

Routledge Studies in Religion and Film

EXPLORING FILM AND CHRISTIANITY

MOVEMENT AS IMMOBILITY

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5 Filming the Soul?

From Robert Bresson to Manoel de Oliveira

Maria do Rosário Lupi Bello

Introduction

Born a mere seven years after Robert Bresson, the Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira made it clear on several occasions that he was indebted to the French director with whom he said he had learned, along with other values, the power of the static shot:

The first time I noticed how the fixed camera created a powerful force was in Bresson's *The Trial of Joan of Arc* [*Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1962]. It affected me greatly. It creates a very high degree of stability, a force, a coherence.¹

Force, coherence and stability were values both directors always pursued, and their cinema aesthetics are remarkably close because those characteristics are sometimes the object of criticism: the slow dialogues, the actors' inexpressiveness and lack of tonal modulation, the large amount of text, the copious use of fixed shots, the lack of "action." The roots of the similar technique used by both filmmakers are to be found in the basic principle another great filmmaker, Pier Paolo Pasolini, knew so well how to capture and define: "A technique that is frontal, simple, hieratic, devoid of nature and of naturalism can be nothing but a sacred technique."²

In fact, both Bresson and Oliveira show in their works an apparent "immobility" that expresses the sacred nature of an inner movement, the vibration of the soul, the intensity and the infinity of desire, as well as the ineffable presence of a mystery that can be found in the physicality of the material world. But they do so in different, albeit comparable ways that demonstrate the difference in their respective starting points, the originality of each one's aesthetic path, and, above all, the diversity of their desired points of arrival. It is significant to observe that each of these artists encapsulates the basic elements of their art in a very similar trilogy: for Bresson, image, sound and silence; for Oliveira, image, word, and music. Nevertheless, it is just as important to see the similarities as it is to recognize the subtle differences between them. The aim of Bresson's cinematic gesture is to travel across the surface of the image searching

for a transparency that is a sort of anti-image: "IN THIS LANGUAGE OF IMAGES, ONE MUST LOSE COMPLETELY THE NOTION OF IMAGE. THE IMAGES MUST EXCLUDE THE IDEA OF IMAGE."³ There is no mere formalist purpose, at least not in the strict sense, in Bresson's aesthetic; his eye is directed toward what the image provides for us to see, whether beyond it or through it, without lingering on the image itself and on its eventual plastic seduction. There is no kind of suspect in relation to the filmic image at stake here—its value is not in itself questioned—but rather a profound confidence in its potential as a vehicle of something visible and true, the immaterial side of the concrete image that appears on screen.

Manoel de Oliveira views the image as the "ghost" of reality. The filmic image "fixes" what escapes from life and what only art can provide, although not forever: the "theater" of existence, not life, but rather its "theatrical," codified and staged ethereal form in which a hypothesis of meaning is hidden. The more the image is manipulated and artistically worked, the more "transparent" it becomes, coming closer to the truth of the real: "The cinema of transparency is in fact the one that is more manipulated, more sophisticated. I would say more 'artistic'."⁴ To him, the filmmaker's work consists in this type of aesthetic aimed at making reality visible: "The objective of cinema is to show what one sees. If, in theatre, there are many things that are not seen, the duty of cinema is to show what is not seen in theatre."⁵ But Oliveira is referring to what is "materially" possible to film. Thoughts and dreams, or any other ethereal realities, can only be suggested by film; every attempt at "reproducing" them in cinema is artificial and is ultimately a failure.

For Manoel de Oliveira, the word has a sensible and capturable form. This is the second key element in his trilogy, and it is considered as real and as visible as a face or as a body. Words inundate Oliveira's cinema in all their varied and prismatic dimensions—they appear as audible and rhythmic sound, full of weight and meaning, taken from literature or directly from life, and uttered "in," "over," and "off"; they appear in textual and graphic form, a visual body captured in handwritten letters, messages, titles, and subtitles; or they are given a human form by issuing out of the mouth of those who incarnate them. Such is the case of Father António Vieira, a famous seventeenth-century orator, in *Palavra e Utopia* (2000) [*Word and Utopia*]⁶—in him, the word becomes a person and travels around the world. The "theatrical" dimension of Oliveira's cinema is also confirmed here since the word is both performative and dynamic—it is the primary origin of the film's movement and of its pendular oscillation. Something that moves the film forward as well as causing the necessary (and reflexive) interruption.

Unlike Oliveira, Bresson puts "sound" in second place instead of the "word" and gives both weight and body to this element by highlighting, among others, the sound of sounds: "The voice: soul made flesh."⁶ A sound—not just one of human origin but any sound—can replace an image and, in Bresson's view it is better to suppress the image because "[w]hat is for the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear";⁷ and "[i]f the eye is entirely won, give nothing or almost

nothing to the ear. One cannot be at the same time all eye and all ear."⁸ Sound gives film a unique quality, its interiority: "The ear goes more towards the within, the eye towards the outer."⁹ Among the many possible examples, let us recall the moment in the film *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) when we hear the sound of a car accident we cannot see; or the importance of the sounds in *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) that weave one of the most important webs of signification in the film, namely in the tournament scene in which only the bottom half of the horses are seen, their hooves filling the screen, instead of the bodies of their riders. Also, the narrative force of the battle comes primarily from the noises that can be heard which enable us to build up a relatively exact picture of the events.

Manoel de Oliveira says that neither image nor word nor music should ever be subordinated to each other but instead there should be an equal and collaborative relationship in which none of the three lose their autonomy. In a similar vein, Robert Bresson says: "A sound must never come to the help of an image, nor an image to the help of a sound."¹⁰ It is possible to see in their films many examples such as these where various *strata* are "superimposed": moments when you hear a voice repeating what you see in the image, or when a written text can be heard as well as read, thereby obtaining a form of interaction that adds power to the value of each of the elements in question, creating new significant effects. Although Bresson does not mention "word" in his trilogy—which is significant in itself—words enjoy a very special weight in his cinema, as we shall attempt to show below, and frequently appear with a physical and bodily value. However, unlike Oliveira, Bresson does not give the word the reflexive dimension that we find in the Portuguese filmmaker's work; its value is more spiritual than intellectual.

In third place, Bresson refers to "silence," while Oliveira refers to "music." However, the difference is not as great as it might seem. For Bresson, silence is always "musical": harmonic, expressive, dynamic; never empty or static. It is tied umbilically to noise, to the word; ultimately, it is born like a melodious resonance, a sort of echo of what is said and heard. "Silence, musical by an effect of resonance. The last syllable of the last word or the last noise like a held note."¹¹ It is to this silence, to this reverberation of the sound that remains behind, that Bresson usually refers. And he then clarifies this to distinguish it from total silence: "Absolute silence and silence obtained by a *pianissimo* of noises."¹² He is totally committed to the value of relationships and so has always been considered a "filmmaker of montage": "From the clash and sequence of images and sounds, a harmony of relationships must be born."¹³ Thus it is from the clash of sounds that their absence is born: "THE SOUNDTRACK INVENTED SILENCE,"¹⁴ said Bresson. The filmmaker makes this same silence and its correlative "immobility" the starting point for his aesthetic expression: "Be sure of having used to the full all that is communicated by immobility and silence."¹⁵

For Manoel de Oliveira, music is "the structure of the invisible,"¹⁶ as Leonardo da Vinci defined it, making a person feel what cannot be seen but which presence is undeniable; or, according to Schopenhauer,¹⁷ expressing what is metaphysical

in the physical world. Indeed, in his films, Oliveira always used the music of great composers also played by famous interpreters: Georg Friedrich Händel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Felix Mendelssohn, Antonín Dvořák, Giuseppe Verdi, Gaetano Donizetti, Karol Szymanowski, João Paes, Maria João Pires, to name a few.

A good example of the interaction between music, word, and image in Oliveira's films takes place in *Amor de Perdição* (1978) [*Doomed Love*] in the sequence where we see the preparations for the birthday dance, in Teresa's house (the protagonist). The scene is first accompanied by the voice of the narrator who recounts what has happened just before: Tadeu de Albuquerque, Teresa's father, has decided to tell Baltasar Coutinho, Teresa's cousin and suitor, he has threatened to send his daughter to a convent for refusing to marry him, but Baltasar attempts to dissuade him so he can put another plan into action. Next, there is only the music, which continues to be heard until the moment when the three elements function together giving this section of the film a finished form: the *image* of the arrival of the guests, the *music* playing softly, and the narrator's voice-over whose *words* tell us how Teresa is being initiated with this celebration into the social life and the sophisticated entertainment habits of the nobility. The fact that the words are not synchronous with the image or with the music (since it begins before the dance itself) shows that the different elements are deliberately not complementary, which also manifests their concomitant use as specific and independent cinematographic modes of expression.

Manoel de Oliveira also pursued a certain sort of silence, which is above all a silence of the eye and not so much of the ear; a silence that shows itself temporally: the suspension of mutability, the halt provided by the slowdown of the rhythm pace and the use of the fixed shot, all of which aim at offering the spirit a "silent" space of reflection (something that movement would make more difficult to penetrate). "Eternity is stopped time," said Oliveira, a believer in the ultimate value of *stasis*, an absolute place that is simultaneously the origin and the destiny of everything, where everything happens and everything is.¹⁸

Bresson's silence is more predominately spatial; it coincides with the silent "presence" of the sensible, with the "visible parlance" of bodies and things, which expresses—and allows the viewer to capture—the meaning of what "happens." Oliveira's gesture has an element of dissent; he seems to want to "halt" the unstoppable flow of existence and challenge the laws of the seventh art, the most temporal of all the arts.

Meanwhile, Bresson focuses primarily on the cinema's ability to reveal reality (if used according to the criteria of what he calls the "cinematographic") and on the possibility it offers to "provoke the unexpected. Expect it,"¹⁹ through offering the pure essence of things and people, whom he calls "models" ("Mechanized outwardly. Intact, virgin within").²⁰ These elements can be found in two masterpieces, Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951) [*Diary of a Country Priest*] and Oliveira's *Francisca* (1981), and are reinforced by other dimensions pertaining to the aesthetics of both filmmakers.

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Journal d'un curé de campagne is based on the homonymous literary work by Georges Bernanos, published in 1936.²¹ Bresson said he wished to remain rigorously faithful to the book and wanted the writing of the diary to set the rhythm of the film. In this respect, the relationship between this work and many of Oliveira's films, in which characters may be found writing or reading letters or other documents (as in *Amor de Perdição*), is particularly evident and confirms the profound influence of Bresson's aesthetic on the Portuguese director. In *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, the presence of the word performs a function also defended by Oliveira: it is dynamic, alive, performative, it triggers movement, it makes the action progress. The word is what marks the cycle of days and events, while at the same time it is through the word that we gain access to the protagonist's inner world. In this respect, its value is not "realist" but "dramatic," which would lead André Bazin to ask "Is *Le Journal* just a silent film with spoken titles?"²²

At first sight the film seems to be somehow made up on the one hand of the abbreviated text of the novel and illustrated, on the other hand, by images that never pretend to replace it. All that is spoken is not seen, yet nothing that is seen is also spoken.²³

The location is set in a small village in the north of France called Ambricourt where a new parish priest (played by Claude Laydu) is sent. He is a young man of great simplicity and austerity who has recently been ordained, but he suffers from a stomach complaint (further discovered to be cancer) that will lead to his early death. Not understood by the local rural population who are trapped within traditions and religious codes voided of their true content and, therefore, implacably moralist and pitiless, the young priest suffers an agonizing form of martyrdom that is made worse by the loneliness to which he is condemned. Ambricourt thus becomes for him a sort of purgatory or Garden of Gethsemane—a veritable *via sacra*.

Laydu, a non-professional actor, is a truly genuine "model" figure—as in fact are all the main characters in this drama—in the sense that Bresson attributes to the term "model": "all face"²⁴ in which "nothing wilful"²⁵ can be seen but only "*the constant, the eternal beneath the accidental*"²⁶ through their "inner way of being. Unique, inimitable."²⁷ It is their mere "presence," their visible body, that expresses their true interior, their unfathomable mystery, through the automatism of their movements.

From the very first minutes of the film, we find him in the company of a notebook that he has turned into a personal diary: a hand—a major element in Bresson's cinema—turns the pages of the notebook where these words can be read: "I don't think I'm doing anything wrong in writing down daily, with absolute frankness, the simplest and most insignificant secrets of a life actually lacking any trace of mystery."²⁸ We hear his voice (off screen) saying these

words, which contain the essence of his character—his preoccupation with good and evil, his sense of responsibility toward himself and the others, his desire for truth and frankness, his simplicity and humility.

Immediately afterwards, a new piece of written text appears. It is a sign with the village name "Ambricourt" on it, which we see at the same time as we hear the engines of the passing cars. Next comes a close-up of the face of the village's new parish priest who looks exhausted and wipes the sweat off his face. The camera cuts to a full shot showing the priest holding his bicycle, seen through the railings of a large entrance gate while dogs can be heard barking; this is immediately followed by a close-up of a couple embracing but who move apart when they see the priest and, turning their backs on him, walk toward the manor house half-hidden behind the gate we saw earlier.

In little less than a minute the viewer is provided with the main elements of what they are going to see and hear: the voice (the soul) and the thoughts of the priest, his young suffering face, the space (both physical and spiritual) where he will end up fighting the next battles of his existence, Ambricourt (with its everyday life and movement), and his "inconvenient" presence in a microcosm where sin reigns—we will soon learn the couple is committing adultery.

The film's structure is based on this movement which, by being repeated, is marked by a sort of hidden rhythm: the writing—embodied by his voice—followed by the successive failed initiatives of the priest, who is rebuffed by all, his growing awareness of his own impotence, the worsening of his illness and, finally, his death. His inner universe is engaged in a permanent struggle and is "objectified" by what surrounds him: a small, rural, backward village, the local inhabitants who are spiteful and mostly uneducated, the profound loneliness and discomfort of his existence. Railings are a recurrent image—as if each of the priest's movements is an attempt to open doors and traverse closed hostile territories, leaving his existential exile—while the background noises (the passing cart, the barking dogs, the crowing cock) define the simple, insignificant everyday dimension of his little world, which is so human yet at the same time so averse to probing its own depths. There are those who say this is a story about failure and the pain of imprisonment; it is certainly a story about the fight for freedom as the abandonment of the self and about the indispensable inner and outer battle that leads to it.

The film shows a form of progression: as the events unfold, the intensity grows, and this coincides with the priest's increasing suffering which reaches an almost intolerable level. "Several takes of the same thing, like a painter who does several pictures or drawings of the same subject and, each fresh time, *progresses towards rightness*," explains Bresson.²⁹ Rightness cannot be reached without asceticism, an asceticism of life that manifests itself in aesthetic asceticism. The steps leading toward this are encompassed in the basic events: *encounters*, successive encounters between people which are always, if we look carefully, encounters between souls. Each person is the carnal and visible form of their own soul—or, in this case, of their own sin. What Bresson is concerned with in this story is the meaning of a priest's existence in society: old Fabregat's

avarice, the countess' callousness, the count's pride and lust, young Seraphita's malice, the doctor's atheistic rebelliousness, the countess' daughter's contempt and hatred.

"A real priest is never loved," warns his mentor, the parish priest of Torcy.³⁰ It is sufficient that he be "respected and obeyed." Later, tortured by the hostility he encounters all around him, the young priest asks the old canon, the count's uncle: "But what do they accuse me of?" The answer is clear: "Of being what you are. The people don't hate your simplicity, they are protecting themselves from it. It is like a sort of fire that burns them." The words of T. S. Eliot in "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" when he speaks of the Church as a "Stranger" come to mind—"The Rock. The Watcher. The Stranger"—the one nobody likes.³¹

Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.
They constantly try to escape.
From the darkness outside and within.
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.³²

The film's camera shots stem from this darkness. They are shots inhabited by the sins of men in confrontation with this tender yet hard Presence, a "stranger" with a provocative "dangerous" purity.

The famous scene of the countess' conversion through her discussion with the priest is the clearest example: it deals with a meeting and a struggle—a hard extenuating struggle, like hand-to-hand combat—between two souls. The countess is a haughty woman, bitter and hardened by the suffering caused by the loss of her son and her husband's constant infidelity. This has filled her with hatred and resentment toward God and there is only room in her heart for the memory of her lost son to the point that she does not know how to love her elder daughter. Standing next to the fireplace—the symbolic center and source of warmth—she challenges God, in the person of the priest who, seen from a lower angle, speaks to her firmly but tenderly of death and life and love. Meanwhile, the rhythmic sound of the gardener raking up the fallen leaves outside can be heard, bringing the resonance of an otherwise silent world, like an echo of the simple and valuable reality of life; it avoids the risk of pure abstraction and inserts the scene in its true, concrete context. Each of the countess' sentences is like a blow, parried and rebutted by the priest. Whenever we see his face in close-up, we realize her struggle is also his struggle, and the words he utters are like pleas to God, reminding us of Francis de Sales' answer to Madame de Chantal (the future Jane Francis de Chantal): "one must open oneself to Him, give Him everything, keep nothing back, even offer pride itself, one's own desire, and beg for His kingdom."³³ "God is not the master of love. God is love itself" and whoever wishes to love cannot "set themselves outside love." The countess' resistance is overcome by his words and his presence. Her final gesture, of kneeling down, expresses her complete surrender.

In *Journal d'un curé de campagne* all the aspects that mark Bresson's filmic aesthetic can be already found: the imagery-creating power of the written word, the value of sound, silence as a melodious resonance, the carnal and mysterious presence of the "model," the encounter at the heart of the narrative ... Bresson would later clarify and intensify many of these concepts, which he would systematize in his book, *Notes sur le Cinématographe*, published more than 20 years later in 1975.³⁴ These aesthetic concepts are all to be found in his later films in a more refined, radical form.

Francisca also appears at a relatively early moment in Manoel de Oliveira's career. It is the sixth full-length film of a filmmaker who would direct films right up until 2014, the year before he passed away, shooting over 30 full-length films and some 20 short and medium-length ones. For João Bénard da Costa, the film critic who would become Cinemateca Portuguesa's most enduring director, this film is the first example of a "cinematographic reading of literature," of the "visible word."³⁵

The dialectics between cinema and literature that we find in *Journal d'un curé de campagne* seem to be brought here to the point of a synthesis, of a full assimilation. In *Francisca*, Agustina Bessa-Luis' novel is read cinematographically from the first shot to the final one, with "reality" (the apparently natural and physical physiognomy of everyday life that is equivalent to the village of Ambricourt) almost never showing its face. The film abdicates from any context right from the start, plunging us immediately into the visibility of the aesthetic and literary experience: we see José Augusto Pinto de Magalhães' sister-in-law reading a letter of condolence (for José Augusto's death) from Fanny's mother while we hear the words written in the letter being read in voice-over. Words that will immediately be repeated as if it were necessary to force us to enter unreservedly, with heart and soul, into the very "pages" of the story we are going to read, hear, and see.

Next, an intertitle—as in a silent movie, reminding us of Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne*—informs us that: "With the independence of Brazil a climate of instability and despair was generated in Portugal." We could say that the context is being set here: but this is not so much an historical contextualization as the depiction of an atmosphere, which can be understood shortly afterwards: "a section of the youth, who saw their traditionalist ideas defeated in 1847 in the civil war, ends up embodying a skeptical type, inclined to fatal passions." Oliveira employs here the usual process behind his aesthetic construction: a historical fact is used as a concrete basis for the creation of an atmosphere, of a truth to be shown, glimpsed, and metamorphosed. In this case, it concerns a certain type of passion, a fatal passion, as the following intertitle confirms: "This is the true story of the fatal love between José Augusto and Fanny (*Francisca*)." It is, therefore, a question of a certain type of predisposition of the soul and the consequences that arise from it.

The three main characters are in fact real: José Augusto Pinto de Magalhães and Fanny Owen were both known to the writer Camilo Castelo Branco, who lived as they did in Porto in the mid-nineteenth century. Fanny and Maria were

the daughters of an English colonel, who had been a counsellor to Dom Pedro IV during the Liberal Wars, and a Brazilian lady. The complex web of this triangular relationship (since Camilo was not indifferent to Fanny's charms) leads to Francisca being kidnapped by José Augusto. They got married despite the fact Camilo warned his friend against such a step, saying who "loves with pride, who loves the luxury of loving," which basically leads to a structural inability to truly love, will end up killing his bride.³⁶ Indeed, this is what happened in August 1854 with Fanny's death from tuberculosis. José Augusto also dies the following month, in a somewhat mysterious and inconclusive way, after a month of great doubts and torments, to the point of having Fanny's corpse exhumed to verify the virginity of his own wife, whose fidelity he had always doubted.

The story of this unconsummated love takes place in an extremely worldly and viscerally Romantic society in which men dress and talk *à la* Byron (as in the case of José Augusto), ride their horses indoors (one of the unforgettable scenes in the film) and talk flippantly about love, women, and lovers while "deciding" to fall in love like someone who decides to play a game of cards. In one of the main scenes of the film, Fanny asks Camilo who José Augusto is. "He is a tragic man," the novelist replies. "He has no soul." Fanny echoes him: "What is the soul? A butterfly does not have a soul either but it knows better than anyone how to touch a flower." And she adds: "The soul is not a chair that you offer a visitor. The soul is..." Faced with Fanny's silence, Camilo insists: "Is...?" to which Fanny replies: "It is a vice. The soul is a vice." This enigmatic expression, taken from Agustina Bessa-Luis' novel, is the key that enables us to unlock and penetrate the very heart of the film, throwing light on much of its diegetic universe and providing a fundamental clue to Oliveira's own aesthetic, where the quest for truth always seems to involve much effort and a great deal of discomfort, as if led by forces impossible to control and difficult to accept.

Unlike Bresson, whose struggle concentrates on the search for the emergence of the soul incarnate in the bodies he films, Oliveira joins forces with his characters to endure a terrible battle along with them—a sort of reverse path that reaches the limit when trying to demonstrate that the soul is a vice, an undesirable reality perhaps, but certainly one that is persistent and permanent, which cannot be escaped. The tragedy of the love between José Augusto and Fanny is the tragedy that confirms this "truth." Thus, out of the pain, melancholy, and darkness that run through the whole film emerges the light of one inexorable fact: the heart is an unfathomable mystery, impossible to be tamed and defeated, much less eliminated. The heart could be said to appear here in the biblical sense, coincident with the soul, that "place" of the infinite within the human, where the unlimited demands of truth, love, good, beauty, and justice are rooted.

The film portrays a society subjugated by the codes of an exaggerated Romanticism that turns its "victims" into "unstable and desperate" people as the initial intertitle suggests. To understand the film, it is important to recall

the famous scene in which José Augusto, after his wife's death, is seen by a maid in the dark chapel of his house, engaging in a dialogue with Fanny's physical heart, which he keeps inside a formalin glass box—it is, in fact, a monologue spoken aloud with words that are life and blood, truth and pain. This sinister monologue is repeated. First shown from the perspective of the maid, who is horrified by what she sees, then shown from José Augusto's point of view. José Augusto does not manage to calm or restrain the maid, seeing her flee in terror as the water in the bucket she was carrying pours out, spreading the water over the floor—thus, significantly, mingling with the blood from Fanny's heart (like Jesus's blood pouring out together with water from His wound), that José Augusto had dropped on the ground. When trying to quieten her, José Augusto argues that there is no need to be afraid of a dead heart (“It's a muscle that has stopped, like a stopped clock”) but rather of the living one:

Did it not make an impression on you when you could feel it beating in her chest, in her pulse? Then, yes, it was frightening. Incredible things came from it. The fate of one man, and even of others ... Now look: it is there, harmless, with no smell and no fire, with nothing to cause a turmoil in the world.

Added to these powerful spoken and repeated words is Szymanowski's disturbing music and the plastic weight of the images which, interacting with each other, produce something much greater than their sum—the possibility of an authentic experience of an aesthetic existential nature: a glimpse of the unfathomable mystery of the human heart (which Fanny herself says she “is nostalgic for”) and its immense inescapable power.

Francisca is the fourth film in the so-called “Tetralogy of Frustrated Loves” directed by Manoel de Oliveira. It follows *O Passado e o Presente* (1972) [*The Past and the Present*], *Benilde ou a Virgem Mãe* (1974) [*Benilde, or the Virgin Mother*], and *Amor de Perdição* (1978) [*Doomed Love*]. All of these films are about the many encounters and misunderstandings of love—which are also misunderstandings of the soul—and about its deceits and illusions, the false pretensions and trickery love brings, and above all the irreducibility of its transcendent dimension.

By dropping the formalin glass box containing Fanny's heart, smashing it violently on the ground, José Augusto exclaims: “It is good to know I do not make you suffer. That is what freedom is.” Would freedom then be the absence of consequences, or the death of the heart, freed from its demands? Yet, by definition, one cannot escape a “vice.”

José Augusto—who dies at the early age of 23 when Camilo was already 34—is the figure who embodies the Romantic “misunderstanding,” the way of living that mistakes the desire of love for love itself, transforming the unlimited dimension of desire into the exaltation of passion. Camilo Castelo Branco, being older, was aware of the fragility of such a position—he described his friend as a typical representative of this Romantic culture and society: “talent without common sense; barbarism mixed with culture, sensibility and the most

extreme selfishness"—although his disdain for these features did not stop him from feeling attracted to it. After all, as Jacinto do Prado Coelho so clearly puts it in his essay "A metafísica da novela" [The metaphysical of the novel], to anaesthetize your own heart and live without drama would be much worse; it would correspond to the "foolish contentment of the sated bourgeois," of which the true novelist of flesh and blood had an utter horror.³⁷

In the final scene of the film, Camilo Castelo Branco and two other friends are in the Café Guichard and comment on José Augusto's recent death, a suspected suicide. The scene introduces a final ironic tone, much to the taste of the real Camilo Castelo Branco as well as to Manoel de Oliveira: "If I ever write about the case," the homodiegetic novelist says, "I will say he died of a brain fever; it is more elegant and the readers like it." And then, calling out loud to the passing waiter: "Bring more cognac!" At that precise moment, an explosion is heard, a sort of inverted version of *les trois coups de Molière*, and the story is brought to an unexpected abrupt end, wrapped with lively music, reminiscent of the *Folies Bergère*. Finally, the curtain falls theatrically on the screen, covering the tragedy that has just been staged and witnessed.

Whereas the viewer of Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* is left with the epiphany moment of the death of the village priest, Oliveira's viewers are "forced" to work the ending out for themselves and form their own opinion. The Portuguese director places his trust in this sort of "visual deposit" which becomes fixed in the viewers' mind and with which they can go on working. "In cinema, what is important is not what we see but what occurs *between* the images," Oliveira says in reply to Tancelin.³⁸ For Oliveira, Tancelin explains, "We must pay attention to what stays behind in our head from the film. That's what is beautiful, to go on thinking afterwards. During the screening, we only see what is trivial."³⁹ Provoked by the "triviality" seen in *Francisca*—the tragedy of the ironic attempt to flee the soul—Oliveira's viewer is given a mission; his task is to decide. As the Portuguese director João Mário Grilo once said, Oliveira's films "are made to divide": they are anti-consensual films with an alternative logic—either life or death, either good or evil, love or hate, the soul or the void, everything or nothing.

Robert Bresson uses the word "encounter" or "meeting" ("*rencontre*") to speak of cinema. "Shooting is going out to meet something. Nothing in the unexpected that is not secretly expected by you."⁴⁰ His cinematographic gesture always wants to produce on the screen this mysterious combination of expectation and surprise that can be described by the word "event."⁴¹ Whereas Oliveira seeks to present to the viewer the spectacle that life is ("What heart is this of mine!" exclaims Fanny; further on we hear an identically astonishing statement: "Men and women!") by placing the viewer in the presence of a mystery and leaving him or her with the impact of this cry which has the form of a question, Robert Bresson addresses mainly the cognitive value of the cinematographic image and its ability to reveal the essence of the human being—"to attain that 'heart of the heart' which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy, or by drama," in order to "discover the matter they

are made of.”⁴² As Paul Schrader reminds us,⁴³ following an interview given by Bresson to James Blue, what underpins Bresson’s art is the “real” which he interrogates in depth, magnifying it: “The supernatural in film is only the real rendered more precise. Real things seen close up.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

For Oliveira, “everything exists and nothing exists. Everything is mystery”⁴⁵—it remains for us, his viewers, to provide the evidence for this inescapable reality, the soul, which imposes itself like a vice, through the aesthetic form that reflects, like a mirror, reality and life, and, by accepting an inescapable battle, to be able to admit that “There is only grace. There is only faith.”⁴⁶ Bresson’s *Journal d’un curé de campagne* speaks of the total submission to this fact. It is a film in which “the movements of the soul were born with the same progression as those of the body” and the point of their immobility coincides with the moment of maximum “action,” the moment of the death of the priest in the final scene, with his positive and unreserved admission: “Everything is grace.”⁴⁷

Notes

- 1 Antoine de Baecque and Jacques Parsi, *Conversas com Manoel de Oliveira* (Porto: Campo das Letras, 1999), 180 (translation mine).
- 2 Luigi Fontanella, *Pasolini rilegge Pasolini. Intervista con Giuseppe Cardillo* (Milan: Archivio, 2005), 54 (translation mine).
- 3 Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 33.
- 4 João Bénard da Costa, Ed., *Manoel de Oliveira* (Lisbon: Cinemateca Portuguesa, 1981), 35 (translation mine).
- 5 De Baecque and Parsi, *Conversas com Manoel de Oliveira*, 52 (translation mine).
- 6 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 30.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 16 Carlos Pontes Leça, “Da Luta pela Criação Musical,” *Revista Portuguesa de Psicanálise: Separata 4* (1986): 63–8.
- 17 Manoel de Oliveira, “A Eternidade é Parada,” interview by Paulo Portugal, *Sol*, 2 April 2015, <https://sol.sapo.pt/2015/04/02/manoel-de-oliveira-a-eternidade-e-parada>.
- 18 Sérgio C. Andrade, “A Lição de Cinema de Agnès Varda,” *Público*, “Ípsilon,” October 23, 2009, <https://www.publico.pt/2009/10/23/culturaipsilon/noticia/a-licao-de-cinema-de-agnes-var-da-243612>.
- 19 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 50.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 21 Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002).

- 22 André Bazin, "Le Journal d'un curé de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 138.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 16.
- 25 Ibid., 25.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., 27.
- 28 This is the film's English subtitle for: "Je ne crois rien faire de mal, en notant ici, au jour le jour, avec une franchise absolue, les très humbles, les insignifiants secrets d'une vie d'ailleurs sans mystère."
- 29 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 53.
- 30 All translations of dialogue and intertitles are mine.
- 31 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1963), 148.
- 32 Ibid., 160.
- 33 "That Dear Lord would have us so entirely His as that nothing should remain ours, but that we may give ourselves up wholly, unreservedly to His Providence. Let us abide patiently amid the darkness of the Passion," Francis de Sales, *A Selection from the Spiritual Letters of S. Francis de Sales*, trans. H. L. Sidney Lear Francis (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1876), 142.
- 34 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*.
- 35 João Bénard da Costa, "Francisca," *Folha da Cinemateca*, "Todo Manoel de Oliveira: Cem Anos em Dois Meses," Cinemateca Portuguesa – Museu do Cinema, 2008 (translation mine).
- 36 See Agustina Bessa-Luís, *Fanny Owen* (Lisbon: Guimaraes Editores, 1988), 47 (translation mine).
- 37 Jacinto do Prado Coelho, "A Metafísica da Novela," in *Camilo: Evocações e Juízos. Antologia de Ensaios*, Ed. Abel Barros Baptista (Porto: Comissão Nacional das Comemorações Camilianas, 1991), 173 (translation mine).
- 38 Serge Daney, Raymond Bellour, and Philippe Tancelin, "Le ciel est historique," *Chimères: Revue des schizoanalyses* 14 (1991): 150.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 52. Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 104: "Tourner c'est aller à une rencontre. Rien dans l'inattendu qui ne soit attendu secrètement par toi."
- 41 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 50. Bresson makes this principle an essential work method: "To provoke the unexpected. To expect it."
- 42 Ibid., 20. In full: "Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of. To attain that 'heart of the heart' which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy, or by drama."
- 43 Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley, CA: Da Capo Press, 1988), 61.
- 44 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 62.
- 45 De Baecque and Parsi, *Conversas com Manoel de Oliveira*, 52 (translation mine).
- 46 Ibid., 167 (translation mine).
- 47 Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 19. This is a sentence by Montaigne: "Les mouvements de l'âme naissaient avec même progrès que ceux du corps."