

*"You Can't Have It On A Plate Forever":
the English class system implodes in
Losey and Pinter's *The Servant**

“Você não pode ter tudo de bandeja sempre”: o sistema de classes
inglês implode em *O Criado*, de Losey e Pinter

Martin John Fletcher

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil

Abstract: The collaboration between Harold Pinter and Joseph Losey on the 1963 film *The Servant* represents a high point in the history of British cinema. Whilst acknowledging the film's technical and cinematic merits, I argue in this paper that *The Servant* remains an essentially English film. Pinter's idiomatic dialogue illuminates the intricate hierarchical structures and prejudices of the English class system. This makes the film essentially 'idiomatic' in its depiction of a particular historical and ideological moment, a time when the class system was in crisis and the political and cultural upheavals of the later 1960s were already in sight.

Keywords: Harold Pinter. Joseph Losey. *The Servant*. English cinema. 1960s.

Resumo: A colaboração entre Harold Pinter e Joseph Losey no filme *The Servant* de 1963, representa um ponto alto na história do cinema britânico. Embora eu reconheça os méritos técnicos e cinematográficos do filme, argumento neste artigo que *The Servant* continua a ser um filme essencialmente inglês. O diálogo idiomático de Pinter ilumina as estruturas hierárquicas complexas e preconceitos do sistema de classes inglês. Isso faz o filme essencialmente “idiomático” em sua descrição de um momento histórico e ideológico particular, num momento em que o sistema de classes estava em crise e as convulsões políticas e culturais dos anos 1960 por vir já estavam à vista.

Palavras-chave: Harold Pinter. Joseph Losey. *The Servant*. Cinema inglês. Anos sessenta.

When Joseph Losey first read Harold Pinter's screenplay for *The Servant*, he noted down a number of things he “didn't like” about the script and then confronted the playwright with some suggestions. Pinter took umbrage and walked out of the meeting. Fortunately,

a few days later, Losey approached Pinter again and, after another meeting, the two agreed to work together on the film (PINTER, 2000, p. ix). I mention this difference of opinion because, paradoxically, the director and the playwright's approaches to the film appear to complement each other: Pinter's subtle use of pauses, silences and gestures point towards a 'deeper', (for Mark Lawson, "darker") layer of meaning(s) beneath the dialogue; Losey's inventive use of camera angles, mirrors, close-ups and darkness builds tension and suggest a kind of menace lurking somewhere beyond the immediate action (LAWSON, 2005). In many ways *The Servant* is a film that engages and disturbs the viewer precisely because of what is *not* seen and *not* said; by what is merely suggested, implied and hinted at.

I want to look more closely at some of the techniques employed by Pinter and Losey in the making of the film before discussing a number of thematic interpretations that have contextualised *The Servant* cinematically and historically. In many ways, the formal aspects of the film, shot in black and white in 1963, are highly significant in producing the multi-layered messages cinema audiences take home with them. However, despite the richness of technique showcased by *The Servant*, its significance depends on historical factors as much as its structural dynamics. Apart from the more obvious elements of deception and moral decay exemplified by the storyline, the film also reveals the dominance of certain ideological assumptions within the English class system in the late 1950s and early sixties. The more 'universal' themes of dominance and subservience, of lust, guilt and treachery within human relations only make sense, I will suggest, when illuminated by the setting, by the historical context of time and place.

I want to argue that *The Servant* is essentially an English film; that the characters personify certain aspects of an identifiably English sensibility; that certain idiomatic elements of the film are not translatable linguistically or historically. Although the action of the film could have been transposed to another, more international setting, depending for its message on the universal themes I have mentioned, what makes *The Servant* simmer with suggestive power is its provocative depiction of the transgression of established values in post-war England. The film highlights the frailty of an age-old feudal hierarchy, the hypocritical sexual morality of the protestant church, and the contradictions and abuses of power within a crumbling class system.

Although *The Servant* is based on a novella by Robin Maugham (nephew of novelist and playwright Somerset Maugham) published in 1948, Losey and Pinter conceived of the film version as contemporary with its 1963 production, rather than as a period piece. The pair also took liberties in their adaptation. In 1964, Losey warned his American publicist that comparisons between the book and the film were ill-advised, writing that “the novel of *The Servant* bears so little resemblance to the film that I think one should stay away from it if possible” (SARGEANT, p. 25). One of the main differences is that the novella is narrated by an army chum of Tony’s, Richard Merton, who relates the story of his friend’s demise from a safe distance. In contrast, Losey was keen to engage the audience by using the camera as a kind of peeping surveillance tool: Maugham’s narrator Richard was “displaced in favour of clinical and voyeuristic observation” (SARGEANT, p. 20). Indeed, Losey’s particularly inventive use of the camera in *The Servant* is a crucial element in the transformation of the original story, as the director’s formal techniques offer new dimensions of meaning that go beyond the narrative prose which characterises Maugham’s novella. In Gale’s analysis of the film, it is “the shot”, what he describes as “the basic unit of film”, that makes a fundamental difference.

“You Can’t Have
It On A Plate
Forever”:
*The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter’s The
Servant*

275

It is this last component that distinguishes film from other art forms because shots can be used to make discontinuous action continuous and to make continuous action discontinuous. Special effects (slow motion, fast motion, process shots), focus, camera angles (including elevation, distance – extreme close-up, long-shots and so forth) and shifts of point of view provide for new methods of expression (GALE, p. 15).

In *The Servant*, the traditional devices of dramatic irony are intensified: the viewer is not only privy to action and disclosure which evades the characters themselves, but also given privileged access to those disclosures by a kind of “spying-through-the-keyhole” technique, where “surveillance is used as subterfuge, intrusion and with menace” (SARGEANT, p. 23).

To summarize the basic plot of the film version of *The Servant*: a young upper-class man, Tony, buys a large London house and employs a manservant, Barrett, to look after the place and tend to his needs. Tony is “resting” after returning from Africa, though he claims to have future

plans to redevelop parts of Brazil. Barrett soon begins to overstep his position, making changes to the house, invading Tony's privacy, and clashing with his girlfriend Susan. Barrett dupes Tony into agreeing to hire his "sister", Vera, to help with the cleaning and maintenance of the house. Barrett arranges for Vera to seduce Tony, thus putting himself in a position of greater power in the house. Despite Tony's new infatuation with Vera, he and Susan go away for the weekend but return early to find Barrett and Vera in Tony's bed. When confronted, Barrett admits Vera is not his sister, but his fiancée. Tony dismisses the pair. The house is soon in disarray as Tony mourns the loss of both Barrett and Vera.

By chance, Tony sees Barrett in a local pub and the servant pleads to be reinstated. Tony assents, but despite Barrett's initial contriteness, he begins to treat Tony as his "equal" and to complain about his household chores. Tony drinks heavily and appears distant and feeble, unable to challenge Barrett's insubordination. Vera reappears briefly, but Tony rejects her entreaties for forgiveness. Finally, Barrett is seen orchestrating a drink-fuelled party or orgy in Tony's bedroom, with an odd assortment of women guests including Vera. When Susan appears at the party, Tony, stupefied by drink and drugs, pleads with her to leave. She stays, kissing Barrett briefly before Tony, in a rage, kicks over the drinks trolley and overturns the record player. Barrett orders all the guests, except Vera, to leave. On her way out, Susan hits Barrett across the face. She rushes out breathlessly, grabbing hold of a tree to steady her nerves.

One of Losey's devices for illustrating and intensifying this tale of "moral decay" is to utilize the house metaphorically as a reflection of this deterioration. As the film's cinematographer, Douglas Slocombe, explains, the director:

was at great pains to describe the necessity for different moods in the picture to go with the different phases in the disintegration of the house: at the beginning it is an empty shell, it's cold and has no personality; then it's suddenly painted and beautified; then it gradually rots; and then at the end it takes on a completely new personality, it's partially repainted, it has black ceilings and a gaudy, meretricious look in everything (SARGEANT, p. 88).

This parallel reflection functions less as a background to the action – in the way scenery functions in the theatre – and more as a producer of meaning. How the camera chooses to capture and construct the house directs the cinema audience to interpret the interaction of the characters in particular ways. This is an example of how form drives and interacts with content: in *The Servant*, cinematic technique does not merely carry the story, but creates moods which are suggestive, evoking deeper layers of significance which transform the characters and the on-screen action.

Within Losey's house, the director also places great emphasis on another kind of reflection, the one we see looking back at us from mirrors, which function in *The Servant* as "recurring visual and structural motifs". For Sargeant,

Losey [...] uses mirrors to convey a sense of characters' awareness of being watched: Barrett catches Tony's eye, watching him, as he polishes a mirror in the drawing room, framing and isolating Tony and Barrett as one item in the alternative couplings and multiple configurations successively distributed among the comings and goings witnessed by the house (SARGEANT, p. 21).

Not only do mirrors serve as reminders that the film is about spying and "subterfuge", they also point to another dimension, a place "beyond" the action, beyond the house even, where the terms of the film do not make sense. This other world, constantly suggested by the use of mirror images and by the prying camera, is also the place Pinter exposes in his screenplay, through pauses, silence and gesture. In *The Servant*, the suggestiveness of the camera angles and "the shot" are enhanced by a screenplay, which depends as much upon what is *not* said, as upon what is said. It was Pinter and Losey's first collaboration and, according to David Caute, finally the director had a screenplay "unspoilt by stock studio formulas, melodrama and tedious exposition. For the first time a writer offered him the primacy of the implicit over the explicit, with human conflict percolating through the masking-tape of received language, idiom and gesture" (CAUTE, p. 3).

The potential for adaptation Losey must have identified in Maugham's themes – deception and power scheming, subterfuge and the menace of the unsaid – were also dramatic elements that Pinter thrived upon in his writing. Pinter identified something sinister about

*"You Can't Have
It On A Plate
Forever":
The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter's The
Servant*

language itself, what he calls “a disease at the very centre of language, so that language becomes a permanent masquerade, a tapestry of lies” (PINTER, 1990). However, the “disease” that renders language as essentially false, does not preclude its use as device for obtaining power. For Pinter, the suggestiveness of language, its power to unsettle, together with the spaces between its articulation, come together to vie for power in human relationships. Someone dominates, and the dominator always needs his or her complement: the dominated.

Martin John
Fletcher

278

Clearly, it was the question of dominance and subservience that attracted [Pinter] when he decided to write this screenplay. He willingly incorporated Maugham’s themes of moral decay and class struggle in his scenario, but for the screenwriter it must have been the theme of domination that appealed the most. His imagination is always captured by what lies below the surface (GALE, p. 92).

Silences, pauses and the unsaid, however, are not the only means by which Pinter infuses his script with intensity. The playwright also has an ear for speech patterns, shifting registers and the idioms of English, which not only distinguish the speaker’s position in the intricate hierarchy of the English class system, they also reveal the essential playfulness of language, a level of “insincerity” characterised by irony, sarcasm and parody. “Performances, vocal (intonation, pitch and accent) and physical (gesture) speak volumes in *The Servant*, volunteering adverbs and adjectives rendered implicit or redundant in Pinter’s rudimentary script” (SARGEANT, p. 17). The sparseness of Pinter’s dialogue, the way the characters communicate non-verbally and move across the screen, allow for spaces to develop where the viewer can insert his or her own language of interpretation.

To illustrate Pinter’s method, I will offer two scenes as examples. After Tony has been seduced by Vera, Barrett returns to the house, disturbing the new lovers. As a way of distracting Barrett so Vera (ensconced upstairs in only a nightshirt) has time to make herself presentable, Tony sends him to the pub for brown ale. When Barrett comes back, using the tradesman’s stairs leading down to the kitchen, Vera is already there waiting for him (though still only wearing the nightshirt). Not a word is spoken. Vera looks coyly at Barrett and nods (the deed is done), causing

Barrett to display a satisfied smile. Vera then perches herself playfully on the table, provoking Barrett to move towards her suggestively before the scene ends. The coded messages implicit in the scene are all conveyed non-verbally, by gestures, looks and body language. What gives the scene its power is not only the silence, but that what is left unsaid is not completely clear: there is room for conjecture, spaces where the audience has to guess at what is being depicted. This doubt, this darkness behind the dialogue, is the place where Pinter pitches his menace.

The second example demonstrates how Pinter manipulates language and the idioms of speech to create different moods and to develop characterization. In the final sequence of the film, Barrett switches speech registers, revealing his chameleon-like cunning. Barrett has organised a party and Tony's "old flame" Susan has turned up. Tony is slumped on the staircase in a daze. Barrett shakes Tony's face with his hand, addressing him in a mocking, patronizing tone, highlighting, at once, Barrett's working-class origins and equal status in the house. When Barrett announces the unexpected visitor, Tony manages, with difficulty, to speak: "Did you tell her we're expecting visitors?", he slurs. Suddenly Barrett drops his sarcastic tone and, for an instant, appears to remember his servile position. "Oh, yes...yes I did", he replies, slipping back to his earlier, more respectful, well-spoken voice. He continues: "But I also *took the liberty* of showing her into the drawing room. After all, she's a lady" (my italics). Barrett's choice of words here captures his inscrutable ambiguity: one moment he is Tony's "mate", poking fun at his emasculated victim, and the next moment he is affecting the speech patterns of a butler. Later, when Susan has spoken briefly with Tony, she attempts to join the party. Barrett exploits the situation by speaking to Susan, the "lady", as if she was a common barfly. Picking up a drink, he flutters the glass in front of Susan and says, "Do you want one, love?", and later offers her a cigarette with "Want a fag?" employing his "common" accent, slang and the familiar term of address to mock Susan's pretensions and to flaunt his accession of power. Moments later he announces to Susan that he and "Tone" are going to Brazil in the morning, again reducing the "master" to a "mate" and ridiculing his professional plans. Pinter's ear for the vernacular and subtle changes of register not only highlight Barrett's Machiavellian dissembling, they also reveal the

"You Can't Have
It On A Plate
Forever":
The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter's *The
Servant*

279

playfulness of language. Spoken language in *The Servant* may be a tool for winning power, but it is also laced with irony, struggling to capture the “truth” of any character or dramatic situation, what Pinter calls “a permanent masquerade”.

The theme of domination and subservience in *The Servant* may be read as a progressive power-reversal: the master’s authority is gradually destroyed by trickery and deception until the servant assumes control. For Sargeant, however, this interpretation simplifies the complexity of power relations in the film. “Losey and Pinter explore dominance and servitude as concepts rather than straightforwardly adapting a source text called *The Servant*. Dialogue, *mise en scène*, performance, props and costuming all contribute in the film towards the structuring and reconfiguration of this relationship” (SARGEANT, p. 12). For Pinter, the struggle for power is not a theme identifiable in certain dramatic texts as opposed to others, but something universal, an essential feature of human relations and the structures of language. Power relations in *The Servant*, therefore, are never established or absolute, but oscillate between the characters, each subtly gaining and losing control over certain situations. Gale believes that what Pinter once said about his short story, *The Examination*, published in 1955, could also be applied to *The Servant*.

[T]he question was one of who was dominant at what point and how they were going to be dominant and what tools they would use to achieve dominance and how they would try to undermine the other person’s dominance. A threat is constantly there; it’s got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be...it’s a very common, everyday thing (GALE p. 50).

Pinter’s comments preclude an interpretation of the film as a straightforward inversion of the established class hierarchy, characterized by Barrett’s assumption of power. As the film progresses, the complexity of power relations between the characters defies any such reductive reading. However, this does not detract from the centrality of class relations in the story, according to one reviewer:

Class struggle is the most apparent *raison d'être* of the film, but *The Servant* is a much more layered work that dramatizes the dynamics of authority rather than being a fantasy of upending them. Sexual, societal, and structural hierarchies don't become inverted but instead are rendered meaningless (TSE, 2013).

Barrett's takeover of the house is never complete; he does not replace Tony as the master, but fractures the hierarchy, exposing its essential fragility. Barrett corrupts Tony, not to elevate himself, but to bring Tony down to his (and Vera's) level. His insolence, though menacing, is also playful and ironic: his constant smiling, mimicking and parodying trivialize class differences and highlight the hollowness of Tony's superior rank. Tony may be a weak master, but his inability to oppose Barrett's manipulation can be construed as weakness of character, rather than authority. "For Tony, a conceited indolence [...] is at once his bane and his essential self. Tony is unable to will himself to resist Barrett, even while he knows that Barrett is intent on enticing him to his own destruction by way of heady and forbidden pleasures of the flesh" (SARGEANT, p. 97).

There is also a sense in which Tony's loss of authority reduces the integrity and social standing of both he *and* Barrett. In the first scene after Barrett has been reinstated at the house, he complains to Tony, who is lolling on the couch doing a crossword: "Look at all this muck and slime, it makes you feel sick...you expect me to cope with all this muck and filth everywhere – I'm not used to working in such squalor!". The irony is that when first hired as "the servant", Barrett, presumably, had at least as much work to do in the house, if not more. He is deliberately neglecting his duties, as the need to "keep up appearances" has been purged by the dissolution of the master/servant power structure. His sense of duty and professional standards also appear to have been eroded. "Not only does Tony become dissolute as a result of his experience with Barratt, but Barratt, too, gradually succumbs to the very degradation that he is promoting in Tony" (GALE, p. 45). The moral disintegration Barrett has introduced into the house, principally by smuggling in Vera, seems to have infected both himself and Tony, metaphorically, with the "muck and filth" about which he is protesting.

Another thematic element often identified in the film is a covert homosexuality, latent partly because of the film censors (homosexuality was still a serious criminal offence in 1963) and partly because none of the

"You Can't Have
It On A Plate
Forever":
*The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter's The
Servant*

relationships in *The Servant* are overt, but instead rely on suggestion and the unsaid. Clearly, Tony and Barrett develop a strong bond between them, despite the obvious class divisions and battles both verbal and physical on show in the latter part of the film. During his second incarnation as the servant, Barrett cooks a meal for Tony, although now he sits down with the “master” to share the meal, suitably attired in jacket and tie. Tony compliments the chef, judging the food to be “fabulous”, to which Barrett responds by saying, fondly, that Tony’s appreciation of his culinary talents “make all the difference”. Barrett smiles and helps himself to a bottle of beer. As he does so, he speaks hesitantly about his “feelings” for Tony:

Barrett: You know, sometimes I get the feeling that we are two old pals.

PAUSE

Tony: That’s funny. I got the same feeling myself.

PAUSE

Barrett: I’ve only had that...same feeling once before.

Tony: Did you? When was that?

LONGER PAUSE

Barrett: Once in the army.

PAUSE

Tony: That’s funny. I had the same feeling myself there too.

[PAUSE]

Tony: Once.

The tone employed by both men is serious, yet tender and intimate, like two bashful schoolboys admitting a secret passion. The pauses, hesitations and gentleness displayed in the exchange speak at least as much as the dialogue itself. Yet nothing is clear: such passages depend upon their suggestiveness, hinting at a meaning beyond the surface, a meaning that might be located in the spaces between the words.

At the end of the film, as Barrett is marshalling all the guests out of the house, he tells the “Madame” – a well-dressed socialite who seems to be intimate with Tony – to return tomorrow night and to “bring John”. Apart from Tony and Barrett, all the faces at the aborted party are women. The introduction of a man into the nightly degenerate proceedings at the house might indicate homosexual tendencies in ei-

ther Tony or Barratt, or both of them. Whoever “John” might be, his presence “may suggest that the homosocial regime enforced by Barrett has encouraged an appetite in Tony for homosexual liaisons – or, at least, that “John” is to be used, like Vera, as some sort of instrument in Barrett’s plans for his master’s demise” (SERGEANT, p. 82). However, the phrase “bring John” is left hanging in the air, unclear and unresolved, merely suggestive of darker forces at work beyond the dialogue, in the realms of the unspoken, where much of the film gathers its potency.

Reflecting on *The Servant* nearly forty years after its release, Pinter remembered the film as “stinking of moral corruption” (PINTER, 2000, p. ix), and Losey has described the film as redolent of, what he calls, “false values”. However, it would be misleading to categorize the message of the film in such ways, without considering the historical context of its making. Both “morality” and “values” are fluid rather than fixed terms: they are subject to historical change, the tenets of specific societies and the differing interpretations of individuals within those societies. Losey’s attribution of “false values” to an understanding of *The Servant* is not meant to be prescriptive, however, but highlights the relative nature of such values. In an interview with James Leahy, Losey said the film highlighted:

the consequences of, the ultimate deterioration resulting from, living by false values – turning the relationship upside down to expose the falsity of values on both sides, a falsity leading, finally, to utter degradation and disaster for all concerned...Every society has its false values...and the question...is the degree to which people are free to explore them, combat them, change them (GALE, p. 8).

Losey’s analysis cuts across class, suggesting both Barrett and Tony are infected and deluded by “false values” which can contaminate the working classes and upper classes alike. Indeed, the very idea of class, of superior and inferior positions, of privilege, dominance and subservience, of respect for authority and “knowing one’s place”, are savagely exposed as hollow in the *The Servant*. However, those “false values” which reside within, and define the English class system, need to be examined in the light of the pervading ideological discourses that characterised England in the early 1960s, when the film was made.

“You Can’t Have
It On A Plate
Forever”:
*The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter’s The
Servant*

By 1963, the traditional cornerstones of public opinion on ethical issues were beginning to subside in England. The poet Philip Larkin, looking back wryly some years later, captured the mood of the country in the opening stanza of his poem *Annus Mirabilis*:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(which was rather late for me) -
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP

Martin John
Fletcher

284

A number of social and historical factors generated these changing attitudes, which together ushered in the so-called “permissive society”. Firstly, D.H. Lawrence’s notorious novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* had finally been deemed fit to publish in 1960, after an infamous trial on charges of obscenity, and more than thirty years after it had been written. Secondly, a British-made contraceptive pill for women was launched in 1963, the moment novelist Fay Weldon describes as “the beginning of the separating out of babies from sex” (THORPE, 2013). Thirdly, the ignominious Profumo affair, which forced the resignation of a cabinet minister who had lied about his affair with a young model, Christine Keeler, and exposed the hypocrisy of government leaders expected to set moral standards. Leahy explains how Losey deliberately used a particular chair in a sex scene between Tony and Vera to suggest a parallel between the film and the infamous affair. “[O]ne of the prime functions of the scene between James Fox, Sarah Miles and the designer chair was to generate a visual evocation of an iconic photographic image of Christine Keeler posed [naked] in a similar chair” (LEAHY, 2002). According to social historian David Kynaston, the national scandal, which also involved a Russian agent, “was one of the things that switched the English default position on politics from deference to scepticism, if not yet to cynicism” (THORPE, 2013). Also, as Larkin reminds us, 1963 was the year *The Beatles* began their steep climb to world fame, the group playing a significant part in a social revolution which created new cultural spaces, and a voice for young people.

These factors produced a new loosening of moral strictures in post-war England, as people began to question the sanctity of establishment codes and the authority of a class system that had held fast for

decades. In a sense, *The Servant* reflects this erosion of accepted values, which began in the early 1960s and gathered force as the decade continued. The film, however, also plays a role in *producing* societal change, by highlighting the arbitrary nature of class divisions, power hierarchies and ethical codes. Losey was no stranger to radical thought: a one-time member of the communist party, he had studied in Germany under Bertolt Brecht and visited Russia in the nineteen thirties to study the soviet theatre (COLLINS, 2013). One recent reviewer of *The Servant* identifies the influence of Losey's esteemed mentors in the making of the film.

In the spirit of Brecht and Meyerhold, the movie's rejection of a passive, purely observational style and its creative use of sound, framing and editing, sensitised audiences not just to the destructive relations inside the master's London home, but to those of British society at large (MARAS, 2012).

The abuse of power, always a tendency in societies stratified by class, can promote the view that such class relations are essentially "destructive"; the hierarchies of wealth, privilege and social position, which disintegrate in *The Servant*, were also beginning to show serious signs of strain in English society.

In order to illustrate one of the layers of class antagonism on display in *The Servant*, I want to look briefly at the character of Susan, and in particular, how she reacts to the ascendancy of Barrett. Susan's scepticism about Barrett from the beginning of the film is heightened by Pinter's sense of irony. When Tony mentions he has hired a "manservant", Susan retorts with, "a what!?" unmasking Tony's pretension and revealing how outdated are his concepts. Susan's tone turns to sarcasm when she is served dinner by Barrett sporting white gloves. When Tony admits the gloves were Barrett's idea, Barrett quickly adds that gloves are used "in Italy, miss", to which Susan quips, "who by?" – a question left unanswered. In the same scene, Barrett pours the wine, excusing its modesty by saying "It's a good bottler". Susan's response is, by now, almost predictable: "A good what?" Tony repeats, with emphasis, "A good bottler!" as if to suggest that only people of higher social rank would understand the term. These exchanges not only highlight Tony's (and Barrett's) archaic affectations – soon to be shattered – they also alienate Susan from the gamesmanship deployed by the two ex-army

"You Can't Have
It On A Plate
Forever":
*The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter's The
Servant*

285

men. Susan has another dig at Barrett after he has (deliberately) disturbed the couple's attempt at lovemaking on the drawing room floor. As she is leaving, she looks into the servant's eyes and asks, sarcastically, "Isn't it time you were tucked up in bed?" at once humiliating him and flaunting her superiority. Susan may look upon Barrett as a threat, recognising, from the off, that "Tony's hiring of a manservant betokens his laziness and vanity and (more worrisome for her) may confirm him in his bachelor status" (SARGEANT, p. 16). Nevertheless, she appears to take pleasure in asserting her status above him, addressing him with a tone of mock derision. *The Servant* will reveal how Susan's haughty arrogance also belongs to a bygone age of strict class divisions, of accepted roles of dominance and subservience.

Susan's showdown with Barrett comes later, when she turns up on the doorstep to be informed, curtly, "I'm afraid the master's not at 'ome". She barges into the house issuing a tirade of orders in a tone of brutal imperiousness. After insulting Barrett by asking if he "uses a deodorant", she throws some new cushions on the sofa before asking the servant what he thinks about her decorative idea. Before Barrett, visibly shaken, has time to answer, she announces, snootily, "I don't give a tinker's gob what you think!". By adopting the kind of gutter language she imagines Barrett might use himself, she crassly reveals how flimsy power relations can become when masks are removed. Losey's direction and Pinter's language show how Susan is both defined by the very outmoded class divisions she mocks in Tony, at the same time as she contradicts those divisions by sinking to Barrett's level. Although Susan has every right to be suspicious of Barrett's intentions in the house, she seizes an opportunity to be offensive and trample over his lower status, ordering him to "put that coat down and give me a light". Indeed, it is Susan, more than Tony, who displays the ugly side of her presumed superior class ranking.

The issue of class, a prevalent thematic element in *The Servant*, is also a key element in any analysis of the peculiarities of "Englishness". Losey and Pinter's film is emblematic of several strains of Englishness, at a time when accepted belief systems and hierarchies were under threat. In a sense, the film portrays the post-war English class system in crisis, evoking the dying embers of empire and crumbling power relations. One of the indicators of this deterioration is the inclusion of a kind of archaic terminology in the film, some examples of which I shall try to classify. "Manservant": Susan's surprise at Tony's designation of Barrett highlights how antiquated

the word had become by the early nineteen sixties. Manservant implies a kind of lackey more associated with the Raj – an Englishman in India in the heyday of empire would usually employ one particular man to see to his every need (according to Sargeant, Tony is cast in *The Servant* as a “son of Empire”) (SARGEANT, p. 35). “Butler”: although not used in the film, Barrett really aspires to the position of butler, or “gentleman’s gentleman”, in many cases a confidante and advisor to the master.

Barrett’s pretensions, however are scuppered because he is forced to assume too much responsibility, cooking, cleaning and even decorating the place for the hapless Tony. The scarcity of people who could afford a butler in the nineteen sixties rendered the term obsolete. “Nanny”: Tony chides Barrett for being “too skinny to be a nanny”, indicating that he was brought up by nannies himself, which is not only a sign of wealth and upper-class status, but also suggests he was indulged as a child, and now expects to be spoilt similarly as an adult. “Bachelor”: this is another obsolete term, or one used only ironically, though with numerous connotations. In *The Servant*, Susan uses the word to mock Tony, though she presumably fears he may not be “the marrying kind”. The term was often employed euphemistically by, and for, homosexual men who had to hide their predilections. Tony’s old-fashioned, bachelor status is only made possible by using a servant to do everything for him; although he asks Susan to marry him early in the film, he also shows signs of shunning the entrapment of marriage, whilst not refusing opportunities to enjoy noncommittal sex. “Aristocrat”: Sargeant dubs Tony “a junior aristocrat” (SARGEANT, p. 73) implying he was born into “the master class” and is destined to enjoy the privileges of power.

However, Tony’s pompous complacency casts him back to a time almost before the Victorian age; by the early sixties, the aristocracy was a fading class anachronism. “Peasant”: although often used as a general term of abuse, when Tony screams at Barrett, in a fit of anger, “You’re a peasant!” the connotations of the word resonate with snobbery. Tony’s choice of terminology reveals his delusional worldview: when his aristocratic status fails to deter Barrett, he reaches for a feudal epithet, thereby assuming a “lordly” position over his minion.

In a sense, Tony’s downfall begins at the beginning. After he has sat Barrett down for his interview, he tries to improvise a job description. “Apart from the cooking”, he says, “I’ll need...well...

“You Can’t Have
It On A Plate
Forever”:
*The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter’s The
Servant*

everything! I'll need general looking after, you know" (my italics). "Oh, yes, I do, sir", says Barrett. The "junior aristocrat's" self-important and unrealistic expectations invite exploitation. The implication being that servants given a free hand, who do not really "know their place", are liable to abuse their position. "Barrett ostensibly presents himself as something more than a cut above a nanny – 'a gentleman's gentleman' – a personal fag – a man who does for his master, lives in and presumes and exploits, thereby, a privileged position of intimacy" (SARGEANT, p. 14). Tony's English schoolboy dream of hiring a composite personal servant befitting his social position – part butler, nanny, fag, lackey, cleaner and cook – betrays his aristocratic impotence, his inability to take charge of anything, including the encroaching power of his hired hand, Barrett.

This impotence, built on the crumbling foundations of empire, an imaginary England of lords, "gentlemen", "peasants" and servants who do "everything", is satirized in *The Servant* by the Mountsets, friends of Tony's family who own a sprawling country estate. Losey and Pinter frame and present Lord and Lady Mountset as archaic and supercilious snobs who, as ageing versions of Tony, reflect back his "junior aristocrat" pretensions. Our first glimpse of Lord Mountset shows him standing cross-legged and smoking a pipe, a pompous attitude that makes him appear like a relic from an eighteenth century family portrait. Lady Mountset, sitting sewing on the divan, haughtily dismisses Susan's (accurate) attempt to correct her about the meaning of the word "poncho". Both Mountsets appear distant and irrelevant, resting on laurels that have putrefied long ago.

Perhaps the most telling symptom of Englishness displayed in *The Servant* is identifiable in the ambiguous relationship between Barrett and Tony. One of the main indicators, already mentioned, is the intimate "feeling" both characters admit to in the meal scene. The fact that both of them mention the army is also indicative. The English public school system, responsible for Tony's (and Robin Maugham's) education, has earned a reputation within English culture as a seed-bed of homosexuality, particularly before World War Two. Eton, Harrow, Rugby and the other celebrated boarding schools were always strict male enclaves, encouraging a "type" of teacher once described by Cyril Connolly, euphemistically, as "that repressed and familiar type, the English male virgin" (CONNOLLY, p. 235).

Connolly's recollections of Eton reveal how he and his school chums, isolated and denied access to female company, thought it normal to develop a "crush" on another boy. The army, in particular the officer class, can be seen as a continuation of this male bonding (interestingly, the three most prominent English World War One poets – Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen – all had homosexual tendencies) (MURRAY, Ch. 2, 3, 4). This homosexual strain, spawned by the exclusive, upper-class English school system, also reaches into modern literature, through novels such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, E.M. Forster's *Maurice* and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. In *Women in Love*, D.H. Lawrence (though hardly a public school type) even suggests that love between two men is the only true kind. At one point, Gerald says to Birkin,

I've never felt it myself – not what I should call love. I've gone after women – and been keen enough over some of them. But I've never felt LOVE. I don't believe I've ever felt as much LOVE for a woman, as I have for you – not LOVE. You understand what I mean?" (LAWRENCE, pp. 490-497).

This speech could be seen as an elaboration of the intimate admissions about "feelings" made by both Barrett and Tony. Birkin also says to Gerald, "We are mentally, spiritually intimate, therefore we should be more or less physically intimate too – it is more whole" (LAWRENCE, pp. 490-497).

In *The Servant*, the intimate bond alluded to by both Tony and Barrett during the meal is reinforced by Pinter's dialogue and Losey's direction. In the pub scene, when Barrett tries to ingratiate himself with Tony to get his job back, he says, "I was so happy there with you. It was like bliss". This child-like sentimentality not only hints at Barrett's emotional immaturity, it also suggests the relationship had been much more than that between employer and servant. Later, reinstated, Barrett berates Tony for not getting a job in manner that displays a new effeminacy ("camp"), and suggests a more open intimacy between the pair. Stretched out on the couch, Tony says, in his defence, "As a matter of fact, I'll be meeting a man very shortly". Barrett responds with, "What man? The man from Brazil? What's he going to do for you? Comes out by a helicopter on the roof, does he?" which prompts from

"You Can't Have It On A Plate Forever":
The English class system implodes in Losey and Pinter's The Servant

Tony, “Oh why don’t you shut up!”. This jocular banter is more redolent of a lovers’ tiff than a serious discussion about employment. Even more intimacy is suggested when, during the ball game played on the stairs, Barrett says, “That’s the point of the game, the bending. You’re getting as fat as a pig. You need the exercise”. Later, when the game turns to a menacing version of hide-and-seek, Barrett rushes up the stairs to find Tony. “Where’s your little lair this time?” he teases. “Puss...puss...puss...pussy...puss...puss...puss”, whispers Barrett as he creeps forward. This childish playfulness might be both affectionate and intimate, but it is also deeply disturbing, the dark mood heightened in this scene by bleak, edgy background music. Despite these allusions, hints and suggestions, the relationship between Tony and Barrett remains defiantly inscrutable. Though I am suggesting that it might be classified as a particular kind of English male bonding, with overtones of homosexuality, the film does not allow for final judgements. Pinter and Losey merely suggest, they do not disclose, and it is from this that the film garners much of its power.

The ambiguity of relationships in *The Servant* is part of the film’s more general enigmatic sense; the grey areas of the film become ever darker as the action unfolds. One of the motifs for darkening the film’s message is the recurrence of an oblique, melancholy love song, a record Tony appears to play constantly on his radiogram. The lyrics for the song, *All’s Gone* (sung by Cleo Laine and played by Johnny Dankworth), were composed by Pinter and encapsulate the film’s mystique:

Now while I love you alone
Now while I love you alone
Now while I love you
Can’t love without you
Must love without you
Alone

Leave it alone
It’s all gone
Don’t stay to see me
Turn from your arms
Leave it alone

It's all gone
Give me my death
Close my mouth
Give me my breath
Close my mouth
How can I bear
The ghost of you here
Can't love without you
Must love without you
Alone

*"You Can't Have
It On A Plate
Forever":
The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter's *The
Servant**

291

While the "I" of the lyric would appear to be Tony himself, the "you" is more nebulous, initially suggesting Susan, but, as the film continues, also having resonance if substituted for Vera, or even Barrett. The eerie rhyme of "death" with "breath" before the "ghost of you" appears, and the idea of loving "alone" give the song a morbid intensity. Just before the final party scene, a dazed Tony warns Susan to "leave it alone... it's all gone", though she appears not to understand. What has "gone" exactly, and what "it" is that Susan must "leave alone", are, of course, never spelled out. Pinter's message lies somewhere behind the lyric, in the darker spaces Losey creates as the film progresses. Although it might be natural for movie audiences to wrestle with the meaning of *The Servant*, Pinter never offers anything as definite as the "truth", claiming,

there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost (PINTER, 2005).

Despite its menace, the final impression left by *The Servant* is not that of a depressing tale of treachery, finished off with a kind of bleak pessimism. Pinter's enigmatic wit does not allow for that. In addition, Losey's decision to make the film contemporary with its 1963 production opened up new possibilities of interpretation, linked to the profound changes in values sweeping through England, a cultural revolution that would charac-

terize the decade in the historical imagination. When Pinter described the film as “stinking of moral corruption”, in some ways that “morality” was already outdated by the early 1960s. The “false values” Losey identified in the film were about to be severely questioned by a decade of liberating ideologies. Tony’s downfall is not shocking, but symbolizes the failure of the upper class to maintain its tenuous position of power in English society. Barrett may be an opportunist scoundrel, but his accession to power is hardly criminal; he easily takes control of a weak and deluded young man whose accident of birth has provided wealth and authority.

Martin John
Fletcher

292

As The Beatles also came to prominence in 1963, I am reminded of the opening lines of a song, “A Day in the Life”, written by John Lennon in 1967. Lennon offers his version of how a wealthy socialite – 21 year-old Tara Browne, son of a Baron and heir to the Guinness fortune – died after crashing his Lotus sports car in Chelsea in 1966, not far from the street where Tony parks his own sports car outside the house featured in *The Servant*. Lennon had met Browne, a former Eton pupil, on the London party circuit and the peer’s son gave Paul McCartney his first taste of the hallucinogenic drug, LSD (ROBERTS, 2012).

I read the news today oh boy
About a lucky man who made the grade
And though the news was rather sad
Well I just had to laugh
I saw the photograph.
He blew his mind out in a car
He didn't notice that the lights had changed
A crowd of people stood and stared
They'd seen his face before
Nobody was really sure
If he was from the House of Lords.

The “lucky man who made the grade” (reportedly driving his car at incredibly high speed through Chelsea at the time of the crash) was essentially a playboy whose position in society, like Tony’s, was propped up by the privileges of inherited wealth. If the 1960s was the decade of The Beatles, it was also the start of a shift of power in England from an irrelevant aristocracy to a new meritocracy. In a sense, *The Ser-*

vant could be seen as political allegory: like John Lennon, Hugo Barrett represents the rise of the working class to positions of influence; both men seize the historical moment to create something new and daring. Though Barrett's methods are essentially destructive, this does not detract from the fact that the "type" represented by Tony (and Tara Browne) was ripe for replacement in the England of the 1960s.

*"You Can't Have
It On A Plate
Forever":
The English class
system implodes
in Losey and
Pinter's The
Servant*

REFERÊNCIAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

CAUTE, David. **Joseph Losey: A Revenge on Life**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

COLLINS, Frank. **The servant – studio canal DVD review**. April 9, 2013. <<http://www.cathoderaytube.co.uk/2013/04/british-cult-classics-servant.html>>. Access: 02, March, 2015.

CONNOLLY, Cyril. **Enemies of Promise**. London: André Deutsch, 1988.

GALE, Steven H. **Harold Pinter's Plays and the Artistic Process**. Kentucky: University Press, 2003.

LARKIN, Philip (ed.). **The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

LAWRENCE, D. H. **Women in Love**. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

LAWSON, Mark. **Renaissance for the nationality that dared not speak its name**. Guardian: October 15, 2005.

LEAHY, James. **Losey Revisited**. Senses of Cinema, Issue 21, July 2002.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/director-joseph-losey/losey_revisited/>. Access: 02, March, 2015.

MARAS, Robert. **Dissecting class relations: The film collaborations of Joseph Losey and Harold Pinter**. World Socialist Web Site, May 28, 2012.

<<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/05/lose-m28.html>>. Access: 02, March, 2015

MAUGHAM, Robin. **The Servant**. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1949.

MONK, Ray. **Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude, 1872 – 1921**. New York: The Free Press, 1996.

MURRAY, Nicholas. **The Red Sweet Wine of Youth: British Poets of the First World War**. London: Little, Brown, 2010.

Martin John
Fletcher

PINTER, Harold. **'Oh, Superman': Opinion**. BBC Channel 4, May 31, 1990.

294

PINTER, Harold. **Collected Screenplays Volume 1**. London: Faber, 2000.

PINTER, Harold. **Art, Truth and Politics: Nobel Lecture, December 7, 2005**. Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 2005.

ROBERTS, Glenys. **A Day in the Life: Tragic true story behind one of the Beatles' most famous hits**. Daily Mail, November 22, 2012.

SARGEANT, Amy. **The Servant**. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

THE SERVANT. Director: Joseph Losey. Production: Joseph Losey and Norman Priggen. Screenplay: Harold Pinter. Studio Canal DVD, 2002 (original: Springbok films, 1963).

THORPE, Vanessa. Sex began 50 years ago, Larkin said. How has the Earth moved since 1963? **The Observer**, Saturday 27 April, 2013.

TSE, Carman. *Film Review: 50 Years Later British Classic 'The Servant' Is Still Dizzying And Resonant*. August 30, 2013. <http://laist.com/2013/08/30/the_servant_rerelease_movie_review.php>. Access: 02, March, 2015.

Recebido em 10 de setembro de 2015

Aceito em 11 de novembro de 2015