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The Choreography of Longing: Songs, Screens and Space in Carlos Saura's *Fados*

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At the time of its release in 2007, Carlos Saura's *Fados* was presented as the third in a trilogy of films about modern urban musics, following *Flamenco* (1995) and *Tango* (1998). Like those films, *Fados* is dedicated to a particular genre – the Portuguese music of the film's title – and presented as a series of performances. Stylistically it is closer to *Flamenco* in that it dispenses with plot, narrative and characters (still important in *Tango*), opting instead to proceed via staged performances involving singers, instrumentalists and dancers. Like the earlier films the main 'action' is shot on a large sound stage which has been fitted with an assembly of partitions, screens, mirrors and theatre props to create a distinct space for each performance and to allow the interaction of live and pre-recorded material, the latter delivered via projection, still photography and recorded sound.

For those unfamiliar with the musical genre of fado, Saura's film may not seem particularly elucidating. This was an issue raised by some critics on the film's release in the USA, with one describing the film as '[a] documentary that doesn't bother to explain anything; a concert film with interpretive dance; MTV for world-music fans' and suggesting that Saura had made the film only for aficionados (Kois 2009). Little or no context is provided for the bulk of the performances and it may not be clear to those unfamiliar with contemporary world music figures that a number of the performers are not Portuguese. Additionally, for those not familiar with fado, it may also not be clear that there is no dance form associated with the music as there are for flamenco and tango. Meanwhile, although Saura's lack of contextualization might have prompted some to see his film as directed towards aficionados, the use a global cast of 'fadistas' and the accompaniment of fado with dance suggest a challenge to those same aficionados, who may well see such moves as challenges to the authenticity of the music.

In this article I address the lack of contextualization in *Fados* by providing some background information on the musical genre depicted in the film. I also provide a contextualization of *Fados* in light of Saura's other musical films, suggesting that these works' recurring themes of artifice, imagination, mythology, performance and the poetics of space are crucial to an understanding not only of *Fados*, but also of the genre it celebrates. I suggest that Saura succeeds in depicting fado as an urban folk music that both evokes and inhabits the contemporary Portuguese city. Rather than critiquing the director for his 'inauthentic' depiction of fado, I respond to Saura's provocation by considering his film as a strategy for setting fado's poetics of time, space and history in a new light. Taking a cue from the use of choreography and urban tableaux in the film, I offer a spatial reading of *Fados* that draws upon the work of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre and suggest that the film makes visible a 'production of space' that complements existing fado mythography.

Fado

Fado takes its name from the Portuguese word for 'fate', although it is uncertain when it attained the name. Debate continues as to the origins of the music, with various accounts attributing Arabic descent, African and Brazilian roots, or the influence of European troubadour poetry. For some, the music's origins lie in Portugal's seafaring past, with fado imagined as the cry of the homesick sailor borne upon the rolling ocean. Romance, myth and history have blurred in many of these accounts and, while they provide poetic inspiration, they generally prompt more questions than they can answer. Fado is probably best thought of as an urban folk music, a term that serves to highlight the music's dual nature as both modern and traditional. Most historians of the genre agree that fado in its present form emerged from the riverside districts of Lisbon in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. While there may well have been similar forms of music prior to this time, the musical and

lyrical styles most associated with fado were only fixed during the course of the nineteenth century. From its origins amongst amateur performers in taverns and brothels, fado went on to become the music most associated with Portugal during the twentieth century, helped partly by recordings which spread it to a global audience.¹

Fado is distinguished instrumentally by the use of the *guitarra portuguesa*, a pear-shaped lute- or cittern-like instrument whose origins are as debated as the music itself. The *guitarra* is played via a combination of strumming and plucking, using mostly the thumb and index finger, on which are worn *unhas* ('nails'). The other constant accompaniment is provided by the *viola* (the Portuguese name for the Spanish guitar), which provides harmony and rhythm predominantly but may occasionally lead. In addition, especially in contemporary practice, a *viola baixo* (acoustic bass guitar) is often added. Additional percussion is rarely used. The fado singer, or *fadista*, tends to take the centre stage in a performance of gesture, phrasing and verbal improvisation that serves to heighten the drama of the lyric and lead the song to an appropriately momentous conclusion. Drama is often emphasized by alternating between registers, with songs invariably closing on a vocal climax that repeats the last part of the final verse or chorus and is punctuated by a two-chord 'exclamation mark' from the guitars. Because fado's most famous stars have been female, there is a tendency outside of Portugal to think that only women sing fado. This is very far from the case and the genre has been represented by many male performers, from early stars such as Alfredo Marceneiro and Fernando Farinha to more recent fadistas like Carlos do Carmo and Camané. There are also traditions of fado associated with the university city of Coimbra and with the northern city of Porto. Coimbra fado, with links to a romantic, male student troubadour tradition, produced a number of noted *guitarristas* as well as songwriters associated with the protest song movement of the 1960s and 1970s, such as José Afonso. Yet it is undoubtedly Lisbon fado that has proved the most dominant form both nationally and internationally and that has produced the most famous *fadistas*, from Maria Severa in the nineteenth century to Amália Rodrigues in the twentieth and Mariza in the twenty-first.² Of the artists mentioned above, all but Farinha appear in Saura's film.

Lyrics are of vital importance in fado and, while some are improvised, many are the work of fado lyricists who are not normally involved in the performing group. Adaptations of high-art poetry are common and mix with more down to earth variations of a range of lyrical themes, especially love, death, longing and loss, as well as the city, the lot of the *fadista* and fado itself. One of the main themes of fado is Lisbon, particularly the neighbourhoods most associated with the music's history such as Mouraria, Alfama and Bairro Alto (Colvin 2008; Elliott 2013; Gray 2013). Fado texts summon up a mythology of place as they trace the remembered and imagined city of the past. References to grief, rejection, disquiet, defeat and destiny abound, all brought together in the expression of *saudade*, a supposedly untranslatable Portuguese term that describes a sense of longing, yearning or pining that all fado, and all *fadistas*, are required to possess.

Fado Figures

Fado, like other vernacular practices, relies on a sense of tradition and timelessness, of having always been around as an authentic voice of the people, and, at the same time, on a notion of the exceptional and the particular. This interplay between the exceptional and the everyday has found its most notable mediation in the figure of the star *fadista*, the first of whom was Maria Severa. Severa's brief life predated the dawn of sound recording and so we have little idea of her performance style or of how closely it is matched by contemporary performers. Her life and work were, however, recorded in other ways: by word of mouth passed down through the ages, and by plays, movies, and songs. Severa came to embody a particular time and place as her name was connected to historic parts of the city which were

¹ For a detailed fado history see Vieira Nery 2004.

² For more on the text and context of fado see the essays collected in Brito 1994.

demolished in the name of progress during the early years of António Salazar's dictatorship.³ Plays and films about Severa produced other songs which have served to keep her story alive, including 'Rua do Capelão', which takes its name from the street where she lived and which appears in Saura's film alongside footage of the 1931 film *A Severa*. These fados became famous through recordings by Amália Rodrigues, fado's biggest star, as well as more recent 'new fadistas'. Amália also made famous the tradition of wearing a black shawl as a mark of mourning for Severa. In *Fados* a street singer relates the story of Severa to a small crowd, emphasizing the pedagogical nature of fado and, though more impressionistically rendered, of Saura's film. Such associations have kept the name of Maria Severa alive while also providing a historical and mythological context for fado, which continues, in the twenty-first century, to navigate a path between tradition and innovation. Current stars such as Mariza and Ana Moura will alternate between the intimacy of the fado house and the global space of international music festivals, one day collaborating with rock stars, the next with hardcore *fadistas*.

Saura's film

Saura's *Fados* is informed by the history and mythology of fado even if it does not always take the time to provide contextual information. The veteran *fadista* Carlos do Carmo and the musicologist Rui Vieira Nery acted as 'musical consultant' and 'musicological consultant' respectively, providing the film with vital insider knowledge. Carmo also features as musician in *Fados* and it is his voice we hear over the opening credits, though not before the film has been inaugurated in authentic fashion by the sound of a *guitarra portuguesa* breaking the silence. The song introduced by the *guitarra* is 'Fado Saudade', a fado that speaks of old Lisbon and of the *tabernas* of its famous neighbourhoods: Alfama, Bica and Madragoa. The process of naming these locales serves to establish place as an important motif in fado and in Saura's film. At the same time, the singer issues a warning, stating that 'whoever lives only in the past / stays trapped in destiny'. This observation is supported by the opening images of the film, which show the profiles of pedestrians silhouetted against screens on which is projected filmed footage of contemporary Lisbon pedestrians negotiating the city. Lisbon emerges from this initial encounter as both a contemporary city of multicultural, mundane routine and a historic port city whose departures and arrivals have fed into a history rich in global encounters (a theme of the film) and real, imagined and mythologised places (the 'traditional' neighbourhoods hymned in Carmo's song). Visible and invisible cities coexist, creating a palimpsest echoed in Saura's multi-layered panels.

The emphasis on global encounter is emphasised when the film cuts from its initial depiction of everyday Lisbon life to rhythmically charged scene in which we witness a multiracial crowd of costumed drummers, dancers, whistle blowers and bearers of flags, swords and models. This is the first hint that dance is going to play an important role in the film; it is also an indication of the flexible nature by which fado history will be presented. The scene depicted is the 'Kola San Jon' festivity, of Cape Verdean origin and associated in particular with Cova da Moura, a neighbourhood to the northwest of Lisbon with a large Cape Verdean population. The 'Kola San Jon' evokes the colonial encounters between Portugal and Africa through the use of percussion, singing, dancing and distinctive costumes involving boats and maritime icons. Africa is evoked again in the fourth performance of *Fados* as Mariza is shown singing a song inspired by her Mozambican grandmother. While Mariza is a performer very much associated with fado – and, at the time of the film's release, probably the genre's most famous contemporary performer nationally and internationally – this particular performance emphasizes global musical fusion in its lyrical references, musical accompaniment and choreography. Amongst those accompanying Mariza are a bouzouki player, a percussionist playing the *cajón* and Portuguese rock star Rui Veloso, whose electric guitar contribution evokes African popular music styles. Other global fusions are introduced by international performers including Lila Downs (Mexico), Miguel Poveda (Spain),

³ Salazar's 'New State' lasted from 1933 to 1974, the year of Portugal's 'Carnation Revolution'.

Toni Garrido, Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque (all Brazil). Interspersed with these international contributions are more straightforward fado performances, with notable space given to singers Lucília do Carmo, Camané, Argentina Santos, Amália Rodrigues, Alfredo Marceneiro, Vicente da Câmara, Carminho and Ricardo Ribeiro. A number of prominent Portuguese *guitarristas* are also featured, including Mário Pacheco, Ricardo Rocha and José Manuel Neto.

Fados as a Carlos Saura film

It is worth situating *Fados* within the context of Saura's other musical films to highlight the aspects it shares with them and the extent to which it should be seen as a Saura film as much as a homage to a musical genre. While the most obvious precursors to *Fados* in Saura's filmography are *Flamenco* and *Tango*, the film also shares features with the earlier 'flamenco trilogy' consisting of *Bodas de sangre* (1981), *Carmen* (1983) and *El amor brujo* (1986) and with the 'choreofilms' *Sevillanas* (1992), *Iberia* (2005) and *Flamenco Flamenco* (2010). These films all focus on the representation of performance, the staging of drama, dance and music, the tension between 'reality' and 'artifice', and a self-conscious reflection on filmmaking. These themes are emphasised through recurring devices such as rehearsal spaces, stage scenery, screens, projections, lighting, the fetishization of detail and the exposure of the apparatus of filmmaking via the deconstruction of the soundstage on which the action is being filmed. A strong element of Saura's work has also been his exploration of 'the burden of Spanishness' (D'Lugo 1991: 12-28) and, while this may be less relevant when considering films such as *Tango* and *Fados*, it still provides useful points of comparison. In his study of Saura's flamenco trilogy, Marvin D'Lugo suggests that the films work against the mythical representation of Spanishness associated with the Franco regime by estranging the practices and processes of flamenco through a 'refusal to use the cinematic medium merely to record the performance of a dance company' (193). Although *Fados* provides a more 'finished' presentation of performance (shorn of the rehearsals that constitute significant portions of the flamenco trilogy), it still deliberates in artifice rather than attempting to disguise it. Where dancers assumed authorial roles in the earlier films, here they serve to undermine the authorial roles otherwise granted to most of the singers, lending a playfully deconstructive element to the metaphysics of presence summoned by song. Equally, there is a breaking-down of the mythical in that, even though the familiar stories of fado's origins are represented, the artificial aspect of all the scenarios works against the normally invisible (because hyper-visible) spectacular naturalization of Portuguese myth. We are constantly reminded that this is a performance of Portugueseness and that there are many potential performers emanating from different cultural contexts. The discourse of the fado aficionado, or *purista*, encounters that of the postmodern world music fan. Both are problematic and neither is ultimately victorious.

As with Saura's other musical films, *Fados* fetishizes details, focussing on particular words, gestures and musical epiphanies. Immobile singers, close-ups and direct-to-camera addresses highlight clarity of communication, particularly notable in the case of Caetano Veloso, Chico Buarque and Argentina Santos. It is these moments that provide the 'meaning' of the film, acting as emotional pivot points for which a more conventional narrative film would use plot developments. Like *Flamenco*, *Fados* differs from both the earlier 'flamenco trilogy' and *Tango* in being shorn of framing narratives. There is some internal narrative as we are led from origins through iterations and mythology to socio-political concerns to fusion, yet the 'story' that materializes is that of fado's place in the world. Rather than think of *Fados* as a narrative film, it is perhaps more useful to consider it as a work of cultural musicology which seeks to highlight important facets of the musical genre, both in isolation and in combination with other aspects. The impressionistic nature of the 'fado pedagogy' hints at what fado has been, what it is and what it could be.

Watching Saura's studio-based films, one becomes interested less in how the director will represent external 'reality' and more in how he will use the limitations and possibilities of the

studio space, props, lighting, sound and confined protagonists. The opening shots of films like *Flamenco* and *Flamenco Flamenco* act as teasers in which we are first shown the artificial set-up and then see the space peopled and sounded. This process of peopling and sounding materialises the world of the film and subsequently becomes the main point of reference, with the external world forgotten until the closing sequences. At the end of *Flamenco* the camera moves away from the soundstage to show the view through the window, reminding us of the external world through sight and sound. Over the credits we hear the noise of the city rather than of flamenco, a technique also used at the end of *Flamenco Flamenco*. The soundscape is a trick; had the noise of the city really been so audible, it would have needed more than exuberant flamenco musicians to drown it out. Sonic space is produced as artificially as visual space, through technology, microphones and masking. *Fados* closes with a long crane shot across the studio in which the scenes have been filmed, allowing us to see that everything has been happening in the same place while also taking in the various screens that have been operating as backdrops and partitions. We then see the filmmakers and technicians reviewing the filmmaking process at one end of the studio before zooming slowly and impossibly into the camera lens itself.

One way in which Saura combines the recurring themes of reality and artifice in his films is through the use of screens and mirrors. In *Fados*, screens and panels are used in various ways. As cinema screens, they act as canvases on which to project the past – as in the archive footage of past performers such as Amália Rodrigues, Lucília do Carmo and Alfredo Marceneiro – and more contemporary scenes, such as the footage of Lisbon citizens used in the introduction or live video feeds which enlarge and particularise performances taking place in the film studio. As stage props, they provide visual and geographical context, such as when Carlos do Carmo is shown walking between large panels depicting Lisbon scenes, placing him 'in' the city as a visual accompaniment to his song 'Um homem na cidade' ('A Man in the City'). From a practical perspective, panels are used to block one diorama from another, though this can also be read in ways that go beyond the convenience of staging, suggesting different self-contained worlds, the closed-in, or fenced-off nature of fado, the fetishization of the detail or the isolated moment. The panels are also the backdrop to the shadow play of the singers and dancers, a reminder of fado's fascination with light and shadow. Mirrors, meanwhile, duplicate and reduplicate protagonists and confuse spectators, highlighting the artifice at work and suggesting a lack of any one true source of presentation, let alone meaning.⁴

In addition to the screens and mirrors that populate the set of *Fados*, use is also made of props and stage furniture, adding to the artificial nature of the fado spaces depicted in the film. Many of the props are simple, functional items, such as the chairs, instruments and microphones utilized by the musicians, the M-Audio keyboard and laptop used in the 'Marceneiro rap' scene and the illustrated panel depicting the Severa legend used by Catarina Moura for 'O Fado da Severa'. Watching Argentina Santos delivered her impassioned 'Viva Vivida', we are invited to focus on the prominently placed microphone as much as on Santos's expressive face.⁵ The most elaborate stage set is the reconstruction of a *casa de fado* (fado house), used in the climactic scene of the film and consisting of customers sat at long tables and posters of famous *fadistas* on the 'walls'. A succession of *fadistas* rise from the crowd to perform the kind of duels associated with the improvised *fado vadio* style. Just as the partitioned stage sets throughout the film serves as reminders of the

⁴ On the use of mirrors in Saura's *Carmen*, see D'Lugo 1991: 206.

⁵ It is interesting to compare this scene with the opening scene of *Flamenco* in which La Paquera De Jerez introduces a Bulerias with ferocious intensity. Points of comparison would include the representation of age, gender and experience, the control of vocal and facial expression and the use or non-use of microphones.

fetishization of the performance space in more regular concert venues, so the 'fake' *casa do fado* suggests that all *casas do fado* are stage sets.⁶

Fados and the production of space

Finally, I want to return to a theme that has interested me in much of my work, namely the connections between song and place. Such connections may take the form of vocal and instrumental styles associated with particular regionalised genres, lyrical descriptions of place, space and displacement, the appropriation and regionalisation of songs, genres or styles through adaptations and cover versions, or the establishment of songs as processes for stabilizing or destabilizing memory places (Elliott 2009, 2010). In exploring such connections, I have been drawn to the work of thinkers such as Michel de Certeau, Georges Perec and Henri Lefebvre. Certeau's famous essay 'Walking in the City' provides some useful metaphorical and analytic language for thinking about the negotiation of space. His account of the city space proceeds visually by zooming in from the 'God's eye' perspective of the aerial or roof-top view to the street-level negotiation of city streets by citizens who act as readers and writers of the city text. Certeau also attends to the poetic power of place names, suggesting that, in the history, romance and mythology that accompanies certain well-worn names, a 'migrational or metaphorical city' is superimposed on the planned city (Certeau 1984: 93). From Certeau we can adopt the notion of the 'migrational or metaphorical city' as hymned in the numerous fado songs that obsessively return to and fetishize the city of Lisbon. IN Fados, this is particularly apt for the scene in which Carmo performs 'Um Homem na Cidade' amidst a palimpsest of photographs depicting different perspectives on Lisbon.

Georges Perec offers a reversal of Certeau's initial strategy by zooming out from an analysis of letters on a page to the table on which the page rests, the room in which the table stands, the house, street, town, and so on to outer space (Perec 1999). This relatively smooth transition through 'species of spaces' is one that favours visual metaphors (the camera, the airborne view, the zoomable electronic map) and offers a useful examination of the dynamics of inside/outside and near/far. The dialectical relationship between inside and outside is also explored in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, although the work mostly concerns itself with the ways in which the intimacy of the poetic line finds its mirror in the intimacy of the domestic sphere as a microcosm of the broader relationship between body and world. Bachelard explores the 'eulogized space' of the poetic imagination, claiming that such space resists the positivist indifference granted it by 'the measures and estimates of the surveyor' (Bachelard 1994: xxxv-xxxvi). From Perec and Bachelard we can inherit the poetic nature of space in all its variety and examine ways in which texts – whether fados or films about fados – connect to contexts and 'poems' map on to intimately remembered or imagined places. With its palimpsest-like arrangement of screened layers, Saura's *Fados* is nothing if not a presentation of numerous species of spaces, all of them designed to elicit some aspect of the 'fadoscape' (Elliott 2010: 180).

Henri Lefebvre, whose work often alludes to sound, rhythm and music, offers perhaps the most complex account of the ways in which the perception of space combines with the conception and practical experience of space. Just as Bachelard was keen to distinguish the spaces of dwelling and the poetic imagination from the space of the surveyor, so Lefebvre (1991) distinguishes between three understandings of space. Firstly, 'spatial practice' refers to the ways in which we perceive and make sense of space and, as such, is the domain of spatial disciplines such as geography. Secondly, 'the representation of space' concerns space as conceived by utopian thought and vision; this is also the space of planning, surveillance and control. Finally, what is alternatively translated as 'representational space'

⁶ A show based on the *casa do fado* scene was produced in Lisbon in late 2007, having also been produced in Spain. Saura's musical films are like theatre shows and are often about the preparation of theatre shows, so this was a logical outcome.

or 'spaces of representation' relates to the lived space of 'users' and is the space of social struggle, contestation and reimagining. Lefebvre complements his work on the production of space with a series of writings on 'rhythmanalysis' which explore lived space as a series of rhythms (biological, psychological, social) as well as the bodily understanding of space and time (Lefebvre 2013). Lefebvre and the cultural geographers who have been influenced by him (Gregory 1994; Soja 1996) provide ways of thinking about the interaction between real and imagined spaces which can illuminate the ways in which a 'topophilic' genre such as fado can be heard to both reflect and critique the politics of place and space.⁷

As an art form and everyday practice, fado brings together the representational spaces of the city with the representation of space, arguably doing so more effectively and more persistently than the other arts in Portugal. The longing for lost time and space that is hymned in fado is choreographed in *Fados* in ways that alternately harmonise and conflict with the dominant narratives of the genre. Lisbon emerges from this choreography of longing as real, imagined and performed city, as fragmented, fetishized and vibrant as the screens through which Carlos do Carmo walks as he sings his hymn to fado's capital.

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⁷ For fado-specific work that explores the city as site of reflection and critique from other perspectives, see Colvin (2008) and Gray (2013).