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The Architecture of Resistance: Paula Rego and Propaganda

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between propaganda and the work of Portuguese-British visual artist Paula Rego, analysing how mechanisms of persuasion, visual rhetoric, and political imagery shaped both the content and function of her art. It addresses this in two dimensions. Firstly, it considers how the propaganda of the Portuguese Estado Novo regime informed Rego's early experiences and how its ideological frameworks, spatial conventions, and social constructs surfaced in her imagery. While Rego referenced the structures and narratives of the authoritarian state, she also subverted them, transforming her work into an act of political resistance and a form of anti-propaganda. Secondly, the paper explores Rego's role as a 'propagandist' in her own right, particularly through her engagement with women's rights and her contribution to shaping public opinion during campaigns leading to changes in Portuguese abortion law. In this context, I argue that Rego mobilised propagandist techniques to advocate for social justice, deploying visual persuasion to rally support for causes central to her practice and identity. Methodologically, the paper conducts a visual analysis of selected Estado Novo propaganda, drawing on visual rhetoric to examine their linguistic, literal, and symbolic messages and the cultural connotations embedded within their political context. It then juxtaposes these with Rego's 1990s works, many set in domestic interiors, to demonstrate how she reconfigured familiar spaces as sites of dissent. Ultimately, this paper argues that Rego's art is inherently political: it exposes social injustices, constructs visual networks of resistance, and contributes to the struggle for gender equality.

Keywords: dissidence, domesticity, feminism, politics, visual rhetoric

1 Introduction

> Paula Rego is not necessarily thought of as a political artist. With so much of her work drawing on stories – folk tales, myth and characters from literature (sometimes in surreal combinations) – her reputation is more for subverted narrative than protest, but her art has been political from the start (Rix, 2019).

Building on Rix' observation, other experts who understand Rego's context, such as Ruth Rosengarten, Fiona Bradley, and John McEwen, identify the political theme as recurring in both her non-realistic and later more representational work. There is a consensus that the preoccupation with the political in Rego's work is intimately connected to the Portuguese *Estado Novo* (New State) dictatorship (1933-1974), which she experienced growing up as a child in Portugal. Some of her earlier work is an explicit critique of the regime, as denotated not only by the titles of the pictures but also by their violent undertone. Paintings such as *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland* (1960) and *When We Had a House in the Country We'd Throw Marvellous Parties and Then We'd Go Out and Shoot Black People* (1961) illustrate this. As her style developed from semi-abstraction with fragmented figures to a more naturalistic style, the preoccupation with the political theme prevailed. This paper focuses on Rego's later work, from the late 80s and early 2000s, where gender is explored as a strong theme, while always in connection to the Portuguese political sphere.

I believe, as does Rosengarten, that Rego's move to a more realistic style of work and to the domestic realm is about exposing the socio-political in relation to the female context. Rego's shift to this style appears at the same time as she places her stories in the domestic space, often inspired by her own childhood experiences and memories. It is therefore necessary to understand the impact of the Portuguese dictatorship on the aesthetic and associated values of the domestic space and consequently on Rego's work.

While Rosengarten and Bradley write about the relationship between Rego's work and Portuguese culture, highlighting women's rights, these authors do not look at Rego's work through the lens of propagandist art from the Estado Novo Regime. In other words, the relationship between the expected norms of behaviour, as disseminated by the Estado Novo visual propaganda, and Rego's work remains less explored, and this is what I propose to investigate in this paper.

I will explore propaganda in relation to Paula Rego's work from two complementary perspectives. First, I will analyse how the visual culture of Estado Novo propaganda shaped Rego's formative experiences, and how the regime's ideological constructions of space, family, and gender recur in her imagery. Although Rego references these structures, she subverts them, turning her work into an act of political resistance and a form of anti-propaganda. Second, the paper examines Rego as a propagandist in her own right, particularly through her engagement with women's rights and her involvement in shaping public opinion around Portuguese abortion legislation. I argue that in this context Rego employs propagandist strategies of visual persuasion to advocate for social change and to mobilise public support.

This paper draws on a range of propaganda studies to examine how images are used to instigate and shape social behaviour, and how the effects of such visual strategies can persist beyond the lifespan of the regimes that originally imposed them. I argue that in Portugal, certain ideological constraints disseminated under the Estado Novo—particularly those concerning the domestic sphere and socially prescribed roles—remain embedded within cultural practices and social expectations and continue to inform both lived experience and visual representation.

Methodologically, this paper draws on formal visual analysis and on visual rhetoric to examine how meaning and persuasion are constructed in pictures, comparing examples of Portuguese propaganda with selected works of Paula Rego from the late 1980s and early 2000s, all set within the domestic interior and portraying the family and issues of gender. This allows to highlight the persistence of ideological frameworks relating to domestic life and women's roles in Portugal, even after the fall of the dictatorship.

2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Because propaganda is most commonly associated with political discourse, it is first necessary to clarify how the term is defined and understood within visual and cultural studies in order to examine its relationship to Paula Rego's work.

Propaganda is today commonly associated to the propagation of totalitarian and authoritative ideas, which are opposed to democratic ways of living. However, this term was not always negatively connoted. According to the literature, the term was first used in the seventeenth century, when the catholic church was looking for ways to disseminate their ideas in a world where Protestantism was growing. Pope Gregory XV created the Sacra Congregato de Propaganda Fide (Sacred Congregation for the Propaganda of Faith) in 1622 (Clark, 1997). At the time, the word was as far as possible from the deceitful tricks that come to mind when we think of propaganda today (Miller, 2005).

Considering its role in the seventeenth century, art historian Toby Clark defined propaganda as a term used to 'describe the systematic propagation of beliefs, values and practices' (Clark, 1997). For Bernays, 'propaganda is a consistent and enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or a group' (Bernays, 2005). Welch defines propaganda as 'the dissemination of ideas intended to convince people to think and act in a particular way and for a particular persuasive purpose'. Welch's definition excludes religious propaganda and advertising, focusing only on political activity (Welch, 2022). Clark contends that propaganda is not necessarily inherent to images and that it may not be the original intention of the author as sometimes the meaning of the image or work can change or read differently depending on its context, its site or how it has been framed in private or public settings (Clark, 1997).

In contrast, Welch proposes that propaganda is mostly a conscious act, and that 'it can be defined as the deliberate attempt to influence the opinions of an audience, through the transmission of ideas and values, for a specific persuasive purpose that has been consciously thought out and designed to serve the self-interest of the propagandist, either directly or

indirectly'(Welch, 2022). These definitions are relevant because they frame propaganda as a historically contingent concept and clarify how visual meaning and persuasion operate within specific cultural contexts. This paper adopts a position that acknowledges both the changing contextual meaning of images, as proposed by Clark (1997), and the importance of intentionality emphasised by Welch (2022).

While propaganda is not inherent to images themselves, the visual culture of the Estado Novo was produced within an explicitly ideological framework, making persuasive intent central to its analysis. Although Welch excludes religious propaganda, the Portuguese case requires attention to the entanglement of religion and politics, particularly in relation to domestic space and social roles. This conceptual framework enables the examination of propaganda both as a mechanism of control and as a visual language subsequently subverted in Paula Rego's work. Such an analysis also requires attention to how propaganda produces and regulates gendered subjectivities, emotions, and social hierarchies through visual culture.

This paper draws on feminist visual-cultural scholarship that understands images as active agents in the production of gendered subjectivities, power relations, and emotional norms. Judith Butler's conception of gender as a performative and politically conditioned construct is particularly relevant in the Portuguese context, where femininity was shaped through state propaganda, Catholic morality, and legal restriction under the Estado Novo (Butler, 1998). bell hooks' analysis of representation further highlights how power operates through classed and hierarchical relations, a dynamic evident in Rego's depictions of authority enacted within intimate domestic spaces (hooks, 2014). Finally, Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies allows these images to be read as participating in competing emotional regimes, with Estado Novo propaganda attaching moral order to domesticity, and Rego disrupting these affective alignments through confrontation and discomfort (Ahmed, 2004).

Concerning mechanisms used to create propaganda, Bernays argues that its success is deeply connected to a thorough understanding of the anatomy of society. Propaganda is not designed for the individual, but rather for more complex and interlocking social units. Bernays states that propaganda must appeal to the individual, seen as a cell. It is therefore essential to secure the cooperation of what he defines as a 'key man' within a group. This person will relay the message to its followers, within their social groups. The loyalties and formations of these social groups are the means though which ideas are propagated. Various approaches can be used (visual, graphic or auditory), but they need to relate to and therefore manipulate emotional habits and mental cliches of the individual within these social groups to produce mass reactions: 'Touch a nerve at a sensitive spot and you get an automatic response from certain specific member of the organism' (Bernays, 2005).

Working from an understanding of propaganda as a persuasive cultural practice that can operate both positively and negatively, and drawing on twentieth-century propaganda theory, this paper approaches propaganda as a system of visual persuasion enacted through images and symbols. It focuses on visual strategies employed in printed mass media produced under the Estado Novo—including posters, pamphlets, and postcards—and places these in dialogue with a selection of Paula Rego's works. Through comparative visual analysis, the study identifies similarities and differences in thematic content, formal strategies, and spatial cues,

highlighting the ways in which Rego both references and subverts Estado Novo propagandist conventions.

Based on Roland Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964), I examine how selected images deploy linguistic, literal, and symbolic messages to construct meaning and to persuade audiences, identifying the cultural connotations embedded within their historical and political context. In addition to identifying and analysing the rhetorical structures of the selected images, this study employs formal visual analysis—focusing on composition, colour, spatial organisation, gesture, and atmosphere—alongside iconographical analysis to identify key symbols of Portuguese visual culture and to assess their meaning and significance within the historical and cultural contexts in which they appear. Building on this analysis, the paper looks at Paula Rego's work as a form of resistance that contradicts and subverts the realities proposed by Estado Novo propaganda.

The visual corpus analysed in this paper is necessarily selective rather than exhaustive. The propaganda material comprises two images produced by the Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional between 1935 and 1938, selected on the basis of their use of explicit engagement with the cult of the fascist leader, domestic space, family structure, and gendered roles. These include a postcard and a lithographic poster widely disseminated through schools and public institutions. Paula Rego's work is represented through three key images produced between the late 1980s and early 2000s, chosen for their sustained engagement with domestic interiors and the female subject. While this limited corpus does not encompass the full breadth of either Estado Novo propaganda or Rego's work, it allows for focused comparative analysis. The study does not aim to provide a comprehensive survey, but rather to identify recurring visual and spatial strategies through the close reading of representative examples. Each image is analysed first through visual rhetoric (linguistic, literal, and symbolic dimensions), followed by formal and iconographical analysis, before being placed in comparative dialogue.

3 Propaganda, Domesticity and the Estado Novo

Visual propaganda from the Estado Novo parallels that from Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy and Franco's Spain. One similar trait is their poetic character, which Clark contends distinguishes fascist images from communist ones, that steer to rationalist reality. Common to fascist propaganda are themes such as the historical revival or the romanticising of a nation's 'golden age'; the idealisation of manual work, religiosity and the denial of capitalist and materialist ideals; promotion of leisure as a form of militarisation, namely for school children; the role of women as mothers and homemakers (Clark, 1997). Also important is the cult of the leader as the saviour and father of the nation. Bernays defines personality as an instrument of propaganda, because the public needs a personality that typifies the regime. This author further notes that 'once a public figure has decided what ends he wishes to achieve, he must regard himself objectively and present an outward picture of himself which is consistent with his real character and his aims'(Bernays, 2005).

In the Portuguese case, the figure of the leader was embodied by António de Oliveira Salazar (1889 – 1970), an economics professor from Coimbra, who became minister of finance in

1928 working to balance public finances. Salazar was well known for his traditional and catholic views, stemming from seminary education before joining university. Due to his austere policies, he became popular among the more conservative sectors of Portuguese society, such as the industrialists and the middle classes. This set the ground for his public image as the Salvador da Pátria (Savior of the Nation). In 1932 Salazar was appointed President of the Council of Ministers, and in 1933, with the approval of a new constitution, he was granted dictatorial power. Salazar is considered the creator or the *Estado Novo*, and as was the case with Hitler, Mussolini or Franco, he was featured in mass produced postcards. The image below shows Salazar depicted as D. Afonso Henriques, the first king of Portugal. Symbolic meaning is built into the image by use of cultural associations that are relevant to the Portuguese. As suggested by Clark, the image returns to a 'gilded age' where Portugal was a conquering nation.

Drawing from Barthes, in addition to the symbolism of the image and the historical connotations, the linguistic message is used to help direct the interpretation of the image. Salazar's name is prominently featured at the top left corner, in the largest and boldest text. Right below it says 'Salvador da Pátria' (Saviour of the Nation). Text printed on the shield reads 'Tudo pela Nação, Nada contra a Nação' (All for the nation, nothing against the nation). Finally, centred below the figure the sentence reads 'Ditosa Patria que tais filhos tem' (Blessed homeland that has such sons). This line is imbued with significance, as it is a verse adapted from *Os Lusíadas*, Luís de Camões' epic poem from the sixteenth century, where the Portuguese or Lusitanos are celebrated as a nation of discoverers.

Figure 1: SPN, Salazar, Salvador da Patria, Illustrated Postcard, 1935
Source: Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional (SPN), Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

However, it is not only the cult of the leader that defined Portugal as a fascist nation at this time. Sapega contends that the *Estado Novo* can be classified as a fascist regime because during its first decade, various institutions were created to promote fascist social policies and suppressing free speech (Sapega, 2008). Examples of this are the Mocidade Portuguesa (Portuguese Youth), Legião Portuguesa (Portuguese Legion), and PIDE (International and State Defence Police). These institutions were similar to those created by other fascist governments as a way to control its people, curbing freedom. Another example of such an organisation is the *Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional* (SPN), created in 1933. This organisation was instrumental in the establishment of the cultural project of the *Estado Novo*.

From its creation in 1933 until 1949, the SPN was led by António Ferro (1895 - 1956), a writer and journalist associated with the Portuguese modernist movement. The impact of the SPN was felt across all areas of Portuguese cultural life through what was to be called the *Política do Espírito* (Politics of the Spirit), aimed at elevating the nation, in direct opposition to the alleged materialist culture prevalent elsewhere (Serra, 2021). Heavily influenced by Mussolini, Ferro wanted to create and enable a form of nationalist art, since he believed the arts and literature to be indispensable for the elevation of a nation (Ferro, 1933). The art promoted by the regime appropriated elements of popular culture, highly reminiscent of rural areas, and celebrated a style where the symbolism was deeply connected to the promotion of traditional values (Ribeiro, 2017). This strategy made images relatable to people from all groups, enabling effective communication. I will analyse an example - *A Lição de Salazar* (Salazar's Lesson) (1938).

In 1938, it had been a decade since António Salazar was part of the government, first as finance minister and then as president of the council of ministers. To celebrate his achievements, the SPN worked with the Ministry of Education to create a series of seven lithographic posters. Specifically targeting school-aged children and designed to be displayed across all schools and textbooks, the style adopted was simple and realist enough that it could be easily understood both by children and their parents. The first six posters focused on promoting the positive impact of the changes resulting from Salazar's policies and showed a before and after image, along with a short paragraph of text.

Drawing on insights derived from Barthes, it can be argued that the text here not only helps interpret the image (anchorage) but it also complements it (relay). Acknowledging the poor alphabetisation of the Portuguese people, the SPN artists employed a combination of images with text, adapting the medium used to target all social groups, as suggested by Bernays. The posters were designed including visual references easily identifiable as typically Portuguese: the Portuguese flag, stone fortified constructions, and the Portuguese home with its whitewashed walls and ceramic tiled roofs.

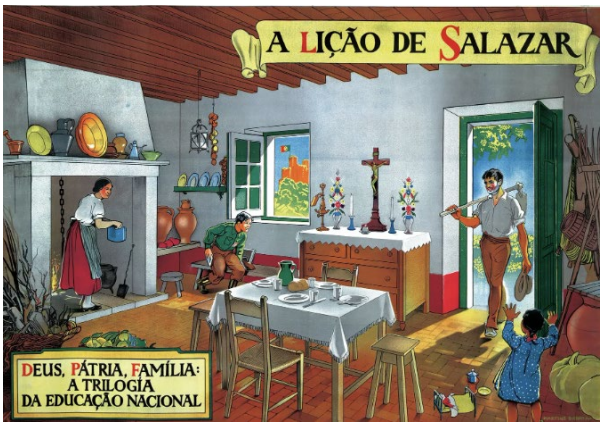

Figure 1: Jaime Martins Barata, A Lição de Salazar: Deus, Pátria, Família, 1938
Source: Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional (SPN), Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

I will focus on the final poster of the series, different from all others as it does not show a before picture. It focuses on the domestic interior of the family home, shown as essential and

not in need of change - progress is neither necessary nor welcomed. As Bártolo cleverly notes, 'the decision to distinguish this poster from others stresses its importance as the one where, more than simply present facts, fundamental principles to the regime were proclaimed' (Bártolo, 2014).

Lisboa contends this picture 'allegorized the Salazarista global vision outlined above: a nation — and empire — of obedient women and happy peasants, monitored by an invisible God, whose earthly delegates were the Prime Minister himself and his deputy within the cellular infrastructure of the family, namely the husband and father' (Lisboa, 2019). Rosengarten writes that the image '[transports] us into an idealised home, a humble abode where each character plays a hierarchically assigned role. Through such a harmonious image of family life, the nation itself is constructed as co-operative and operational. The world represented here is at once patriarchal, rustic and Christian' (Rosengarten, 2011). Bártolo links the image to Salazar's ideal view of the Portuguese home, which he believed should be a 'reasonable house, house of the poorest, salubrious house, independent, arranged like a nest – home of the workers family, modest home, restrained, Portuguese'. Bártolo goes on to state that 'this house was not any house but symbolized the perpetual "Portuguese Family Home" upholding ideals that all Portuguese should achieve' (Bártolo, 2022).

Analysing the image, there are two sections of text. On the top right-hand side, the title 'A Lição de Salazar' (Salazar's lesson). In smaller font on the bottom left 'Deus, Pátria, Família: A Trilogia Da Educação Nacional' (God, Homeland and Family: The Trilogy of National Education). The text helps interpret the image and terminology used reveals this to be a model family and home, central to the trilogy of essential Portuguese values proposed by the regime. In addition to its linguistic message, the image was constructed to include strong symbolic meaning, with cultural connotations. It depicts the front room of a home set within a rural and humble context.

A kitchen and eating area within a single space, with a window and a door. From these opening, a castle with a Portuguese flag is visible in the distance, hinting to the importance of the homeland. Four characters are represented in the picture: a woman, a man and two children, a boy and a girl - the idealised nuclear family. The assignment of traditional gendered roles is clearly depicted, denoting the expectations of the regime. The woman is placed inside the fireplace – confined not only to the most interior and private spaces of the home but further confined in the enclosure where cooking happens. Surrounded by utensils, she is preparing a meal for the family, while also minding her children.

The son is depicted closer to the window and the outside space while the little girl is placed more towards the interior space of the home. She plays with toy crockery, already conditioned to the role of home maker. The boy, in contrast, holds a book, hinting at a very different type of education. Moreover, the boy is depicted wearing the uniform of the Mocidade Portuguesa (Portuguese Youth), further highlighting the importance of the homeland. Traditional gendered division of labour is further portrayed by the man arriving from work outside the home. He holds an agricultural instrument over his shoulder, and more work instruments are visible in the home. As Rosengarten highlights, manual and agricultural work was seen by the regime as a way to achieve moral purity (Rosengarten, 2011).

The perspective lines recede diagonally from the left to the right, converging behind the figure of the father. Visually, the 'head of the family' thus becomes the most prominent figure in the image. This is in agreement with Rosengarten, who defends that the Portuguese family serves as a blueprint for the nation and for the Estado Novo regime: 'As in Fascism, for the *Estado Novo*, the family, hierarchically structured around the moral authority of the father, operated as a seat of transmission and cohesion of the larger social unit (Rosengarten, 2011).'

Centrally positioned in the foreground, a table has been set and is prepared for the family meal – four plates, four seats, a loaf of bread and a green jug that most likely contains wine. Rosengarten contends that 'bread and wine not only advertise the abundant produce of the soil but also symbolically represent the incorporation of Christianity through the Eucharist' (Rosengarten, 2011). Consequently, we can see this central setting as a device to show God is present in the home.

4 Discussion

4.1 Rego's Counter-Image: Subverting the Domestic Interior

If Estado Novo propaganda frames the home as a site of orderly virtue, where hierarchical structures and social norms consist of obedience to the father, Rego's *The Family* (1988) completely subverts these notions.

Comparing *The Family* to *Salazar's Lesson*, similar themes appear. In *The Family*, there are various references to religion. Observing the central scene, a girl holds her hands in prayer. In the background, an oratory is visible. This choice not only references the ever-present and important role of religion in the Portuguese home but also represents Rego's own childhood memories. As McEwen pointed out: 'The shrine against the far wall is typical of the kind one finds in Portuguese homes, not least in her [Rego's] mother's room', where 'still today there is a curtained shrine to Our Lady in the bedroom Paula's mother uses'(McEwen, 1997). However, in Rego's picture the oratory's appearance is different to the one in *Salazar's Lesson* – it is not a chest of drawers but rather a cabinet type furniture composed of two parts.

This difference highlights the contrasting social and economic conditions of the two families – whereas in the modest household from *Salazar's Lesson* the oratory is improvised over utilitarian furniture, in the household Rego depicts the oratory is a statement piece, purposely built and highly decorated. A closer look shows the upper part of the oratory is designed in the style of a Spanish theatre toy. Curtains on either side frame what could be a painting or, if based on traditional oratories, an assembly of objects placed in different planes. Traditional oratories would have functioning doors or shutters, hiding or revealing its interior, but here Rego deliberately chose to use a more theatrical reference.

Elena Crippa described the images of the oratory as Saint George and the dragon and Joan of Arc, 'there to conquer evil presences and bring back peace' (HENI Talks, 2018). The theatrical and elaborate narrative of Rego's oratory contrasts with the simplicity and directness of that seen in Salazar's lesson. Created for a more instructed viewer, Rego's

image is strongly imbued with symbolic meaning that extends beyond the image and its boundaries.

Figure 3: Paula Rego, The Family, 1988

Source: Reproduced from Paula Rego (p. 171), by J. McEwen, 1997, Phaidon

While Rego chose to represent a family, naming the picture accordingly, we cannot see this as a conventional Portuguese family or one that resonates with the example from *Salazar's Lesson*. Comparing the two, Rego's picture also contains four people. However, the majority are women and only one man is represented. Contrary to *Salazar's Lesson*, where the man appears as the head of the family, walking home from work, in *The Family,* the man is portrayed in a very different role, where he appears less able to perform as the authoritative figure. This role is instead taken over by the women handling him and towering over his seated and less able body. Rego chose to invert the traditional family and gendered roles, and the power shifts towards the women in the picture, contradicting the regime's vision where the father was the most important figure. Rego's representation deliberately subdued the father and his authority.

I argue that this picture deliberately chooses to question the regime, its values and the concept of the ideal family, drawing from representations of the Portuguese home, where familiar cues— the shrine, the table, domestic space - are retained, but it all seems upside down, turning the interior into a theatre of dissent that deliberately contests the image of *Salazar's Lesson* and its legacy. Read through feminist theories of power and gender, *The Family* exposes authority and masculinity as contingent rather than natural. Gendered roles are not anchored in paternal position but are produced through bodily arrangement, proximity, and physical domination, revealing power as performative and relational rather than fixed. At the same time, the image resists bourgeois ideals of respectability by foregrounding forms of female strength expressed through control, confrontation, and collective action within the domestic space. The home thus becomes a site where gendered hierarchies are not reinforced but actively destabilised.

A second case study, *Celestina's House* (2000-01), extends this logic to a threshold space that overlaps interior and exterior. Rego draws on recognisable vernacular forms of the

Portuguese House, as proposed by the regime —the tiled roof, the outdoor bread oven, the table with white cloth—but populates the scene with gluttony, intoxication, and erotic charge. Rego's version is diametrically opposed to *Salazar's Lesson* as rather than showing an orderly familial environment, it showcases a scene of gluttony and depravation – Celestina, a female procurer in Spanish literature, appears undressed at the table and other characters appear inebriated and unconscious.

Figure 4: Paula Rego, Celestina's House, 2000-01
Source: Reproduced from Paula Rego: Behind The Scenes (p. 97), by J. McEwen, 2008, Phaidon

Rather than the humble house wine and bread, we see bottled wine served by a formally dressed man and lobsters and spider crabs on the table, showing what would have been described by the regime as an ostentatious and improper way of living. Bread-and-wine cease to read as sacrament and instead become props in a theatre of transgression. Power in *Celestina's House* is articulated not through moral authority or patriarchal order, but through excess, class differences, and social inversion. By juxtaposing formally dressed servants with intoxicated and exposed bodies, Rego exposes authority as situational, unstable, and disconnected from respectability. The domestic setting thus becomes a stage where dominant values of restraint and hierarchy are deliberately undone.

Rego used multiple planes, nesting images into one another and overlapping the inside and the outside, blurring the boundaries between these spaces. This picture seems to reference the veranda from Rego's grandparent's quinta, showing once again the importance of her personal memories and experiences, which she corrupts to propose a new order. Rego de-authorises the nationalist ideology of the Estado Novo regime, and once again subverts the structure of the family home. The domestic interior is not neutral: under the Estado Novo it naturalised obedience; in Rego's hands it stages critique and resistance.

I now want to focus directly on women and on how Rego mobilises the same space to argue for women's rights.

4.2 Women, the Home and the Untitled (Abortion) Series

Rego once stated: 'I paint the women I know. I paint what I see. I make women the protagonists because I am one' (Kellaway, 2021). This statement is key to understand Rego's portrayal of women as central to her work. The women in her images are not symbolic types or moral exemplars, but rather real women, shaped by the realities she witnessed growing up under the Portuguese Estado Novo regime. Consequently, Rego's work is an act of resistance to the challenges Portuguese women faced. Marina Warner argues that Rego revolutionised how women's issues and concerns were represented (Warner, 2022). Lisboa notes her persistent engagement with religion, society and the family (Lisboa, 2019), and Rosengarten highlights how her work exposes the "chauvinistic rhetoric" of Salazar's dictatorship (Rosengarten, 1997).

To understand Rego's concerns with politics and the issues she addressed in her pictures, one must understand the world she inherited. In 1970—just four years before the dictatorship fell—25.7% of the Portuguese population was illiterate (around 1.8 million people), 64% of whom were women (Pordata, 2024). Education for girls was limited, and gender inequality was a deliberate state policy rooted in the trinity of God, Homeland and Family. Power flowed from the State and the Church into the household and was enforced by the father or husband. Women were legally confined to the domestic sphere, their expected virtues obedience, chastity and piety.

The 1940 Concordat with the Vatican reinforced these expectations, elevating the Virgin Mary—particularly through the cult of Our Lady of Fátima—as the model of Portuguese womanhood. These ideals were underpinned by legal frameworks that restricted women's autonomy in marriage, employment, and civic life, while divorce and reproductive choice remained tightly controlled (Pimentel, 2011). Although the fall of the Estado Novo in 1974 marked a political rupture, feminist legal historians have argued that deeply embedded cultural and juridical constraints continued to shape women's lives for decades, forming the historical backdrop against which Rego's later interventions must be understood (Lisboa, 2019). This is the reality Rego proposed to address and subvert in the images discussed here.

In 1998 Rego produced the *Untitled* Series, in response to the failed 1998 Portuguese referendum on abortion. These works confront the consequences and impact of illegal abortions. Rego speaks with devastating clarity about the reality she witnessed:

> *"I did these new paintings for Portugal. In my village I saw the secrecy, the pain, the shame. Women came to me all the time asking for money for abortions. They died, sometimes of septicaemia. Or they washed up on the beach with all their guts hanging out, like an old blown-up cow"*. (McEwen, 2008)

The power of the series lies in its refusal to sentimentalise or to shame and in the direct and non-romanticised way the pictures show women dealing with the aftermath of abortion, represented alone in spaces that can easily be identified as the home. The depiction of beds, kitchen bowls, basins, water jugs, and props such as armchairs, often in disarray, help the viewer situate the story in the privacy of the domestic sphere.

Figure 2: Paula Rego. Untitled No.1, 1998
Source: Reproduced from Paula Rego: Behind The Scenes (p. 62), by J. McEwen, 2008, Phaidon

This is not accidental - once again, Rego situates her narrative inside the domestic interior, the same space the Estado Novo idealised as the cradle of virtue. But here the home becomes a site of danger, secrecy, and suffering - a space where women endure violence privately, hidden from public view. The interiors matter. The regime had trained viewers to see the home as a place of purity, order and obedience; Rego shows the opposite. She uses the same visual vocabulary—the same furniture, linens, and familiar domestic layouts - but turns the meaning upside down. The very ordinariness of the rooms reminds us that illegal abortion was not an abstract issue but a reality inside Portuguese homes and for Portuguese women.

Although the 1998 referendum failed, the *Untitled* series gained significant public visibility in the years that followed. First exhibited in Portugal at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 1999, the works were widely discussed in the press and later circulated more broadly through a set of etchings, several of which were published in Portuguese newspapers in the period leading up to the 2007 referendum. Contemporary critics and curators have subsequently noted that these images became a prominent visual reference within pro-choice advocacy and public debate (Cristea Roberts Gallery, n.d). While it would be reductive to attribute legislative change to a single artistic intervention, the documented circulation of Rego's images within media and campaign contexts confirms their active role in shaping the discursive environment surrounding the successful 2007 vote. In Bernays' terms, the effectiveness of Rego's images lies in their capacity to "touch a nerve," operating through affect and identification to generate collective response rather than rational argument.

Referring to Paula Rego as a "propagandist" raises important ethical and political questions, given the term's historical association with authoritarianism. In this paper, however, the term is not used pejoratively. Rego herself described the *Untitled* series as "propaganda," framing the works as a deliberate intervention in public debate. As recounted by her son Nick Willing, the artist refused attempts to appropriate the images for American anti-abortion campaigning, reacting with anger to their potential misuse (Diament, 2026). In this context, the term "propaganda" can be reclaimed as a tool of resistance, deployed against social and political coercion.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Estado Novo produced a domestic image - the tidy interior, the Eucharistic table, fatherly authority, gendered roles - and disseminated it through popular forms so that it could shape behaviour. Rego takes those same signs - the shrine, the table, the window to the homeland, the staged family - and reassigns their meaning. In The Family, authority shifts from men to women; in Celestina's House, appetite and excess rupture the decorum of "God, Homeland, Family." She turns the interior from a reproducible model of obedience into a theatre of dissent. Thus, Rego's art is inherently political. It exposes social injustices, constructs visual networks of resistance and at moments, is instrumental in contributing to public change. If propaganda aims to align images with conduct, Rego's counter-images aim to realign conduct with justice. She learned the regime's visual grammar so she could speak against it through her images.

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