

NEROSUBIANCO

The film that almost could have changed
Hollywood-cinema of the 1960s

Analysis

by

Alexander Tuschinski,

2011

This analysis was written as an academic exercise
at Stuttgart Media University.
(Hochschule der Medien, Stuttgart)

I. Introduction

The movie *Nerosubianco* by Tinto Brass, filmed in London in 1967/68, is a very unusual narrative feature-film. It revolves around the story of Barbara, a married woman feeling attracted to another man. While showing us her attraction and inner conflict, it addresses many different social issues of the 1960s and utilizes many different narrative techniques.

Indeed, the film's techniques are so unusual that the "story" itself can hardly be summarized and is open to interpretation even after repeat viewing.

Although the film remained relatively obscure to mainstream audiences (especially in the United States), its revolutionary "filmic language" impressed some key-players in the Hollywood film industry so much that they decided to offer Tinto Brass an unique opportunity: To direct "A clockwork orange", a big-budget film to be produced by Paramount. An offer which he, because of some scheduling conflicts, declined.

"A clockwork orange" was later directed by S. Kubrick and became one of the 70s iconic films.

Because of this, *Nerosubianco* (English title: *Attraction*) is especially fascinating: Had Tinto Brass accepted the offer to direct "A clockwork orange" afterwards, it would surely have changed mainstream Hollywood-cinema because of its unique and new visual language.

The main tasks of this paper:

1. Analysis of the story: What is the film about, and what stylistic means does it use?

The movie's "story-line" is very complex, and there are many aspects we need to analyse. Also, special regard has to be paid to the complex cinematic "language" (i.e. camera angles, cuts, etc.) which is used to transport much of the film's meaning.

2. Comparison to other films of the 1960s.

How does this film compare to 1960s Hollywood Cinema? What is different? And can we find similarities to 1960s "independent" Hollywood-films like e.g. "Easy Rider"?

3. American release, and why did the film almost change Hollywood-cinema?

The American release received little reaction among the public, probably due to a misleading marketing strategy.

Nevertheless, why did it impress Paramount-Executives so much that they invited Tinto Brass to Hollywood in order to hire him for their next project?

II. The director: Tinto Brass



1. Tinto Brass (*1933)

(Source: <http://rjbuffalo.com/tinto1.html>)

Tinto Brass was Born in Milano in 1933. He studied the laws and finished his university degree, but in 1957 moved to Paris in order to work at the Cinémathèque Française. There he made his first short film.

In his early career, he experimented with lots of filmic genres, be they comedy (“La Disco Volante”, 1964), Western (“Yankee”, 1965/66) or crime (“Col Cuore in gola”, 1967).

His camera- and editing-style up until the early 1980s were unique and very experimental:

He liked quick, unexpected cuts, coupled with lots of unconventional camera-moves and angles, making his movies of that time very “impressionist”. For that reason, during his whole career he’s always insisted on editing his own movies. Another important factor was that on set, he used lots of improvisation in order to make actor’s performances natural and spontaneous looking.

In the 1970s, he directed one big commercial hit (“Salon Kitty”, 1975), which coupled arthouse-cinema character-set-pieces with shocking sexual and violent scenes. That film, although banned and censored in many countries, opened doors for Brass’ biggest production yet: “Caligula”.

But that last film, starring well-known actors like Malcolm McDowell, Helen Mirren, Peter O’Toole and John Gielgud, proved to be problematic: Brass was not allowed to edit it (which resulted in a very conventional, slow editing style), and the producer decided to delete/restructure major story-scenes and add hardcore sexual footage which changed the film immensely: A political, shocking satire became a pornographic drama. For that reason, this film, which Tinto Brass is best known for internationally, only faintly resembles his original vision.

Starting in the 1980s, his films became more and more erotic, which often overshadows his earlier, more experimental work: Today, he is mostly known as a director of “Softcore erotic films”. Currently (2011), he is preparing to direct a 3D erotic comedy about the emperor Caligula.

III. The film's story and structure: A rough outline

The film's structure is difficult to summarize, because it operates on many different levels. The premise is simple: Barbara – a married woman – is dropped-off in Hyde-Park by her husband Paolo. He has something to do elsewhere, and she rather wants to wait for him in the park.

In this park, she encounters Hippies with their alternative lifestyle and starts wandering around London. In the subway, she encounters a black man who she immediately feels attracted to. He notices that and starts following her throughout the city.

While Barbara walks around, she keeps thinking about having an affair with the man, but she is torn between the loyalty to her husband and the sexual attraction to the stranger. There's almost no dialogue between the two; we get to know Barbara's thoughts by different means: One is by voice-overs and lots of clever edits showing pictures crossing her mind. But most important: The band "Freedom", who composed the soundtrack, often appear in different locations, performing songs. Their lyrics often transport messages which help us understand the images we are seeing. Thus, actually, most of the film is "surrealist": Often, a sequence starts by having us briefly see a realistic scene of Barbara's walk around London (like her entering a Barber-shop, 15:08), which quickly changes to some sort of "surrealist"/"Stream of Consciousness-montage" (in this particular case, the women in the shop turn into cows, followed by cutting to scenes with her husband, accompanied by a song of the band "Freedom"). After some time of showing "surrealist" images (and often the band), the movie cuts back to a more realistic scenery again. (here: Barbara exiting the Barber shop, watched by the black man).

By using this narrative technique, we get to "see" lots of things which enter Barbara's mind. And by doing so, director Tinto Brass gets the chance to address lots of issues of the 1960s: Housewives, bored by their dull life and boring men, trying to break free; protests against the Vietnam-war; racism in England; contraception by taking the pill; conflict between strict religious sexual moral and a more detached, scientific look at sexuality, etc.

During these scenes, we also learn that Barbara is frustrated by her husband (especially sexually), but still loves him. (Although, as I'll describe later, it's open to interpretation).

Finally, Barbara is back in the park and lets her inhibitions go, embracing the black man. But as they are lying under a tree, not yet kissing, she suddenly starts feeling bad about it and runs back to her husband, who is already waiting for her at the edge of the park, leaving the black man behind her and thus returning to her marriage.

All in all, one can roughly summarize the film's structure as follows (with a few exceptions): It is built of multiple sequences, each starting with "the real world", and then drifting into Barbara's "dream"-world. This transition is linked to the start of a song. As the song plays, we see Barbara both in the real world, and what she thinks about in her mind. After the song has ended, these mind-images can continue for a while, before going back to "the real world".

About the film's title:

The film's title *Nerosubianco* is a word-play: The literal translation would be "Black on White", a phrase which we also hear in a song at the end of the movie (01:13:31). There are different meanings: In case of the film, the rather comical meaning "Black (man) on white (woman)" could apply. But the expression "Black on white" can also be understood differently: "(Here you have the facts written) black on white!", meaning that the film is a statement, telling its message "black on white" (i.e. clearly). Another aspect: On the film's promotional materials, the word *EROS* in *nEROSubianco* is highlighted in red.

That's another wordplay reflecting Barbara's erotic fascination to the stranger.

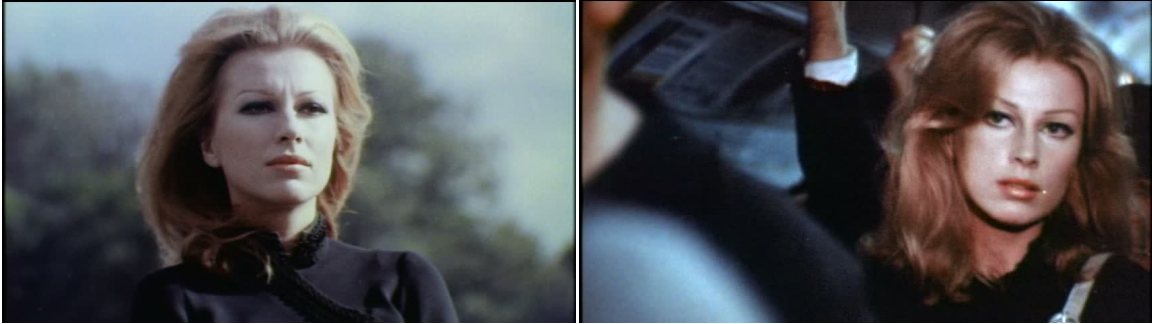
More about the English title in Chapter VI.

IV. The three main characters

Barbara: She is married to Paolo. Aged about 30-40, we don't get to know much about her background or job. We can assume that she is a housewife, as she fantasizes about a housewife's frustration during the song "Relation" (starting 00:19:17). Although she loves Paolo, she is sexually frustrated, as we get to know during the sequence starting at (00:55:19) She seems to have had a strict religious education in her childhood, as we get to know by a voiceover before the song "Childhood Reflection" in which she asks about the church's opinion on masturbation (00:24:00).

Paolo: He is Barbara's husband. He loves her, but has some stereotypical attitudes of a long-married husband, like sometimes rather watching TV at home than talking to her (23:00). To Barbara, sexually he seems boring ("all very proper (..) just like Paolo, always efficient (...) " 00:53:55)

The black man: His name is never mentioned. He is dressed elegantly with a white pullover, carrying a photo camera with him. We don't get to know his job: Could he be a photographer? Or an American tourist in London? The fact that we don't really get to know him really illustrates Barbara's attraction which is only based on looks and sexual attraction for him. He seems to be quite helpful, trying to help Barbara escape from a Chinese agitator (00:38:59) and giving her some photos back she's forgotten in a photo machine (00:46:34). During the whole film, he and Barbara don't really exchange words. The only time he's talking to her is (00:46:34): " Hey lady, please! Your Pictures! You forgot your pictures! Here, take a look!", when he wants to give her some photos back which she forgot in a photo-booth.



Barbara, the main character.

- 2. Left: In the beginning, standing in the park and thinking whether to stay or drive with her husband.
- 3. Right: In the subway, gazing at the black man for the first time.



Paolo, Barbara's husband.

- 4. Left: In the beginning, while dropping her off in the park.
- 5. Right: In one of Barbara's dreamlike visions (00:22:45), sitting passively in front of a TV, ignoring her.



The black man

- 6. Left: In the subway, during his first encounter of Barbara.
- 7. Right: "Rescuing" her from a Chinese agitator by giving him a copy of Malcolm X's autobiography. (00:38:59)

V. Analysis and comparison to mainstream Hollywood-cinema.

How does the film tell its story? But first of all, can we classify the film as belonging to a certain genre, like drama, romance, comedy?

What genre does the film belong to?

An essential factor one notices immediately is the use of music: The band Freedom, who composed the film's score, often appears in the film performing their songs. Indeed, most of the film is set to their songs, and during the scenes in which their songs are playing there are only seldomly voice-overs, putting their songs and their lyrics aurally in the foreground in those scenes. This could remind one of typical American musical movies (like "Singing in the Rain" or "The Producers"), in which songs are mostly performed "in the scene" by visible performers or the protagonists of the film, and not playing as background music just accompanying the scenes, not affecting the protagonists. These musicals also put strong emphasis on the lyrics, which are necessary to drive on the story (Take for example "The Producers", in which in the beginning the producer tries to convince the accountant to co-produce a play with him by singing).

Is it a traditional musical?

This categorization is not really that simple with *Nerosubianco*: Although the songs are sometimes used to tell us about Barbara's inner feelings, one can not help to notice that quite often the lyrics only faintly reference what we see on the screen: Take for example the scene in which Barbara visits the barbershop. We see the old women sitting in the chairs chattering, which, for a comical effect, is speeded-up (00:15:15). After a barber asks a colleague "Will you take care of this old cow, will you?" (00:15:27), we see a close-up of Barbara's face, followed by shots of the old women having turned into cows (or rather wearing cow-masks). That moment a song starts and the lyrics at first directly reference this transformation: "A cow for a wife / Oh what a life". It then cuts to a scene to Barbara's bedroom, where a cow has taken her place on the bed and her husband enters. This still fits the lyrics: "A cow in your bed / Always well-fed" But then the lyrics and the images drift apart more and more: While the lyrics go on about how a cow for a woman would behave, actually criticizing some women's behaviour ("She'll kiss, she'll hug, but then she'll weep and wail! / When you turn your back she'll read your mail!"), we see images of the cows in the barbershop and Paolo, Barbara's husband, driving the cow out of his bed with a broom. While performing this song, the members of the band Freedom are standing in the barbershop, therefore making the music, which first started off-screen, now take place in the scene. After these first stanzas, we see stock-footage of bullfights accompanied by an instrumental part.

One might say that the pictures still match the lyrics, now in an indirect way: When we hear about the bad behaviours, we see the barber shop's customers dressed as cows, and Paolo driving the real cow out of his bedroom. This could be seen as a comment that the barbershop's customers – old, middle-class ladies – behave like that, a pun against the middle class. But it requires some thinking, and the connection remains ambiguous. And when the song ends with the enigmatic lines: "A husband is still / the butt of deception", set to pictures of Barbara lying sick in bed while her husband lets a doctor enter, any obvious connection of picture to lyrics is lost. Indeed, it still transports a mood, and one can imagine that Barbara's not happy with her husband by listening to these lines, but they are much more "enigmatic" and indirect than in comparable American musicals (Example: In "The Producers" the accountant works at his company, while he and his co-workers sing for minutes about how unhappy they are).

Or take, for example, the song "Childhood reflections" (00:24:10), which has lyrics only briefly corresponding with what we see on screen: "A sound mind / in a sound body" fits the mood of Barbara lying in a public bath getting a massage, but the rest of the images do not really reference the lyrics: Instead, they just show bath-scenes while Freedom plays there, and enigmatic scenes of Barbara and her husband at

home. Only at the end of the song we again get references to the lyrics: "You're a big girl now" is set to a funny scene in which Barbara, dressed with a red hood, runs away from a man masked as a beast. (00:26:50, A reference to the fairy-tail). When in the end the band sings the words "Childhood reflections", we get to see comic-pictures about a child being sexually molested (00:27:11) and a voice-over of a religious male voice advising children that sex is a sin (00:27:19). Thus, the images only fit to the lyrics during the beginning and the end of the song, while in the rest of the scene the music at least fits the mood (a rather slow piece of music played while we see a bath scene). Another example is during the scene with a laboratory measuring brain activity: Barbara is lying on a bed with electrodes connected to her head. She lies on her back, not moving, while the band sings: "You sit on your bed / Your face in your hands" (00:39:46). In this case, one could interpret the lyric's role to tell us about Barbara's feelings, while we see images crossing her mind. But before that scene starts, we see Barbara sitting in a bus, which means she is not really sitting on "her bed".

All in all, one can often see a connection between lyrics and visuals, but it requires additional thinking to connect them instead of having the film just "illustrating" the lyrics. Here, the lyrics and the visuals are different narrative levels which we both have to absorb in order to get the film's message.

What is the band's role?

Indeed, the band freedom's role is hard to define: They do tell us things that go on in Barbara's head, and they appear in the sets performing their music – lingering in a tree while Barbara walks through the park (beginning and end of the film park), drive in a bus behind Barbara (00:39:33), stand behind the windows of a building which Barbara watches (00:19:17), etc. In a traditional American musical (as well as traditional opera, etc.), it would have been much more common to have characters explain their emotions by singing themselves; in this case, Barbara singing what she's thinking about would be an approach taken by Hollywood-musicals. But during the whole film, she only talks to us through voice-overs.

What Brechtian ideas can we find?

So here it's a different approach, which reminds one of Brecht's epic theatre and also of antique greek tragedies: In antique tragedies, there was often a chorus explaining certain things, interacting with the figures. That role can be associated to Freedom: Although they interact with no one of the cast in any "physical" way, they give advice to Barbara and address her directly in their lyrics. ("Why try to disguise it?" (00:11:11)) It's notable that they often address Barbara in second person ("Your body is weak" (00:39:30), but sometimes also talk about her in third person: "Childhood reflections (...) float through her mind" (00:26:08) This leads to a more detached perspective, in which we, the viewers, get told what happens to her. This actually fits best Brecht's theories for his 20th-century epic theatre: To stop the illusion of portraying reality (e.g. Barbara's walk through London) the story is broken up with parts e.g. addressing the audience in order to make them think about what they are seeing.

Fitting to this, the band also address the viewer directly: "Free your women let them do / (...) everything they want to do!" (01:14:00) which is a method closely connected to Brecht's theory of the epic theatre. Indeed, in the end, there is a line in the lyrics which is most interesting in this case: "If from this tale you think there's no morale / well not for that we feel that is immoral!" (01:13:10). This is addressed directly to the viewer, and takes us completely out of the illusion of watching "reality" happen: The film is addressed as a tale. But who is "we"? The band freedom? The film's authors? A typical example of epic theatre making the viewer think.

Can this film be compared to other musical films?

It's certainly not a classical, Hollywood-Mainstream musical, and it's not really comparable to any other musical film's of the author's knowledge. A similar, Brechtian approach of having a band singing songs in the film, narrating parts of the story, was also used in Lindsay Anderson's "O lucky man", but that film's structure was much more conventional: There were lengthy dialogue-scenes and a compelling storyline, which was broken up with the songs. Also, the songs fit the story and the images much more closely, and the band interacted with the main character when they meet him in the second half of the film.

Nerosubianco's approach is much more surreal: The band only appears in Barbara's "dream" scenes, giving her advice what to do, commenting on what she's thinking. But who's commenting? Who's giving advice? Is it Barbara talking to herself? Or the filmmaker talking to Barbara through the band? The latter would seem more probable, as during the whole film we get to know her "direct" thoughts through voice-overs in which she is sort of talking to herself. There is a large stretch of the film during which we don't hear the band at all: After the song "born again", Barbara walks through town and encounters several different situations, which criticise 1960s society in many different subjects (e.g. racism / sexism / mass food production). This part without the band Freedom playing is quite long (00:43:30 – 01:07:10). During this, we mainly hear Barbara's thoughts via voice-overs, and they are getting more and more critical towards society and its rules, which is a big change compared to the beginning: In the beginning of the film, her voice-overs are quite short and sometimes insecure, and she "needs" the band Freedom to play while she has certain fantasies (e.g. her killing her husband with a toy-gun while Freedom play their song "Relation" (00:21:20). But after she is "born again" (i.e. after the song), she lets go of her inhibitions and starts becoming very critical thinking: Now she has multiple hallucinations and images in her head while we only hear her voice talking (e.g. "And then they say that negroes are savages..." in an ironic tone after a white man with a knife killed a black man who tried to help a woman (00:52:48)) The band re-appears only at 01:07:28 for the song "The game is over", which has a line that really fits the idea of Barbara starting thinking for herself: "Now you begin / to realize / what it means (...)" (01:07:55))



The band freedom appears in many different locations in the movie. Here a few examples.

8-11: Top left to bottom right: In a public bath, in front of Nelson's column, in a tree in Hyde park, on a cart in the scientific laboratory,

After the “Cow for a wife” scene, when Barbara leaves the salon again (00:18:35), we hear a male voice-over: “Something like a dream”. Thus we can assume that the band exists only in Barbara’s head. A further proof could be the scene in which Barbara enters a bus and takes a seat at the top level. (00:39:25). The black man sits a few seats behind her, and other passengers are present. A few seconds later, we hear a new song, and suddenly the band is standing at the back of the driving bus and the passengers except for Barbara and the black man are gone (00:39:33) While this song plays, we see surrealist laboratory-scenes, and again: At the end of the song, we can hear the same voice-over: “Something like a dream”, before cutting to Barbara roaming the streets of London (00:43:30).

The film’s approach remains unique and experimental, not found anywhere in Hollywood-mainstream-cinema, especially due to other stylistic means discussed in the following paragraphs.

How does the experimental editing stress the film’s messages?

While watching the film, one immediately notices the rapid, sometimes even frenetic cutting-pace, often showing a shot for just fractions of seconds. (e.g. 00:55:22, when Barbara thinks about a voyeur watching her, we see shots of his eye intercut with her with a shot-length of 1-2 frames each). This stylistic characteristic is essential to the “story”-telling, or rather to the messages the film wants to convey. Here, the camera-perspective and editing are at least as important as what’s actually happening in front of the camera. Indeed, often only by editing the footage it starts making sense, and the filmmaker imposes his ideas on the footage he uses.

Examples are numerous throughout the film, so let’s concentrate, as an example, on the topic of racism and how it is covered in the film: When Barbara encounters the black man in a natural history museum (00:49:00), we see his face with a gentle expression filmed from her perspective. Suddenly, this shot is intercut with rapid, menacing images of dinosaurs, angry grimaces, skeleton heads etc. Each of these shots lasts only 1-2 frames, and by the fast flashing, we only get an idea of a big menace, but have a hard time to identify what we really see. Afterwards, she panics and runs away. This scene is very effective: Before that scene, we saw racism against the black man who tried to give Barbara some photos back which she forgot at a photo-booth. (00:46:34). Some well-dressed, typical English people surround him as he politely tells Barbara that she has forgotten her photos, and they start chasing him. (00:46:45: “(...) nigger, get him!”). In their minds, a black man approaching a white woman must be up to no good. So, in the dinosaur-museum, we get Barbara’s prejudices illustrated by intercutting his gentle face with menacing pictures: For her, it doesn’t matter if he smiles at her, he is still someone to be afraid of just because of his skin color. Her attitude changes rapidly in the next sequence in which she watches a woman beaten by a (white) man. When a black man tries to help her, the white man brutally murders him with a knife. In this sequence, she questions her own prejudice as she watches the dead man by asking herself in an ironic tone: “And then they say that negroes are savages...” (00:52:48). This really fits to the idea that, after the song “born again”, she really starts thinking for herself.

The topic “racism” is addressed in many scenes, often by cinematographic means and especially by editing: In the beginning, when Barbara first sees the black man, her face is intercut with images of him dressed as a bushman, playfully chasing her in a jungle (00:08:40). These scenes are often used later in the film, and a good example of the non-verbal cinematic language illustrating her sexual attraction to this man, as well as her prejudices: Although he is dressed quite elegantly, she still imagines him as a “wild” savage, probably just because of his skin-colour. The Civil-Rights-movement in the USA is referenced sometimes, like during the scene with the Chinese agitator: The black man gives the Chinese man a book, after the latter gave Barbara a tiny red book (a reference to a book by Mao, though in the film the book actually contains a screenplay by Godard, as we see in a brief shot). The book the black man hands the agitator is the biography of Malcolm X, an important man in the Civil Rights movement (00:39:05). This sequence follows a very political scene in which we see Barbara walking through a demonstration against American engagement in Vietnam while the band Freedom plays. Their lyrics could be partly understood

to reflect racism (“Now you see the people in another light / the multi colours merge to one” 00:36:59) While they are singing, we see lots of black-and-white stock-footage, among them a shot of a Ku-Klux-Klan ceremony, in which clansmen are burning a cross (00:38:03), or of black people lined up in jail (00:37:44). This is an excellent example of how just the editing can impose meaning on certain footage. An idea very similar to Sergej Eisensteins “intellectual” montage-theories, which require the viewer to actively think about what he sees in each shot in order to make sense of what’s happening on the screen. Indeed, lots of the montage reminds one of early experimental Russian films of the 1920s; Sometimes, especially Dziga Vertov’s “Man with the movie-camera” crosses the mind, an experimental documentary. Nerosubianco has some similar editing patterns, especially in scenes with semi-documentary footage.



12-15: When Barbara takes photos of herself in a photo booth, we get another example of extremely quick cutting. These shots are only shown for a duration of 1-4 frames each, flashing by too quickly to be actively registered.

How is a semi-documentary filming approach realized?

Strongly linked to the editing is the choice of footage used in the film. In American Hollywood-mainstream feature-films, one can expect almost all scenes to be staged especially for the camera, and only small, rather insignificant parts of the footage derive from elsewhere: Stock-footage of landscapes and establishing shots of cities, and maybe some historical archive footage in a film dealing with a special period in history. But in any case, the “original” footage shot for the film would be very predominant, and all scenes featuring actors would be completely staged, with paid extras playing bystanders and other minor characters in the frame. Nerosubianco is completely different. The scenes with the main actors are of course staged, but not to an extent one would usually expect: We often get semi-documentary scenes, like when Barbara and the black man walk through a demonstration against the Vietnam-war: Both of them are still actors, but instead of hiring lots of extras playing protesters, Tinto Brass obviously filmed this scene at a real demonstration, therefore allowing us to basically see “documentary” footage of that demonstration (but edited in a non-documentary way, fitting Freedom’s playing in the film’s soundtrack). Many scenes are filmed this way [3], and Tinto Brass liked to use cut-aways showing normal people, who sometimes don’t even seem to be aware that they are being filmed. There are still lots of staged scenes, but generally the film gets a very authentic look by showing lots of normal people in normal London streets, like for example in the crowd-scenes after the song “Born again” (00:43:43). Although this approach would be uncommon for mainstream Hollywood feature-films, one can find similarities to an “independent” Hollywood film of the 60s: “Easy Rider”. In that film, the finale takes place during Mardi Gras in New Orleans and is filmed with 16mm cameras during the actual event, having the actors walking through the actual parade, giving that sequence a documentary feeling.



16-18: A real anti-Vietnam war demonstration which the actors move through.

How is archive footage used?

Especially during the second half of the movie, there is lots of black and white archive footage used. This is in harsh contrast to the rest of the film being shot in colour. If this was intentional or just due to the fact that most newsreel-footage at that time was still black&white remains open to speculation, but nonetheless, the archive-footage is easily discernible. The sources of the footage vary: Mostly we see documentary images of showing people and special events (like wars etc.), but sometimes we see scenes from other sources, like e.g. scientific footage showing impregnation under a microscope (00:41:15), or scenes from cinema history: In the beginning, when Barbara watches the band "Freedom" playing in a shop, we suddenly see famous shot from "Un chien andalou" by Buñuel showing a woman's eye being slit (00:12:56). Also, in the sequence called "Pornography of violence" in a voice-over, the author recognized a shot from S. Eisenstein's movie "Shtreik!", in which a cow is slaughtered. (00:32:32). This sequence is very interesting, as it is the first one in the film consisting almost entirely of archive-footage. This sequence actually introduces the second half of the film – which puts more emphasis on political issues – in a very provocative way: Paolo, dressed as a priest, suddenly appears during a song about a love commune, declaring: "Encourage people to make love is forbidden because it's dangerous, but it's not forbidden – even though it's more dangerous - to make war!", therefore the "forbidden&dangerous pictures of love-scenes will be substituted by (...) war scenes" (00:31:18). After showing a lot of archive shots of war, the sequence finally ends with Barbara and the black man walking through the demonstration. Again, a very brechtian idea, to interrupt the flow of the film violently and "shake the viewer awake". The message that love is forbidden is emphasized some more during the second half of the film, in which the director takes a leftist position on many political issues of that time, like telling us through Barbara's voice-over how "with sex you sell everything" in a monologue critical against advertising (00:53:48). The filmmaker doesn't hide the fact that this film is considered as a means to convey messages, and scenes like these state very clearly that he wants to deliver some messages directly. Not at all Hollywood's way: In almost all feature-films, even if they want to address issues directly, we get to know them by following a story-line. (See, for example, the action-film "Fire down below" from 1996, which shows environment-pollution in Kentucky by having its story set there.) Having the film-maker "address" us rather directly is a stylistic device more likely found in documentary films.



19-21: One of many instances of Archive-footage used: Three shots following each other, showing Hitler, Mussolini and a shouting ape in order to create meaning through editing. (00:34:12).

How does the film use comic-images and other drawings / texts?

Tinto Brass makes extensive use of comic frames and other drawings / signs sometimes flashing just very briefly, like a “VLAM!” when Barbara closes a door (00:49:17). The film is so full of visual ideas that one could list hundreds of examples; be they a tiny button “I love you” flashing right before Barbara sees the black man for the first time (00:08:15) or a shot showing a torn poster, possibly found by the production crew sticking on a wall “U.S. GET OUT OF VIETNAM NOW!” (00:54:15). Any list of examples during a short analysis has to remain incomplete, as there are literally hundreds or thousands of different motifs of this kind throughout the film. Again, we can find a faint similarity to “Easy Rider”: In one scene of that film, the editing is strikingly similar to Nerosubianco: Before both bikers wake up in a prison cell in the middle of the movie, we get to see very fast impressions of close-ups showing drawings on the cell walls. During this brief sequence, especially the editing as well as the motives (pictures and texts painted on a wall) very well recall Tinto Brass’ editing style.



22-24: Three of the numerous examples of comic-images and other illustrations flashing throughout the movie.

How is the image framed and technically manipulated?

Another important aspect for Tinto Brass is framing and technical manipulation of footage filmed for the film: Often, it's just through framing or colour-manipulation that footage gets a meaning; Something unheard of in Hollywood-Mainstream-Films, in which the meaning would not solely rely on the formal aspects of framing or colouring, but rather on the content and actions being shown.

After the song “Relation” we see one of many instances in which Tinto Brass uses framing in order to bring additional meaning to a scene: We see a dialogue between Barbara and her husband sitting in two arm-chairs. The way they are talking seems very distanced: “Paolo”- “Yeah?” – “Listen.” – “What?” (...) “What do you want?” – “Who?” – “You.” – “Me?” – “Yes, you!” (00:22:10). This dialogue is filmed using lots of masking, which results in large parts of the frame being black, and the couple being only shown in small “windows” of the black frames, intercut with frame-filling close-ups of their hands with their marriage-rings. This framing, showing both in a black surrounding gives us (who view the film through Barbara’s viewpoint) a feeling of confinement, and the marriage-ring shows us visually that the reason for this is her marriage. As this scene takes place during a “dream”-sequence (which ends when we see Barbara back on a boat “in the real world”), these framings intend to show us what is going on in her mind. One shot in this sequence is especially striking: Suddenly, we see a wide shot showing the whole room with thick vertical, black lines superimposed generating the impression of a cage. Together with that shot, we hear a tiger roar while Barbara’s mouth makes an accompanying move, followed by a comical remark: “Put a tiger in your tank” set to a picture of an Esso advertising! (00:22:35)

The cage-motive is used quite often in the film to show confinement, mostly with horizontal lines. (00:24:27)



25-30: Examples of different framings in the quickly-edited sequence showing Barbara and Paolo sitting in front of a TV.



31: Barbara roars like a tiger. The vertical stripes reference a cage. (00:22:35)

How does the film use colors, and does it use symbolism?

Tinto Brass likes to play with colour-manipulation in this film in numerous occasions. One striking example takes place quite in the beginning, when Barbara fantasizes about the black man touching her. We can see his hand moving towards her thighs. This image is shown with different colour-effects in rapid succession: Most strikingly, it's shown with reversed colours, making the black man "white" and Barbara's skin "black". Another statement on racism! (00:14:19). The "black&white" symbolism is shown often: When Barbara and the black man "dance" on a zebra-strip, the way they are dressed is interesting: She, the white woman, is dressed all in black, while the black man is dressed in white! (00:58:18). Again, here we see a short image shot with negative colours.



32-34: During the discussed sequence, we see examples of negative colours and black&white footage.

There are numerous examples of visual symbolism to be found in the movie. A particularly striking one is a brief shot which we see both in the beginning and at the end of the film: Barbara takes a bite off an apple in Hyde Park; an apple given to her by a random Hippie passing by. In the beginning, after the first song starts which calls her to join "the better side", she takes a bite off the apple, thus starting her journey (00:04:20) This is a biblical reference to Adam and Eve taking bits off the "forbidden fruit", giving them new knowledge.

In the end, when Barbara briefly decides to start an affair, we see this shot again (01:13:57), reminding us of that bite that initiated her change.

VI. American release and Paramount's interest to hire Tinto Brass.

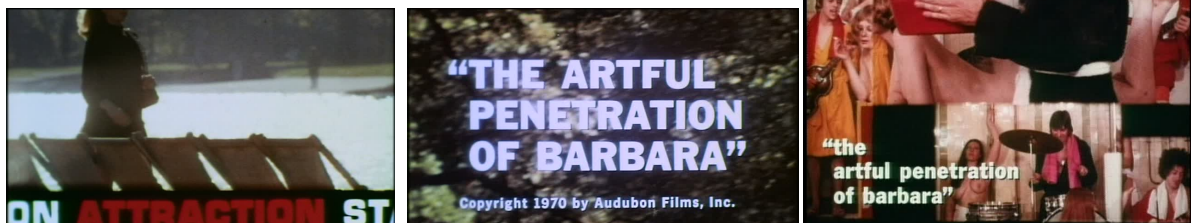
How did the film fare in Europe?

The film was well received at the Cannes film festival 1968, and there, Paramount Producers got aware of Brass. [3] In Europe, due to legal problems with the producer, Nerosubianco only received a "half-hearted" release and was quickly withdrawn. [3] The Italian version was 89 minutes long, but for export 9 minutes were cut, rendering the international version 80 minutes long [2]. Which scenes were cut is nowhere to be found, and the Italian 89-minute version has never been released on video.

Two harsh cuts in the sound were observed by the author and may indicate cuts (at 00:16:52 and 00:54:50). The first cut removes an instrumental part of music present on the released soundtrack. [4] Another possible cut: 01:15:06. In comparison to the released soundtrack, the song is shortened. [4] In Germany, the poster was edited in a way that the black man was not discernible. [2] This was maybe done due to reservations that parts of the public weren't ready to see interracial relationships at that time.

How was the US release received?

In the US, the film wasn't too successful. [3] The rights were bought by Radley Metzger's company "Audubon Films", who tried an interesting marketing-strategy: Instead of using the "official" English titles "AttrACTION" (Which, again, is a word-play, as the word "ACTION" is emphasized) or "Black on White", they quickly renamed it to "The artful penetration of Barbara". [2] [3] Probably this should help to attract a larger audience by creating a "scandalous" title, making the film better-known. But this title implies a pornographic film, which is not at all true. On the DVD [1], one can view the theatrical trailer, which shows this title for almost its entire length, proving that it was desired that people get to see the title.



35 - 36: Left: The opening titles on the DVD read "Attraction", but the film still starts with the shot in the middle.
37: Right: A picture from the trailer. Note: The image-format of the trailer is different than that of the feature film. This is due to the fact that the main film found on the DVD was cropped slightly on three sides, especially on top.

This strategy probably mis-fired, as audiences expecting a pornographic film were surely disappointed: There are no hardcore sexual shots and almost no shots revealing genitalia. At the same time, people who would have wanted to see an arthouse-film on current political topics were surely repulsed by the pornographic title.

Why did Paramout intend to hire Tinto Brass to direct “A clockwork Orange”?

There are many different, sometimes conflicting sources on this topic [5], thus the most plausible one is Tinto Brass himself [6]: Because the book “A clockwork Orange” featured a special kind of slang made-up especially for the book (which we can also hear in Kubrick’s film), they liked Tinto Brass’ innovative and new visual “language” in *Nerosubianco*.

Another factor, as seen by the author, could be Tinto Brass’ portrayal of English society and over-the-top scenes in London, which is also the setting of the book.

Unfortunately, as Tinto Brass was already planning his next film “L’Urlo”, he put off Paramount executives that he would like to do “A clockwork Orange” afterwards. They did not want to wait, and therefore, he was not hired. Ultimately, the film was produced by Warner Brothers and directed by Stanley Kubrick [3]

VII. Conclusion:

Nerosubianco is a very unusual feature film: By mixing lots of stylistic influences, be they Russian cinema from the 20s (rapid editing), pop-art (comics and motifs) and sometimes even preceding a post-modernist approach (using and re-shaping of lots of pre-existing footage and motifs from other films), its style remains unique in cinema history.

Nerosubianco has almost no similarities to any mainstream Hollywood-feature-film from that era. Would Tinto Brass have directed “A clockwork Orange”, this style would suddenly have been in a feature-film seen by many people worldwide.

We can only guess, but probably, this would have changed mainstream Hollywood-styles of the 1960s radically.

Sources:

1. Nerosubianco / Attraction: DVD by "Cult Epics", Runtime: 80 min
2. <http://rjbuffalo.com/1968a-ne.html#nero>
(Webpage of Ranjit Sandhu, an expert on Tinto Brass movies.)
3. <http://www.cultepics.com/Tinto-Brass-60s-Psychedelic-Classics.html>
(A detailed article with a special focus on the production and filming)
4. Nerosubianco Original Soundtrack. CD / Amazon Digital Download by MIE.
(ASIN: B002UIC3J6)
5. <http://rjbuffalo.com/1968b-cl.htm>
(A compilation of many sources concerning the development of "A clockwork Orange")
6. Col Cuore in Gola: English director's commentary on the DVD by "Cult Epics"
Remarks considering "A clockwork Orange" can be found during the last 15 minutes.

Picture Sources:

1. <http://rjbuffalo.com/images/rtinbra.jpg>
2. - 37.: Stills from: Nerosubianco / Attraction: DVD by "Cult Epics", Runtime: 80 min

Remark on the analyzed version:

This analysis is based on the 80-minute export-version of the film. One can only guess about the content of the nine minutes cut from the original Italian release, but, as [2] states, it was not "censorable" material. As the Italian release remains unreleased on home video, this analysis is based on the 80-minute version.

Copyright:

All parts of this document (except pictures) copyright © 2011, Alexander Tuschinski. All rights reserved.

It is forbidden to publish the text in this document – whole or in part – without prior, written permission by the author Alexander Tuschinski.

The pictures included in this document are used for education and research purposes only.
The copyright to them belongs to their respective copyright-holders.