

Víctor Erice

The Ghost

At the beginning of the '50s, in the last century, Manoel de Oliveira had only directed a few documentaries and one fiction feature, *Aniki-Bobó*, filmed in 1942. Cut off from the film industry, he dedicated himself entirely to agriculture. However, in 1952, he imagined a film, *Angélica*, based on an experience he lived due to the death of a young woman, his wife's cousin.

Before the burial, the family asked Oliveira to take a photograph of the deceased. As he recounts it:

The young woman was very beautiful, she was lying on a blue sofa, in the centre of a sitting room. Her hair was golden and she was dressed in white, as a bride. I was carrying a Leica camera, which would produce a splitting of the image when focusing. (1) One had to pay special attention and focus when both images appeared as superimposed on each other. Since I was photographing a dead woman, which now had a double image that had detached itself from her, I was struck by the idea that one of the images could correspond to the living woman, not the dead. And that this image might not trap the other, thus altering everything. The event affected me immensely, in the same manner that the protagonist of *Angélica*, when developing the photograph of a dead woman, perceived her as being alive. (2)

1. *Translator's note.* In this anecdote Oliveira mentions 'un desdoblamiento de la imagen'. *Desdoblamiento* may be rendered not only as a splitting or mirroring, but also as an unfolding and thus, figuratively speaking, may mean an explanation or elucidation.

2. See Manoel de Oliveira, *Angélica* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1998).

This experience (heralding fictions such as Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* [1955], Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* [1961] and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* [1958]) renewed Oliveira's interest in cinema, in another type of cinema: one that could show itself to be, in the first instance, a medium to fix life, one that would be even capable of bringing back the dead from the beyond. Since then, Oliveira has been in the habit of saying: '*O cinema é sempre um fantasma da realidade*' - 'Cinema is always reality's ghost'.

Time

A ghost always carries with it a specific and factual truth: the death or disappearance of someone or something. In the history of cinema, beyond its episodic deaths - real or symbolic: the death of classical cinema, Modernity - there exists a primordial mourning, practically forgotten nowadays: the mourning and sorrow caused by the disappearance of silent cinema in the moment of its maximum splendour, sacrificed for the sake of the spoken word. A premature death, without a doubt; a death of which Manoel de Oliveira is the only active filmmaker who can offer an embodied and heartfelt testimony, a death felt by him as an essential loss. A loss, above all, of a certain specificity of a cinema elaborated under the protection of montage theories, wherein the image worked in favour of an expression that substituted the word.

Inevitably, with sound, literature entered into cinema, and with it, writing and the law. It would take some time for Oliveira to assume these changes. In his path as a filmmaker, he embarked on these changes when, by making use of a painter's gaze, he confronted the

flow of time in *O pinto e a cidade* (*The Artist and The City*, 1956), a documentary about Porto, an authentic reversal of *Douro, faina fluvial* (*Working on the Douro River*, 1931). This was the first link in his meditation on the uncertain nature of cinema: a spatial art, certainly, though also an art of time; a montage art, certainly, though also an art of duration.

The Word

The second link within this process was the discovery of the word. Oliveira declared: 'I realised that it was absolutely useless to attempt to translate cinematically a verbal image, a literary image. It is not even necessary to try, since the literary phrase may be registered on screen. This is the great advantage of the talking picture.' As a witness and participant in silent cinema, Oliveira could become aware of this evidence: the word could not simply be an additional value, a naturalist ornament for the image but, rather, would have to become the basis of action and movement. Something that has little to do with realism, and absolutely nothing to do with its most degraded stereotype: the colloquialism - engendered by television serials, and taken off as a vacuous record of human relationships - that is present in most recent films.

If the human artifice *par excellence* is language, if that is our true nature, then the word constitutes the weave of existence itself. Furthermore - Oliveira affirms - the theatre of the word is all that can be apprehended and shown, since life is pure fugacity: '*Vida que agora não é vida / instante logo perdido / ápice já acontecido*' ('Life that is no longer life / instant that is later lost / apex that has already been'), as he writes in one of his poems.

Stage and Life

Oliveira is thought to be the contemporary initiator of a movement devoted to the ritualisation of Portuguese culture. For him, all that we see, in our role as spectators, is made manifest as theatre. In such a way that cinema, once it assimilates the idea of modernity, is offered two alternatives: to either film the spectacle of life or to film the spectacle of the stage. In his opinion, all known artistic representations haven't taken the stage option:

When I say that cinema does not exist, and that for this reason cinema is a process whereby theatre is fixed in an audiovisual manner, I say it because in that process cinema turns out to be enriching and lasting, in a way that is truly different to theatre, which is quick and ephemeral. If I affirm that cinema does not exist, I do it in the same way that one might affirm that life does not exist. Because life leaves us at every instant, and hence what is left of it for us is its theatre.

The Redemption of Reality

The literature of drama has offered Oliveira not only the necessary words but, above all, a device through which the conventions and social rituals that he deems as necessary in order to reveal Reality's plot, may come into play. In his films, the word has its provenance primarily from the terrain of the novel or the theatrical stage (Camilo Castelo Branco, José Regio, Augustina Bessa-Luís ...); it forms part of the story's body and is always filmed as a document.

Such a formal strategy does not pretend to achieve anything other than to preserve the ontological realism of the cinematic image,

frequently searching for its expressive echo in 'primitive' cinema. Its birth certificate is signed for the first time in 1963, in a formative film, *Acto de Primavera (Rite of Spring)*, which offers the viewer a popular representation of the 'Mystery of The Passion' taking place in a village of the Tras-os-Montes region. Here cinema, for the first time in Oliveira's work, films itself. Oliveira accomplished a significant variation, although respecting what is essential in the original sixteenth-century rite; the end of the representation - which is traditionally celebrated on Holy Friday - does not coincide with the death of Christ, in order to introduce, through the use of images of spring, the idea of Resurrection.

Ghost and, at the same time, redeemer of reality, cinema is capable of resuscitating the dead; it is within this dialectic that Oliveira's films have moved. As was seen, with great clarity, by that magnificent filmmaker who recently passed away, Joao César Monteiro:

Manoel de Oliveira forms part of a small group of Catholic directors for whom the act of filming entails the awareness of a transgression. Filming implies a violence of the gaze, a profanation of the real that has as its objective the restitution of a sacred imagery.

3. *Translator's Note.* The original reads: 'Con ella quedó en mí entañada esa visión de incertidumbre, de inestabilidad del mundo.' *Entañar* may mean to bury deep or carry deep within; or, more figuratively, and pertinent to Oliveira's 'vision of uncertainty', to become very fond of.

The Uncertainty Principle

Before the varied and hazardous contingencies of his childhood, young Manoel, nearing the age of six, began to look at his surroundings as a confused and astounded spectator: 'This childhood experience marked me forever. With it was left buried deep in me a vision of uncertainty, of the instability of the world.' (3) Such mistrust towards Reality has dutifully accompanied Manoel de Oliveira up until the present date. His latest, extraordinary film, *The Uncertainty Principle* (2003), serves as testimony. (4)

4. Oliveira has completed two further features since the writing of this piece: *A Talking Picture* (2003) and *The Fifth Empire* (2004).

In physics the uncertainty principle refers to the fact that it is not possible to observe or calculate, at the same time, the 'situation' and 'impetus' or physical momentum of the elemental particle of any entity or thing. What matters to us in this case is the contradiction or impossibility that exists in not being able to observe simultaneously both phenomena. Were we now to consider the dimension of life, the scenography of that which we call Reality, the difficulty would be multiplied even further, in accordance with the fleetingness of what comes to pass.

Adapting a novel by Augustina Bessa-Luis, in addition to the counterpoint offered by Paganini's music and the collaboration of several performers who attain perfection, Oliveira plays with the uncertainty principle. He applies it to the destiny of a series of male and female couples, in which each individual corresponds, apparently, to his or her opposite or complement. Two maidens: the virtuous and angelical Camila, a fine-looking face; and the mundane and intriguing Vanessa. Two young men: Antonio Clara, 'Scarlet Carnation', the legitimate heir; and José Luciano, 'Blue Bull', the servant's son. Two intellectual brothers who act as arbitrators in their retelling of the story: Daniel and Torcato Roper ... Oliveira's mastery is found not only in his ability to show us the successive ways in which the story unfolds, but also in his ability to portray the frailty that exists between personal boundaries and the distinct dichotomies (angel/demon, femininity/masculinity, legitimacy/illegitimacy, virtue/sin, faithfulness/treachery, predetermination/freedom, damnation/salvation) that are incapable of doing anything other than serve as evidence for the impossibility of any communication between these beings and their varied permutations.

If the migrations of the soul are unutterable, if the possible transgressions seem too autistic, then the other is nothing more than a pretext for complaint or for one's reasoning; meanwhile, life escapes us inexorably, as fleeting as the water of that river which flows on the other side of the train's window, as the film shows us again and again. In the end, of these many forms of existence, no one is able to capture more than some vague explanations offered to the wind, whose secret seems to safeguard some sort of original sin of impossible redemption, lost in the darkness of time.

This darkness is also the darkness of the auditorium, where the spectator who has taken a seat finds her judgement suspended in a *diffuse logic* that takes place amongst credible historical and familiar sceneries and paradoxical ways of reasoning; a theological, mythical and extemporal word, a word that is not embodied nor subjected to the spectator's situation.

Cinema and the River

In an extraordinary letter, written as a posthumous homage to the French critic Serge Daney, Oliveira released cinema from its temporal and historical dependence:

When film appeared, it had always already existed, not as machine or technical invention, but as cinema. This is why we say that cinema escapes time, since it is fruit of the spirit that gives life to all the arts ... In a word, cinema has never been; furthermore, it has not even had a beginning. Cinema is. And it is because it already was, and it was because it safeguarded the spirit of things; and so, since it has always been, it will always be.

Cinema answers - like painting, writing and music - to one of humanity's primordial dreams. The image that Oliveira chooses, in order to approximate his changing nature and his atemporality, is that of the Douro river, '*o rio da minha aldeia*' ('the river of my village'), which is and is not always the same.

It has been said, though not often enough - at least amongst us - that Manoel de Oliveira's work constitutes an exceptional testimony of the path taken by cinematic language, from its origins up until our time. That this great filmmaker, at age ninety-four, is still active is nothing short of a miracle. (5) What's more, that together with his lucid perseverance, he has the honesty, intelligence and moral courage necessary to continue resisting, is something that we cannot but find deeply moving.

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5. Oliveira will be ninety-six in December 2004.

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