole life, he produced a lot of self-portraits. The only thing that stayed the same was the look in his eyes. There was a Dutch director who filmed all of Rembrandt's self-portraits in close-up [Bert Haanstra], which confirmed that the eyes always stay the same, inalterable. The face changes, until it becomes old. In the last of those paintings he said: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity". The awards and the applause, it's all vanity.





## Crew

*Director & screenwriter* Manoel de Oliveira

*Photography* Sabine Lancelin

*Sound* Henri Maikoff

*Editing* Valérie Loiseleux

*Set* Christian Marti, José Pedro Penha

*Costumes* Adelaide Trêpa

*Produced by* François d'Artemare,

Maria João Mayer, Luís Miñarro,

Renata de Almeida & Leon Cakoff

*A co-production* Filmes do Tejo II, Eddie Saeta,

Les Films de l'Après-Midi

& Mostra Internacional de Cinema

## Cast

*Isaac* Ricardo Trêpa

*Angelica* Pilar López de Ayala

*Mother* Leonor Silveira

*Engineer* Luís Miguel Cintra

*Clementina* Ana Maria Magalhães

*Servant* Isabel Ruth

**Portugal / Spain / France / Brazil**

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**1.66 - Dolby SRD**

### PYRAMIDE INTERNATIONAL

CANNES OFFICE Riviera Stand F6

T. 33(0) 4 92 99 32 01

yoann@pyramidefilms.com

lgarzon@pyramidefilms.com

PARIS OFFICE

5, rue du Chevalier de Saint George

75008 Paris

T. 33(0) 1 42 96 02 20 • F. 33(0) 1 40 20 05 51

### PRESS IN CANNES

ALIBI COMMUNICATIONS

BRIGITTA PORTIER

C. 33 (0) 6 48 11 72 05

Unifrance - Village Pantiero

alibi-com@skynet.be

