

JULIÃO SARMENTO'S MOVING IMAGES: VISION'S PERVERSITY FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF DESIRE

 **BRUNO MARQUES**

Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas,
Instituto de História de Arte
brunosousamarques@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article analyses an audiovisual essay created around the exhibition *Julião Sarmiento. Film Works*, that took place in Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Porto in 2019. This exhibition reunited 10 works in film and video produced by the Portuguese artist in different moments of his career. Following the audiovisual essay's structure, I will approach three thematic obsessions transversal to Julião Sarmiento's work, as a reflexive proposal about a gaze phenomenology (or a vision's perversity), regarding dispositives that involve the moving image. Particularly, in what concerns the problematic of desire. These are: (1) The constant work of language (the real, the symbolic and the imaginary); (2) The fragmented body (the conscience/disassembling of voyeurism); (3) The rhythm (exposing the matter of time in favour of a deceptive aesthetics).

Keywords: Julião Sarmiento; Audiovisual essay; Film; Video; Moving image; Contemporary art.

Considered the most international of his generation, the Portuguese artist Julião Sarmento has received full critical and institutional recognition, both nationally and internationally, over the last four decades. But despite several scattered references in catalog texts, critical essays, and academic articles that preceded it, mainly with different concerns, with the exception of *SlowMotion. Julião Sarmento* (2000), there was not until now any exhibition exclusively devoted to the question of the *moving image* used in Sarmento's work.

This audiovisual essay thus constitutes a direct reaction to *Julião Sarmento. Film Works*, an exhibition held at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa (Porto, 2019), curated by Nuno Crespo, which brought together ten works on video and on film made by the artist Portuguese at different times on his trajectory. But instead of presenting a critical review on the exhibition, it proposes a highly reflexive interpretation, providing new knowledge about the topic, and improving our understanding of a several important works, but still little seen by the general public. In this sense, as a “pedagogical tool” it is an excellent example of how the digital audiovisual essay “can put across their arguments about specific films and more persuasively than written articles and books could ever hope to do, while also reaching a wider, more immediate and more easily quantifiable audience than their written publications” (Baptista, 2016, p. 31). Highlighting a specific shot or scene, a recurrent technique or motif, a theoretical issue or theme, this audiovisual essay is primarily analytical, combining the use of voice-overs and/or written titles with visual excerpts both from Sarmento and other authors (illustrators, painters, filmmakers). Thus, the constant resorting to theory (Lacan, Deleuze, Devenport, Pomeroy Brewster, Ruskin, etc.) and some critical fortune of the object of study (M. Bronze and E. Tavares) positions it in a typology that, according with Grant e Keathley, gets close of a “process of writing criticism” (Grant & Keathley, 2014). Dividing in three parts, it proposes three axis of analysis that, on its turn, coincide with three of the most important thematic obsessions that cross the artist's work.

1. THE WORD: THE CONSTANT WORKING OF LANGUAGE (THE REAL, THE SYMBOLIC AND THE IMAGINARY)

The titles transform the images we see. The perverse tension recurrently established by Sarmento between different alphabets, between painting and cinema (cf. Gassner, 1997, p. 46; Wandschneider, 2000; Ávila 2002, p. 96; Iles, 2003, p. 71; Marques, 2012a, p. 341), between the stabilizing poles of stasis and non-stasis (Marques & Braz, 2019), or among the framed live and the flow of time, finds in Toile (2006) – French word for “canvas” – a perfect pretext for João Pedro Amorim to discuss about the theme of the *suppression of the instinct* (Monteil, 1979; Sardo, 2007, p. 12) regarding the horse that runs fast inside the round pen while some T.S. Elliot excerpts about the city enclosure are read. Particularly interesting is the way Amorim, analyzing the video *Lacan's Assumption* (2003),

draws an extensive network of nexus and articulations between diverse works and references, with a particular focus on *Fors Clavigera*, a series of letters in the form of pamphlets that J. Ruskin addressed to the working class, where the English art critic establishes an analogy between the cumulative children's fairy tale *The house that jack built* and the labyrinth built by Daedalus in Crete.

The power of montage as syntax of juxtapositions – always creator of a third element, of a “new concept” (Eisenstein, 1947, p. 4) –, allows to understand that Sarmentos's work is itself a deliberate labyrinth, made clear in the intricate remissive and intertextual flux that go through it. It is as if the work would be no more than an endless cartography on itself, to which resonates, even if elliptically and biased, the intimate memories, the permanent obsessions and the *elective affinities* that Sarmento incessantly find in the authors he admires.

In light of the *dialectics of alterity*, a certain pertinence attributed to the Lacanian theme of the Mirror - well illustrated by Amorim with certain moments of Jean Cocteau's films - convokes the known psychoanalytic implications around the *scopic drive, the inscription of language, the recognition of oneself through an alienated image, the adventure of intersubjectivity and the imaginary construction of the self*. That bring to mind the essential deferral between the real, the *symbolic* and the *imaginary* analyzed by Pedro Lapa during the exhibition *Works from the Seventies* that took place at Chiado Museum, Lisbon, in 2002/03. Moment that definitively “exhumed” Sarmento's experimental cinema and demonstrated that his art was fully integrated within the main currents of the 1970s international art scene, particularly with regard to the attempt to rethink the phenomenon of voyeurism, which is at the heart of cinema.

2. THE FRAGMENTED BODY (THE CONSCIENCE/DISASSEMBLING OF VOYEURISM)

Mentioning the homology established between *body* and *landscape* in *Landscape* (Marques, 2012b), this essay makes a twist regarding the way *voyeurism* is commonly understood. Quoting a text from Sara Carmo, for Amorim the hands over one's own body free it of the condition of passive entity or a mere contemplative object. *Landscape* is, therefore, the corollary of body and camera interaction. This hypothesis draws near former reflections around the “disassembling of voyeurism” that Sarmento undergoes through different operations of *self-consciousness of point of view* (Wandschneider, 2000), by means of exchanges and reflexivity between the one who looks and the one who is *looked at* (Lopes, 1981; Iles, 2003, 82; Sardo, 1999; Lapa, 2002; Marques, 2012a). Retrospectively, we could assert that Sarmento has, in different ways, questioned the orthodox feminist theory attached to a binary analysis (male/female, active/passive, watching/being watched, voyeur/exhibitionist, subject/object), showing that the subject of voyeurism can be far more “ambivalent, heterodox and complex” (Marques & Duarte, 2016).

Although not mentioning directly, Amorim shows in his essay, by using a prolonged segment of *Landscape*, what cinema does to the *desired body*, namely through the tight framing and the fetishistic way the camera lingers on certain details of that body. The brief segments of voice, that follow as mnemonic flashes about the sexuality awakening of the artist, translate exactly that. The fragment arouses the totality of the object of passion that, however, never shows itself, delaying the completeness of a continuously forbidden body, only briefly quickly glanced (Sardo, 1999, pp. 122-132) or show in a segmented way, so that spectator, himself, can recreate it in an *imaginary level* (Melo 1989; Marques & Oliveira, 2016). This is the reason why the images explored by Amorim embody the *topos* of the legs. The sequence of excerpts of *Lacan's Assumption* (2003), *Untitled (Following)* (1999), *Doppelgänger* (2001), and *Jolie Valse* (2007), renders clear this common denominator. A *collective fetish* created by the 18th century Paris photograph (Iles, 2003), an object of obsession introjected in a phantasmic way and that will give title to a Sarmiento's super 8 film (*Legs*, 1975). In it nothing happens when the impassive spectator is confronted by a disarming approach of a woman's pubis. In Lapa's words, in that film "a pure optical image stops the movement to focus on something, always bringing it back differently to itself, infinitely" (Lapa, 2002, pp. 24-25). A condition that poetically and literally embodies the idea of a psychological time, a voyeuristic and nostalgic time connected to something definitely *lost*.

3. THE RHYTHM (EXPOSING THE MATTER OF TIME IN FAVOUR OF DECEPTIVE AESTHETICS)

The oldest film presented in the exhibition, *1, 2, 3* (1975), leads us to an important group of filmic pieces of the seventies. The reductionism or "elementarity" (Wandschneider, 2000) of other Super 8 works like *Legs* (1975), *Faces* (1976), or *Shadow* (1976) brings to mind the independent films of Andy Warhol, who invented a new set of genres marked by an impassive and contemplative indifference where the titles describe only the action we see without any narrative or symbolic dimension. Unlike his photo-works where time is suggested through montage-like processes, in Sarmiento's films from these years, time is taken as matter of inquiry and produced by long sequence shots and by the extended or suspended duration of the (in)action. And through this we arrive to *boredom* (Darwent, 2000, p. 5), in the context of the researches on the psychological affection of the erotic image, as a strategy of deprivation, that lead us to a *deceptive* aesthetics (Macrì, 1998, pp. 93-94).

Commercial Break (2011) is placed within this group of Sarmiento's filmic works, where action is definitely absent. This work transforms the televised interval in an endless waiting time. This intention reacts against the monopoly of images that characterize the dominant visual regimes, because they promote an accelerated reception of reality, proportional to our attention's process of atrophy (Osborne, 2004, p. 151). And, on

its turn, curtails a polysemic fruition, in the name of a fast digestion dictatorship, subordinated to a “unique” and “transparent” meaning (Lopes, 2003, p. 2).

Before concluding, João Pedro Amorim returns to *Doppelgänger* (2001), a double projection that stages a synchrony of movements between two women that walk in and off screen, exchanging places while we listen to a conversation that repeats itself; dramatizing, exemplary, *the frustration of a badly resolved meeting*. Obstinate in non-signifying, Sarmiento prefers to frustrate any univocal “interpretation” (Lopes, 2003, p. 2), any tacit symbolism, putting in its place a troubling dissatisfaction. Thus, by defrauding our expectations, or, at least, the protocolary conclusion, Sarmiento imposes a continually disconcerting absence of closure, sexual as well as narrative. This irresolution works, invariably, as the deferral of every climax, linking the issue of desire to a constant adjournment, to the absence of a further objective outside its own preservation. The result is as much phenomenological as it is symbolic, because it forces us into an experience lived before the screen and, at the same time, to the critical and intellectual unveiling of the sheer nature of desire; here presented as a wandering journey anchored on circularity, a critical analytics equipped to defy the spectacles of Hollywoodesque happy endings.

REFERENCES

- Ávila, M. (2002). *Faces. Julião Sarmiento: Trabalhos dos anos 70*. Museu do Chiado – Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea.
- Baptista, T. (2016). *Lessons in looking: the digital audiovisual essay*. [Doctoral thesis]. Birkbeck, University of London.
<http://bbktheses.da.ulcc.ac.uk/215/>
- Darwent, C. (2000, April 30). Video art takes on Hollywood. *The Independent*.
- Eisenstein, S. (1947). *The film sense*. Harcourt Brace.
- Gassner, H. (1997). Where Pain Rules. *Julião Sarmiento: Werke 1981-1986* (pp. 44-74). Haus der Kunst / Cantz Verlag.
- Grant, C., & Keathley, C. (2014, June 19). The Use of an Illusion: Childhood Cinephilia, Object Relations, and Videographic Film Studies. *Photogénie*.
http://www.photogenie.be/photogenie_blog/article/use-illusion.
- Iles, C. (2003). Julião Sarmiento’s Secret Cinema. In L. Neri (Ed.), *Julião Sarmiento* (pp. 71-97). Polígrafa.

- Lapa, P. (2002). O desejo para onde o desejo aponta: os trabalhos de Julião Sarmiento da década de 1970. *Julião Sarmiento: Trabalhos dos anos 70* (pp. 4-35). Museu do Chiado — Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea.
- Lopes, J. (2003, February 1). O desejo é uma coisa política. *Diário de Notícias*.
- Lopes, J. (1981). Imagem com olhos. *Cinema à Margem. VII Encontro de Cinema em Formato Reduzido* (pp. 18-19). Cinemateca Portuguesa – Museu do Cinema / Direcção Geral de Acção Cultural / Núcleo dos Cineastas Independentes.
- Macri, T. (1998). La Macchina del Desiderio: Julião Sarmiento. *Cinemaschine del desiderio* (pp. 88-105; 179-181). Costa & Nolan.
- Marí, B. (2002). Julião Sarmiento. *Julião Sarmiento: Trabalhos dos anos 70* (pp. 38-45). Museu do Chiado – Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea.
- Marques, B. & Braz, I. A. (2019). Julião Sarmiento. The Photographic as Perversion. *RIHA Journal*.
<https://doi.org/10.11588/riha.2019.0.69957>
- Marques, B. & Oliveira, J. (2016). Julião Sarmiento ou a virtualidade do desejo: do ‘desenho-pintura’ ao holograma. In M. T. Cruz, M. A. Babo & J. G. Pinto (eds.), *Tecnologias Culturais e Artes dos Media* (pp.277-295). CECL/UNYLEYA.
- Marques, B. & Duarte, M. M. (2016). Género e voyeurismo desmontado: quem olha para quem no cinema experimental de Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono e Julião Sarmiento? *Quintana: Revista do Departamento de Historia da Arte*, (15), 183-201.
- Marques, B. & Duarte M. M. (2015). Narrativas da Imagem e (Anti) Expanded Cinema em Julião Sarmiento. *Aniki: Revista Portuguesa da Imagem em Movimento*, 2(1), 49-72.
<https://doi.org/10.14591/aniki.v2n1.103>
- Marques, B. & Duarte M. M. (2014). Quando a Imagem Erótica nos Aborrece: Corpo, Sexo e Desejo no Cinema Experimental de Andy Warhol e Julião Sarmiento. In A. C. Valente & R. Capucho (coord.), *AVANCA / Cinema 2014. Internacional Conference* (pp. 425-434). Edições Cine-Clube de Avanca.
- Marques, B. (2012b). Sob o signo da viagem. Cartografias do espaço e do corpo em Julião Sarmiento (1975-1980). In M. Acciaiuoli, & A. D. Rodrigues & M. J. Castro (eds.), *Arte & Viagem* (pp. 251-267). IHA-EAC, FCSH-UNL.
- Marques, B. (2012a). *Os tableaux vivants* de Julião Sarmiento: Sade, erotismo e cinema experimental. In M. Acciaiuoli & B. Marques (coord.), *Arte & Erotismo* (pp. 325-351). IHA-EAC.

Marques, B. (2011). Julião Sarmiento com James Joyce: Melancolia e Narcisismo. In M. Acciaiuoli e M. A. Babo (coord.), *Arte & Melancolia* (pp. 475-502). IHA-EAC, CECL, FCSH-UNL.

Melo, A. (1989). *Julião Sarmiento. As velocidades da pele*. Galeria Cómicos.

Monteil, A. (1979, February 7). Friedrich in Bern: Julião Sarmiento. *Basler Zeitung*.

Nicolau, R. (2003, February). Uma ontológica?. *Pangloss*, 7-9.

Osborne, P. (2004). Recepção na Distração: Tempo, Arte e Tecnologia. In M.V. H. Pérez (ed.), *Propostas da Arte Portuguesa. Posição: 2007* (pp. 150-154). Público e Fundação Serralves.

Sardo, D. (2007). Print Matters. As edições em contexto na obra de Julião Sarmiento. *Julião Sarmiento. Catalogue Raisonné. Ediciones Numeradas. 1972-2006. Vol. 1* (pp. 10-22). MEIAC.

Sardo, D. (1999). Augenblick. *Tage der Dunkelheit und des Lichts - Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Portugal* (pp. 122-132), Kunstmuseum Bonn.

Wandschneider, M. (2000). Julião Sarmiento. In *Slow Motion. Julião Sarmiento*. Art Attack + Estgad, Galeria e Auditório da ESTGAD.