

Sounds with Open Eyes (or Keep Describing so that I Can See Better). Interview to Rita Azevedo Gomes

Álvaro Arroba

ABSTRACT

In this conversation, Rita Azevedo Gomes –filmmaker and film programmer at Cinemateca Portuguesa– analyzes from her own practice and experience as a spectator the relationship between the voice-over and the image, following Manoel de Oliveira's idea that the word is an image, and that sound should open the eyes or encourage vision, which is exemplified in *Branca de neve* (João César Monteiro, 2000). The filmmaker, then, focuses on her films *A Vingança de uma Mulher* (2012) and *Frágil Como o Mundo* (2002) to explain, with different examples, the use of the poetic word or the creation process of a soundtrack. Later, Rita Azevedo approaches the work of the sound technician, filmmaker and colleague Joaquim Pinto and, finally, the relationship between Manoel de Oliveira and João Bénard da Costa from the documentary that she directed about them, *A 15ª Pedra* (2007).

KEYWORDS

Voice-over, direct sound, sound / image, Portuguese cinema, filmed conversation, Manoel de Oliveira, Joao Bénard da Costa, Joaquim Pinto, João César Monteiras.

The use of a voice-over narration is a much stronger tendency in Portuguese cinema than in any other cinematography. With that in mind, we could start talking about *Branca de neve* (João César Monteiro, 2000), which probably is the apotheosis of this tradition.

Branca de Neve is not only a voice-over narration: the voice is the film. I saw it at a movie theatre and I did it with my eyes open. Looking at the screen I remembered João César explaining me that he had had a problem while doing the color correction of the black colors. And, suddenly, there is a scene in which Snow White is talking with the Prince and sees the stepmother kissing the hunter under a tree far away. The Prince describes the scene to her (“see, at a distance, the other one is kissing the hunter”) and tells her “Look there” and she replies “No, I don’t want to look, keep describing it to me so that I can see it better”. This scene is, in my opinion, key in *Branca de Neve*. Snow White saying “No, I don’t want to see, continue telling me so that I can see better”. It is an amazing game! When I heard that, suddenly, I really saw the breeze, the bridge... I even saw the colors: the stepmother in red (I’m not sure if it was really red), but I was watching all the colors. And, suddenly, she says “Don’t make me look there, I don’t want to open my eyes, keep talking, keep talking”.

The voice-over is a bit like that. It is as when we listen to stories in our childhood; we see all that we hear. When someone tells us a story, we see it immediately. If the film has a voice-over narration, the voice, the narration, adds an additional image that comes from what is being heard to what is being seen on the screen. This, in terms of the experience of the spectator, in some way, creates a third element beyond the sound track, the dialogue and, even, beyond the film: it creates someone who is not there, as if there would be another person... A voice-over can take me to something more oneiric. It’s like if cinema went back to the beginning of cinema, as if there was someone already discussing the film or proposing another point of view about it. That’s why I really

like the voice of the narration, the voice that is written on top or under the film, or that comes out of it.

In this sense, the voice-over can even create a kind of fantasy and nostalgic tone. And nostalgia is something that really belongs to us Portuguese, even if I increasingly try to avoid it. But there is a sort of fixation, of dreaming, I don’t know...

In any case, like Manoel de Oliveira says, a word is an image in and of itself. And I find this idea really present in my work because I believe that, sometimes, we don’t necessarily need to show in the image what can be found in the text. For instance, in my last film, *A Vingança de uma mulher* (Rita Azevedo, 2012) I thought that portraying the Portuguese woman as an absent, crazy or dramatic person would be redundant because I think that the text is so convulsive, so visual, that it wasn’t even necessary for them to gesticulate. Therefore, there is always a line between the narration and what is being watched. A line that, I think, cannot be trespassed... So that things are not repeated, ¿do you know what I mean? And a voice-over, sometimes, can do that.

On some occasions, like in *Frágil Como o Mundo* (Rita Azevedo, 2002), you use the voice and the literary quotation. How did you happen to include texts by Agustina Bessa Luis, Camões, Rilke and Ribeiro?

What happened in *Frágil Como o Mundo* was that, after the film had already been shot, I was reading Berdardim Ribeiro. And, suddenly, I felt a connection between *Menina e Moça*, which is Bernardim’s best poem, and *Frágil Como o Mundo*, which took me directly to the narrator’s voice. There, the narration works as another layer of the film: it’s the film told in a different way. The whole poem that is being developed through the film acts as if it was a veil on top of all that. In this case, the voice-over works a bit as if it was music. But music is an abstract thing and the voice-over, by contrast, is able to make the image subjective. In other words, while the camera makes the image

objective, since it places things nearer to reality or to an image of reality, the voice-over makes them subjective.

Have you ever chosen an actor or actress for their voice or for how they pronounce a language? I'm not only referring to how their voice works in the voice-over but also for what the voice provides to the body.

Of course! I am always looking for that voice. In *Frágil Como o Mundo*, Mario Barroso has a voice that I find perfect. He has a beautiful Portuguese. Exactly like in one of Oliveira's films, the one about Camilo Castelo Branco...

***O Dia do Desespero* (Manoel de Oliveira, 1992)?**

Yes, exactly, the death of Camilo. After Camilo dies, there is a shot in which we find three candles in a cemetery and suddenly the voice of Mario Barroso says "it's really cold, it's unbearably cold" and that voice is extraordinary: it's beyond the physical world. I really believe that happens because it is the voice of Mario Barroso: his Portuguese is incredible.

And, of course, I also love Luis Miguel Cintra. When I listen to him I cannot separate the voice from his body, from the person, and that would make it difficult for him to do a voice-over in a movie of mine, or at least it couldn't be an anonymous voice. He's a really brave actor because he accepts to do all those things that Manoel de Oliveira asks and he gives himself totally, understanding perfectly what is happening. For instance, in *Cristóvão Colombo – O Enigma* (Manoel de Oliveira, 2007) when, suddenly, he starts reciting that poem... It should have been something really uncomfortable for the actor, but he does it extraordinarily. In any case, in the history of cinema there have been many voices that I would have liked to film, like Margaret Sullivan's or James Mason's, which is, for me, the voice of cinema, with its tone of sarcasm, his incredible English... There are voices that immediately transport us.

In this sense, what I find very interesting is looking for a character or a person that only exists because of his or her voice, like what happened with Mario Barroso in *Frágil Como o Mundo*. He doesn't appear on film, he just speaks. A voice which is not tied to a person is an amazing discovery: the voice floats in the air and, suddenly, it opens the story; it is as if there were two movies, two layers or one thing on top of the other.

Alicia Mendoza has observed that the word that is more used in your films by your characters, and that you also use a lot, is *espantoso* (terrific). She also told me that it is a very uncommon word nowadays in Portugal, people say other synonyms such as magnificent. In some way, we could start to define your cinema from that word.

Espantoso is a magnificent and charming thing. *Espantoso* means that you find yourself overwhelmed with admiration. It's not an old-fashioned word, it's just that it's never been really used. João Bénard de Costa used to say it lots of times: when something or a film dazzled him completely, it was an *espanto*. People tend to say other things as it's *marvelous* or it's *fabulous*... *Espantoso* is that which absorbs all your attention. You get totally *espantado*, you can't see anything. *Espantoso* is more than marvelous. But the funny thing is that she noticed that. I would have never noticed it...

Talking about sound, it is impossible for me not to ask about Joaquim Pinto who, in some way, has covered all Portuguese cinema –if we follow the sound of films... How does he work? How does he face the soundtrack as a layer of the film?

I think Joaquim Pinto is the best sound technician that we have ever had. He has an infinite music culture and an *espantosa* creativity. Regarding *A Vingança de uma Mulher*, honestly, the initial concept that I had of the soundtrack was very far from what it ended up as. When I showed the film to

Joaquim (I think that in addition of having incredible taste, he is technically very knowledgeable) and to Nuno, they turned to me and told me that it was an ultramodern film, not a period film. I actually really wanted the film to touch our contemporary days, even if it was a period film, which is why there is a narrator and all those things. But then, they started to see that the film couldn't have all the romanticism that I had thought. And they were truly right; you couldn't insert in the soundtrack that which already was in the image. Therefore, we went to an unexpected proposal: the second school of Vienna. But, of course, when I heard those sounds, I felt a little out of place in the film. The coincidence between the image and the music was perfect but it was disconcerting: I was used to what I had in mind. Some days went by until I managed to get into the project and, after that, it was a delirium with every aspect that appeared. If Joaquim and Nuno hadn't been there, the film would have been very different and I like this deconstruction.

Why do you think they chose dodecaphonic music for such a romantic story? Although it also has a distanced mise en scene, a little Brechtian, a little Schroeter.

Although that story seems unreal in our times, it is not so far fetched. Suddenly, it turns into something composed, the composition is needed to get there. I think that cinema has a lot to do with this idea: its like music, it needs to be composed, to put some things together with others. And, in this case, the music, which is not music from the same period but more recent, adds something artificial to the film. I think it enriches it because if, as I would have expected, we had used Mozart in the scene of the loom, it would be another film. That is why I felt an imbalance at the beginning but later I understood the balance: with the music and the sound of Joaquim and Nuno, instead of slipping on top of the image, the sound opened the image.

Apart from this, which is the principal contribution of Pinto when capturing and conceiving a soundtrack?

When he is on a film, he suggests many things, he is really imaginative and has an amazing capacity to see things in sound that we don't see. For example, in the scene of *A Vingança de uma Mulher* with the recital, when that girl stays at the end and there is a shot of her hands... suddenly, Joaquim Pinto inserted there the sound of a leaving carriage. And at the beginning it felt strange but later it was *espantoso*. They are little details, really creative, really inventive... He has amazing ideas.

On the other hand, I remember that in *Frágil Como o Mundo*, I had problems in the shooting and ended up without any sound. I had it all very well planned but the sound technician left and I had to shoot many scenes with dialogues without recording the sound, not even a reference sound. Later, during the editing, I had to reconstruct everything; I don't even know how I managed because I didn't have any experience. Therefore, in many fragments of the film, there is not a single sound from the shooting. So between dubbing and other things, it was incredible amounts of work: there were some things said by the actors, who were really young, that in the dubbing process were really hard to understand or to guess. Instead of saying "I'm going to have a snack" they said "I'm going to eat"... so we had to make up the words. Hence, in my experience, although direct sound is marvelous, artificial sound also is. I have the idea that, in the same way as if filming an image, any method is valid for recording sound. The fact is that in that shooting I also went to record the sound of the birds, the forest... lots of the environmental sounds were made by myself while I was calling Joaquim so he could explain to me how that was done. And, as he was explaining things by the phone, I suddenly understood the sound.

This matter about direct or dubbed sound is very interesting because I believe Portuguese cinema to be very Straubian.

It is from a particular moment, when some very good filmmakers started to get fascinated by him, but it wasn't always like this. I remember

watching the first Straub in Lisbon because there was a director of the German Institute who programmed incredible things like some cycles of Straub's work. So we all went to the German Institute to see a type of cinema that none of us had ever seen before. And Straub also came here; it was a very important event for us, with those discussions at the end... It was something never seen before and it was very powerful. I think it was decisive for some people of Portuguese cinema. Personally, and especially because I really like Straub's work, it's going to be hard to say what I'm going to say, but I think if the world was how Straub sees it, I wouldn't be happy. But Straub is granitic, he's like a diamond. I once came out of *Sicilia!* (Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, 1999) very moved thinking that I had never cried in one of his movies. There, it really seems that the diamond shed a tear. It is a very moving film, like these last ones he has made. I think that, suddenly, there is something else there, of a huge loneliness, now that he is without Danièle. They are beautiful.

Do you think there has been some transmission between Oliveira and Straub? Especially in the way both direct the actors: there seems to be some kind of communication between *O Acta da Primavera* (Manoel de Oliveira, 1962) and *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* (Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, 1968). Precisely for what you are saying, for how granitic and diamond-like they both are.

I don't think that transmission has ever existed. Manoel has something very personal, which emanates from the inside. It is not casual that he filmed the spring in that way, with the ceremony, the ritual, the theatre... He says many times that cinema is a filmed theatre. I don't know if it is. I believe cinema is cinema. But he works from the representation. Once, I had a conversation with him for a movie that I made and he told me, as he also says in *A 15ª Pedra* (Rita Azevedo, 2007), that the representation of life is what differentiates us: we have the necessity

to represent our life, there is no other creature on earth with the desire to represent. We have this need to tell, which comes from the Greeks, from oratory and from writing... The need to tell heroic or divine facts, the need to pass on life is something extraordinary and it is where everything comes from. Manoel comes from that direct line: from representation, first comes the oratory, to tell the story. Then comes the representation of the story with actors representing rolls, instead of being just one orator. After, we find the theatre and, later, cinema. I think that for him, one thing is always after the other. And, therefore, his relationship is, first and foremost, with these origins.

I would like for you to talk about *A 15ª Pedra* and, in particular, about the differences in the pronunciation of Portuguese between João Bénard da Costa and Manoel de Oliveira. It seems that while Manoel's diction is much more academic, João's pronunciation is very closed. What did João contribute to you, in this sense? His voice, his body and, specially, how his diction is different to Oliveira's.

João Bénard da Costa's voice is one of those that are *saudades*. His voice and the way he spoke. The pleasure he felt when talking was dazzling. My impression is that João's greatest talent was speaking.

More than writing?

I'm not sure... At least, yes in relation of what he communicated to others. João had two phases: a really closed one, in a corner, with his felt pen, writing with a handwriting that nobody could read, it was like a secret thing. But, then, the happiness with which he spoke to people... I don't know any other person like that. He would come to present a film and, suddenly, there was an explosion of intimacy with the people: he was so close to us that I almost felt as if I was sitting on his lap while he was talking to us. And, he also had another special feature (which is a bit present in the film): he was very warm, as if he was speaking to his grandchildren by the

fireplace or sitting around a table. He would say very important things with the same tone as if he was commenting what there was for dinner or the walk he was going to take... And he had that happiness of putting everything in the same level, everything was together. Manoel, on the other hand, is someone from the North. And, here, we also have to distinguish between Portuguese from the North and Portuguese from the South. Manoel has a very religious, very Jesuit, way of speaking. He sometimes has some difficulties while searching for the word but he is always very precise and, also, very ironic. And both of them understood each other in an extraordinary way. That is why I really liked doing this film: I was present at some of their meetings and I saw them appear to each other with lots of respect and admiration (which is not an easy thing to maintain). They didn't love or related to each other in the sense that they would go together on vacations but they had a really profound esteem for each other, while maintaining their position. Therefore, there was never an intimate relationship between equals. Manoel was twenty years older, he was a man, João was a kid. There was a kind of ceremony in their relationship that was kept intact and had the same tone during the twenty years that I saw them together. And I wanted to capture the relationship between the two of them, how they had maintained their connection, that deep respect which was unbreakable until the end. And that was the idea for the film. On the other hand, I am twenty years younger than João, so there were three steps... And, suddenly, I saw them with that happiness of having found each other. Now that I think about it, I realize that it was as if what they wanted to, above all, was to give value to their friendship. They had to keep it intact, and that's how they did it.

It seems to me that Oliveira represents a kind of pure Gothic when he speaks whereas João Bénard is very Baroque. With all his inflexions, all that he does with his voice, the

tone of his voice... Manoel uses many pure forms. It is really charming to see how they complement each other.

There is an important aspect to consider: João never contradicts Manoel, he never permits himself to question what he says, as a sign of respect. When I did the film, I obviously didn't want to ask questions nor to be part of the scene. So the difficult part of the shooting was to avoid the conversation being only about Manoel's work. This could have been the natural tendency: the big interview of Manoel de Oliveira, the filmmaker. But that wasn't my idea. I wanted to capture the relationship between the two and, so that could happen, I had to suggest them different subjects that would conduct the conversation. That is, for them to talk about paintings, about Japan... so that they wouldn't only talk about Manoel's films. It's something that was more or less accomplished in the film: they tell stories, anecdotes, they talk about cinema, about life... João has that very informal way of speaking, it's as if he was eating at the table and talking with you, you know? On the other hand, that doesn't happen with Manoel. Manoel is always more attentive to what he says but, he also always speaks with humor. I also think that Manoel, while listening to João, is already thinking of what he is going to say next. He is very sharp because, if you notice, what he says next doesn't just add to what was being said. He thinks about what he wants to say afterwards and, that way, he guides the conversation to where he wants it to go. But I just let the whole thing develop for itself, without any planning. And, later, there is something that we cannot forget: they are fed up of talking all their life about the same subjects. However, suddenly, what is interesting in the film is that they end up saying things that they hadn't even foreseen, such as the issue of the *15ª Pedra* or the signs in Dreyer and time. And the other one says "Oh, it's true, I had never thought about that!" •

Translated from Spanish by Alejandra Rosenberg

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DA COSTA, João Bénard (1986). “50 Anos da Cinemateca Francesa, 60 Anos de Henri Langlois”, in *Cinemateca Francesa 50 Anos - 1936-1986*. Lisboa, Cinemateca Portuguesa.

ÁLVARO ARROBA

Graduated in English Philology. Founder of the magazine *Letras de cine* with Daniel V. Villamediana. Collaborator of the supplement *Culturals* of *La Vanguardia*, *So Film*, *Diario de Sevilla*, *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, *Panic*, *Rouge*, *Sight & Sound*, *Cinema Scope* or *Lumière*. Editor of the book *Claire Denis, fusión fría* (2005) for the International Film Festival of Gijón. Programmer of the cycles “Abierto por reforma.

Ficciones tras la muerte del cine” (ZINEBI, 2011) y “Gonzalo García Pelayo” (Viennale 2013). He has contributed in different books, such as *El batallón de las sombras*, *La Mirada del vampire*, *Movie Mutations* (Spanish edition), and in many conferences, such as MICEC (International Festival of Contemporary European Film), or in the round table “Cero en conducta” in CGAI.