

TWO FILMS OF JOÃO SALAVIZA: TOWARDS A CINEMA OF IMPERMANENCE, AFTER AN AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY BY CÁTIA DIOGO

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ABSTRACT

After a brief overview about aesthetic and dramatic common motives in Salaviza's work, we will focus on the hypothesis raised by the Cátia Diogo's audiovisual essay *Rafa and David* (2022). The essay juxtaposes two scenes in *Rafa* (2012) and *Montanha* (2015), in which the condition of the "operative image" (Harun Farocki) is revealed. Taking into account a number of ideas that are expressed by the formal strategy that this audiovisual essay takes, we will speculate about how, in the intertextual relation between these films, is possible to envision a change of course in the work of João Salaviza, towards a cinema of impermanence.

Keywords: Salaviza; *Rafa*; *Montanha*; Operational images; Impermanence.

1. We will not take into account the short film *Duas Pessoas* (2004), since it was directed in the context of school years.

“The duel between being looked down and set free is frequent in Salaviza’s work”. This sentence written by Cátia Diogo in her research statement, referring to her audiovisual essay *Rafa and David*, describes in a perfect way the gravitational centre of João Salaviza’s cinema. From his directing debut in *Arena* (2009)¹ until the ethical and methodological reconfiguration inherent to the aesthetics of *The Dead and The Others* (2018, co-directed with Renée Nader Messoria), the tension between a sensation of spatial closure to which Salaviza’s characters are subject to, and a will to “free” them, through the “possibility of the passage” (Câmara, 2015) from a state to another, these, are translated as what one can designate a *dramaturgy of the forms*.

Somewhere in between Salaviza’s path, one feels a curvature in his cinematic conception of the world, a change at an ethical and methodological level, that we can glimpse in the relation (the passage) between *Rafa* and *Montanha*. Cátia Diogo’s audiovisual essay allows us to think this gravitational centre around which Salaviza’s cinema took a *detour* (as slight as it is decisive) in his path.

Let us pan over the two films *put in scene* in this audiovisual essay. *Rafa*, 4th short film of the director, tells the story of a day in the life of Rafael, 13 years old; it is a day marked by the wandering in the centre of Lisbon, where the boy awaits the release of the mother from a police station. In *Montanha*, Salaviza’s first feature film, we follow David, a teenager, in an area of interior transformation, marked by the affective absence of his mother, a hospitalised grandfather and a love triangle with two friends. These are films subordinated to acute strategies of visual and sound composition that, scene by scene, sequence by sequence, reveal a conceptual dimension and share a group of formal concerns. More than a mere stage, the presence of the city is constant, and it seems like a “living organism”. This, happening similarly in his prior films, is due, according with the director, to the “desire to cross adolescence and Lisbon” (Duarte, 2012).

The two films let us see² what is invisible to the naked eye, but that cinema allows us to see: the interior transformations of the protagonists from the relationship they establish with the exterior world. In these films, something is symptomatic that, in Salaviza’s filmography, stands out at the level of visual composition and *mise-en-scène*. And particularly here, a strong attention to the way the gestures and movements of Rafa and David exist and resist — *re-exist* — among the surrounding world, simultaneously imprisoning and liberating.

In effect, as one reads in the sentence of Cátia Diogo with which I opened this text, these films exacerbate a duel between being scorned/ ‘repressed’ and being set free. In them, it is possible to see a fundamental *dramatic difference*, through the almost identical repetition of a dramatic situation under the same formal mechanism. A comparative vision of the films, challenges us to think not only what is different, but the *figure of that difference that we designate as impermanence*.

2. As in Robert Bresson definition (s/d): “To TRANSLATE the invisible wind by the water it sculpts in passing.”

Cátia Diogo's audiovisual essay, *Rafa and David*, centres in two scenes that, in the two Salaviza's films, more than render homage to another scene in *400 Blows* (1959) by François Truffaut, highlight the constructed character of the cinematographic representation. The first gesture in Diogo's audiovisual essay is of denial: by picking two scenes that take place in the interior, 'erasing' the city, and consequently, devitalizing an important part of the dramaturgic qualities of both films, 'forces them' to reveal a very particular condition of the cinematographic image.

What is that condition? Harun Farocki describes it as in "operative image", term he coined at the beginning of the 21st century to designate images constituted in the condition of instruments that execute tasks of integrative function of an operation of scanning, control or identification. Besides its functional aims, these images present themselves in its evidence, i.e., they reveal its operating condition *in act*, evoking a prosthetic condition of an 'objective' vision of the world. The film camera is at the service of a functional condition — a look that acts upon what it sees, tracing, controlling, or identifying what it renders *visible* through a certain operation of media(c)tion.

From the point of view of the cinematographic treatment, what is specific in these interrogation scenes is its formal composition that is notoriously distinct for the others, calling attention to its "operative" condition. It is not a detail that such an operativity takes place in a police station, in *Rafa*, or in a school, in *Montanha*, suggesting a methodological and ideological proximity between modern disciplinary institutions³. From an intertextual point of view, and taking into account the way Diogo juxtaposes the two scenes in the audiovisual essay, besides the exercise of identification of variations and similarities, the scenes can be looked as if they were the same scene, i.e., as if the reason of being of its *image condition* within the films they inhabit was one of convoking the spectator to think about its place of observer of those films, an 'operative observer' of *Rafa* and *David*.

The two interrogation scenes follow the same formal strategy. There is a fixed camera framework, slightly diagonal, at about two meters distance from a table, at which sit *Rafa* (in the police station) and *David* (in school), like defendants under trial. The spectator is drawn to 'examine' the behaviour of both, according with the (verbal or nonverbal) answers that are brusquely returned to the questions 'shot' by voices of authority — a policeman and a school psychologist, absent from the visual frame. The boy's discomfort is inversely proportional to the strength that public institutions exercise in name of a higher good, putting into practices protocolar proceedings of vigilance. Therefore, institutions designed to protect the most fragile citizens become places of identification and control, apparatuses of oppression on marginal and non-aligned beings. The film camera, reproducing an 'examining' eye that cinema renders visible, becomes a part of these coercion mechanisms.

On both films, in specific, sensitive moments, there is a vertigo provoked by the exhaustion of the conditions of possibility of youth. These are highlighted by a particular form of organisation of these *scenes* according to its framework. Cátia Diogo's audiovisual essay, by insisting

3. We think about this proximity from Michel Foucault (1995) and his definition of "field" as space of vigilance.

4. The film that maybe best relates to these scenes in *Rafa* and *Montanha* might be *Belarmino* (1964) by Fernando Lopes. Especially, by the way the city of Lisbon is crucial in narrative and formal terms, and by the way the protagonist, a boxing player, is questioned as if he was a defendant. On this question see Castro (2009).

in the equivalence between the pressuring effect of the authority voices (out of frame), allows us to see how Salaviza ‘imprisons’ the protagonists, adding to the sensitive dramatic situations a conditioning that is proper of the cinematographic form — the deliberate way a film camera ‘fixates’ them seems like a will to push them ‘against the ropes’, testing their limits inside a cinematographic ‘ring’⁴.

Rafa and *Montanha* develop upon two lines of force (forms) that the scenes — by their condition of operative image — allows us to better see when placed side by side: the force of youth, manifested through an untamable pose (the ‘savage’ relation with the city, the contact between the warm bodies of adolescence, the ‘coldness’ in relation to the adult bodies) and the ‘gravity’ that underlies the places in which that youth happens. That ‘gravity’ translates into dramatic elements, such as the threats of imprisonment (in *Rafa*) or school expulsion (in *Montanha*), but also formal elements — from the soundspace of the city, that smothers the actions, to the fixity of the shots that ‘crush’ the fragile bodies of the protagonists, finally, cinema as a way to imprison perception.

Therefore, is luminous that Cátia Diogo’s audiovisual essay responds to the films through a formal strategy of *reediting*, and from it we can highlight two important aspects.

In the first place, by overlapping answers and questions, she emphasizes the dialectics subjacent to the institution (‘they’), that act upon individuals through similar proceedings, with the goal of ‘signalizing’ them; the young men, under pressure and with no real escape, run away or sharply resist, because they know they are in a place of identification to which their body *naturally* resists; it is not by chance that their experience of the city (also in the other Salaviza’s films — in the audiovisual essay *denied*) is an ambiguous, ambivalent and fragmented one — an experience of *crisis*.

In second place, by alternating the two shots in the screen, either by placing them on the left or on the right, Diogo creates a paradoxical effect between the indifference of these places (the school as prison, the prison as school) to the ‘individuals’, but also highlights the difference of these bodies, i.e., that which between them is irreproducible, non-identifiable, under the condition of one same operant image. Therefore, Diogo explicitly promotes that João Salaviza’s cinema, until now, works in a way as subtle as insinuating: a decentering of (our) ‘operative’ gaze on these individuals. The condition of the operant image is subverted on behalf of a “pensive condition” (Bellour, 1990): the films (and these scenes in particular) put us in a deadlock zone — either we are with Rafa and David (‘we’), or we are against ‘them’.

At the end of the audiovisual essay, when David leaves the scene, by opposition to the request of Rafa to leave (that remains in the shot), that draws me to speculate on the curve that was established between these two films.

Would it be possible to emerge a metaphor of a different space, from the formal strategy of the video, from the indiscernibility between police

5. Salaviza says: "There is a pulsion in adolescents that has a lot to do with cinema (...) as if cinema would have been invented to film the youth" (Portugal, 2015).

station and school? Could it arise from the cinema itself (or the forms of a certain cinema) from which these bodies want to free themselves? If cinema was invented to film the youth⁵, wouldn't the destiny of that relation be one of structuring impermanence?

In both films, the bodies resist to a certain *condition of the image*, and if Rafa and David are errant, elusive beings, it is also because they are shapeless, non-conformed either with the eye of the camera, or the director. But David's exit scene is a symptom of a will to break with a certain cinematographic poetics, by making it explode from within. It is a question for following a de-identification with the power of the image — if Rafa resists, staying, David resists, abandoning. That is why, through the permanence of Rafa and the impermanence of David, more than a crisis of the protagonists' identities, one sees a crisis of identity of cinema itself as "school of seeing". Maybe only in this state of crisis, cinema allows us to really coexist, i.e., to *re-exist* together.

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