

# HALLUCINATING GONÇALO M. TAVARES' *SHORT MOVIES*

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## ABSTRACT

*Short Movies*, by the Portuguese author Gonçalo M. Tavares (2011), is hard to define in the field of literary or artistic genres. There are no movies in this book, just verbal descriptions of possible movies, usually marked by intense violence; but these descriptions, in turn, resemble to cinematic scripts, suggesting a set of shots, camera movements, the grammar of a montage. In this hybrid way of writing, the film is an object that remains both present and absent, continually summoned and always deferred. What operation is then required of the reader of this book, what gesture between reading and seeing, what theory of epistemology, what kind of controlled hallucination? In short, this essay proposes that *Short Movies* invites to the development of a subtle and painful art of suspicion.

Keywords: Gonçalo M. Tavares; *Short Movies*; Cinema; Interartistic studies; Hallucination.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: HOW CAN WE DEFINE THIS BOOK?

Any description of *Short Movies*, by Gonçalo M. Tavares (2011), must start from an obvious observation: there is no movie in this book.

*Et pour cause*: in the same way that *a rose is a rose is a rose* (Gertrude Stein), a book is a book is a book, while a film is a film is a film. And yet, as we shall see, *Short Movies* calls into question the solidity of these essentialist tautologies, forcing us to look for the film in the book, and shifting the boundaries of the book into a film that must be hallucinated.

I begin by attempting a very trivial summary: *Short Movies* is composed of an extensive sequence of very short texts – between six lines and three pages – which describe imaginary short films. Even this minimal summary already challenges us to think about a hybrid object of difficult classification. *Short Movies* is not simply a volume of short stories, although it is made up of narratives; it isn't either a sequence of films, since it is a strictly verbal object, without moving images (or even without movie frames), and to which the concept of assembly can be applied only metaphorically. On the other hand, the book is presented, from the title itself, as a set of *Short Movies*, designating the action of the characters through the description of shots, camera movements, a very clear awareness that the knowable depends on the visible, at that same time that it interrogates the impregnation of the invisible.

With some risk, one might then describe this book as a set of sketches of film screenplays, non-existent dialogues phrases, a verbal essay on a complex object to be imagined. In this game of hybridity, I wonder what role is ascribed to the reader: maybe a little more than just reading, a little less than seeing, certainly a lot of hallucinating.

I write “hallucination”, and not simply “imagination”, to emphasize the automatic and largely involuntary process of creating mental images (visual or sound images, among others). In fact, we can ask or tell someone to “imagine that ...”, but not to “hallucinate that ...”. Reading a book like *Short Movies* (and perhaps reading literature in general) implies that readers cannot prevent themselves from automatically generating mental images: in this sense, reading is an experience of dispossession, the dispossessing of oneself.

## 2. HOW TO WRITE A MOVIE

Let me give you a concrete example. Here's one of the *Short Movies*, “The taxi”:

A woman raises her arm. She's on the sidewalk. She isn't in a hurry, but she raises her arm and waves her hand. The taxi doesn't stop. It is free, but it doesn't stop.

The woman wears elegant, brown trousers. She has a scarf around her neck.

Again, we see her raised hand waving. Another taxi that doesn't stop.

The woman is smiling. She is beautiful. She raises her arm again.

We always see her, see her smiling enthusiasm. But no, again the

taxi doesn't stop. Free again, but it doesn't stop.

The shot now opens up more. We see the woman, yes, her elegant brown pants. And, at her feet, an inert body; probably dead. (Tavares, 2011, p. 17)<sup>1</sup>

1 "Uma mulher levanta o braço. Está no passeio. Não tem pressa, mas levanta o braço e acena com a mão. O táxi não pára. Está vazio, mas não pára. A mulher veste calças elegantes, castanhas. Tem um lenço ao pescoço. De novo, vemos a sua mão levantada a acenar. Outro táxi que não pára. A mulher está a sorrir. É bonita. Levanta o braço de novo. Estamos sempre a vê-la, a ver o seu entusiasmo sorridente. Mas não, de novo o táxi não pára. Também vazio, mas não pára. O plano agora abre-se mais. Vemos a mulher, sim, as suas calças elegantes castanhas. E, junto aos seus pés, um corpo inerte; provavelmente morto".

It seems clear to me that we are dealing with a brief narrative, that is, a *short story*, but it is important to ask what makes this text a *short movie*. After all, if there are images here, they are only verbal images, that is, symbolic, not analogical or indicial. Of course, these images are linked in a certain order, but the same happens when Flaubert, for example, describes Emma Bovary, well before the invention of cinema and the systematization of the montage. How, then, can we surprise ourselves with a "request for cinema or becoming-cinema of Literature", in the useful expression of Fernando Guerreiro (2017, p. 20)? Strictly speaking, the title *Short Movies* itself makes us convert verbal images into cinematographic shots; let us say that, roughly speaking, each sentence constitutes a shot, with strictly stipulated limits: it is very important to know what the shot must show, and even more what it must hide.

Thus, "A woman raises her arm" may be an American shot; "She's on the sidewalk", a full shot; "she raises her arm and waves her hand", perhaps a medium shot; and "The taxi doesn't stop", perhaps again a full shot. Already the fourth paragraph implies a close-up: "The woman is smiling. She is beautiful. ... We always see her, see her smiling enthusiasm". Finally, the last paragraph requires a long shot: "The shot now opens up more. We see the woman, yes, her elegant brown pants. And, at her feet, an inert body; probably dead". On the other hand, these shots of different heights are subordinate to a temporal sequence, to a syntagmatic order that leads us from American or medium shots to a long shot, functionally marked as the final shot (but with retro-projective effects: it is the last image that explains – or complicates – the former).

It is important to note that *Short Movies* explicitly marks this chronology. Here are some examples from other texts (the italics are mine):

We see the back of the man, the buttocks of the man, *then* the nape of the woman and *then* the two neutral faces. (Tavares, 2011, p. 19)<sup>2</sup>

*Then* we see the same man *again* entering the compartment. (Tavares, 2011, p. 25)<sup>3</sup>

The man steps back a meter, *then comes back* to her and pops her on the same side of the face. *Then, yes*, he really goes away. (Tavares, 2011, p. 35)<sup>4</sup>

We can also think of the text "A menina" ("The little girl"), a passage of exasperating minutiae, in which the slowness of the verbal description indicates the irreducible slowness of the progress of the action in the film, an effect of eternal return, of eventual terror even in seemingly anodyne actions:

2 "Vemos as costas do homem, as nádegas do homem, *depois* a nuca da mulher e *depois* os dois rostos neutros".

3 "Vemos *depois* o mesmo homem *de novo* a entrar no compartimento".

4 "O homem afasta-se um metro, *volta depois* a aproximar-se e dá-lhe mais estalo, no mesmo lado da face. *Depois sim*, afasta-se *mesmo*".

A girl plays hopscotch. One foot, two feet, one, another. Two feet *again*; she turns, right foot, left, two feet.

She turns, *again* two feet, one foot *again*, then the other and the other, two, turns. There she is *again*, without stopping. *Again*: one foot, two, one, the other, two, she turns. *And again and again and again*. (Tavares, 2011, p. 99; italics mine)<sup>5</sup>

5 “Uma menina joga à macaca. Um pé, dois pés, um, outro. Dois pés *outra vez*; vira-se, pé direito, esquerdo, dois pés. Vira-se, *de novo* dois pés, *novamente* um pé, *depois* o outro e o outro, dois, vira. Ali está ela *de novo*, sem parar. *De novo*: um pé, dois, um, outro, dois, vira. E *de novo e de novo e de novo*”.

Finally, it is important to note the fundamental interweaving between time and space. On one hand, *Short Movies* stipulates a chronological order of actions, of images, of our perception; on the other hand, it defines a set of shots of different heights, allowing different perceptions of space. But the two processes are inseparable: as the time of the film advances, so does the height of the shot, and consequently our information, the increasingly accurate contextualization of actions. And it is this spatiotemporal evolution of the short movie, this complex chronotope (if I can freely use the Bakhtinian concept), which reveals in the most banal acts their deep reality of arrogance, torture, sadism.

In this recurring structure of *Short Movies*, the enlargement of the shot often implies moving from the image of an isolated individual to the image of a group; of the physical, psychic and emotional reality of a single person, to social connections, power relations, hierarchies. And this final chronotope, retroactively, reveals the circumstance of terror that was there from the beginning, without us spectators knowing; now that we know, we project the final information on the whole movie, we hallucinate a movie we had not seen. On the other hand, we now know more than the characters themselves. Pascal Bonitzer (1990, p. 117) states that, in a good screenplay, the characters should be blindfolded; that is to say: the character must not have an encompassing point of view of the history that surrounds him, appropriating himself of the omniscience of the author. Each character is just a point of view about his universe; the spectator, however, must have his eyes wide open and panoramic: painful though it may be, the spectator shouldn't be able to prevent himself from knowing everything, thus attaining a unity from partial perceptions.

It is tempting to cite the numerous examples of Tavarian short movies that follow this structure; I shall return only to the text in which a girl plays hopscotch:

Then the camera moves away a little. We see the hopscotch game drawn in chalk on the floor. There is no one to see the game except a man who has a gun in his hand. It's a revolver (...) He seems to be waiting. (Tavares, 2011, p. 99-100)<sup>6</sup>

We move from the large close-up of the girl's feet to the full shot: we now see an armed man waiting (what for?); we move from the isolated figure of the child to a relation of power, intimation, vulnerability. And the text, obviously, goes on – “Again, we see the girl. She must be eight years old. Again, her little feet. One foot, two feet, one, another” (Tavares, 2011, p. 100)<sup>7</sup> – but this eternal return of the movement under

6 “Depois a câmara de filmar afasta-se um pouco. Vemos o jogo da macaca desenhado a giz no chão. Não há ninguém a ver o jogo excepto um homem que tem uma arma na mão. É uma pistola. . . . Parece estar à espera”.

7 “De novo, vemos a menina. Deve ter oito anos. De novo, os seus pés pequeninos. Um pé, dois pés, um, outro”.

threat no longer brings any new information, only a Hitchcockian, unbearable tension.

### 3. HALLUCINATION

This description of a recurring structure, combining time and space, individuals and collectively, cinematographic shot and knowledge (and yet awareness of one's ignorance, of the fragility of information) only serves to begin to interrogate a complex object like *Short Movies*. In this brief essay, I will only be able to sketch some of the research possible in this game of show-and-cover.

A first line of work would be related to the first assertion I advanced above: in *Short Movies*, there is no movie at all. But narratives such as "The taxi" or "The little girl", for example, require the reader to see (images, shots, camera movements). And if *Short Movies* only includes verbal text, the vision required of the reader is, in fact, a hallucination. Here is an open field of work: the definition of an object that is more than verbal text but less than filmic text, an uncomfortably hybrid form that forces the hallucination of a third object, and therefore an unusual grammar, in spite of the strict studies of literature or cinema. In short, it would be necessary to think how these texts are directed less to the reading or the vision than to the imagination. I freely use the famous expression that Leonardo da Vinci applied to painting: cinema, in *Short Movies*, is *cosa mentale*.

In fact, Gonçalo M. Tavares's book forces a second degree of hallucination; it isn't enough to imagine the visible, as the texts describe situations and characters: one must also imagine what the text doesn't describe but obliges us to complete. In "The girl", the reader imagines the next moment, when the child inevitably will get tired, and stop playing hopscotch; in "The taxi", on the other hand, the reader hallucinates the moment before the situation described in the text: did that woman kill that man? For what reason? And why, in that case, is she so calm, unhurried, smiling? On several occasions, the text explicitly assumes its ignorance, and compels readers to fill the gap, hallucinating what they have never been able to see<sup>8</sup>. Two brief examples more:

something will happen, something will happen to the driver,  
something we won't see but guess by the sounds.  
(Tavares, 2011, p. 55)<sup>9</sup>

A man bent, knees on the floor, head leaning against the grass.  
Around him the family looks for something, we don't know what (...).  
The mother doesn't have the courage to call the father who mourns  
or prays. Dad must have missed something even more important.  
(Tavares, 2011, pp. 47-48)<sup>10</sup>

In other words, perhaps the essential of *Short Movies* is out of frame, protected by a systematic invisibility, which forces the reader to work on

8 Once again, the tension in Alfred Hitchcock's films allows for a fruitful comparison. I recall the sequence of *Rope* (1948) in which Mrs. Wilson removes plates, napkins, dishes, candelabra and a towel from above the chest where David's corpse is kept. What makes this sequence unbearable is not what we see, but what we hallucinate, that is, the instant when the chest will be opened, and the corpse discovered. Thus, terror is created in the *interval between* the seen image and the hallucinated one: in a virtual regime of images, which requires the collaboration of the viewer. On the other hand, when Brandon invites his former master Rupert Cadell to imagine how David could be murdered, a long traveling tour shows the various places in the room where the crime could take place (and did take place, we infer): the atrium, the living room, the bar table, the armchair, the piano, the floor, the chest. In the first example, the viewer hallucinates a possible future image (the opening of the chest); in the second, a likely past image (the sequence of the crime): in this cinematic grammar, horror always depends on the tension between the visible and the hallucinated, the present time and the virtual ones.

9 "algo vai acontecer, algo vai suceder ao condutor, algo que nós não vamos ver mas adivinhar pelos sons".

10 "Um homem dobrado, joelhos no chão, cabeça encostada à erva. Em seu redor a família procura algo, não sabemos o quê . . . . . A mãe não tem coragem para chamar o pai que se lamenta ou reza. O pai deve ter perdido alguma coisa ainda mais importante".

the hallucination supplement: one has to imagine what the text says, but also what it doesn't say. Now it is from Rimbaud that I borrow a phrase: *la vraie vie est absente*; but the reader, suffering from *horror vacui*, can't prevent himself/herself from populating this absence. Forced to fill in its gaps, to write between the lines, to become an accomplice, the reader can't help but imagine the worst nightmares. In fact, as Edgar Morin (2015) recalls in his classic *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, the whole human vision implies this ability to subject the image to an explosion of imaginary images:

Imaginary processes, veritable hallucinations (...) are mixed up in our perception. Let us say in another way that doubling and *vision* (in the visionary sense of the term) are in embryo in perception. Psychological vision seems to be driven by an eye that would free itself from the body, pedunculated, roving, circling away from its mooring post while nevertheless tied to it. (Morin, 2005, p. 126)

Cinema didn't invent this out-of-the-body eye, which condenses the data of perception into a unit and then disperses it again into a constellation of other images, turning the visible into the visionary; the cinema starts from this "distance from self to self" (Morin, 2005, p. 126) and is built upon it. It is this appeal to an imaginary drift of the image that *Short Movies*, in turn, summons.

#### 4. EPISTEMOLOGY

A second field of work would involve returning to the chronotope, to the spatiotemporal development structure that combines chronological evolution and progressive enlargement of shots, and going from Short Movies to the scope of epistemology, drawing new questions: what is knowing, how can one define an object and interpret reality? I think the recurrent device in these texts (presenting a detail of the world but hiding its context, then broadening the range of shots but forcing the reader to hallucinate past and future, etc.) requires a rethinking of a theory of knowledge. Here is one last example, a text entitled "The Mask":

A man with a gas mask on his face. The deformed face. Like a monster. He then makes the gestures of a chimpanzee. He puts his hands curled and simulates the little jumps and movements of the chimpanzee.

The plan opens. We see to whom he is doing it. It's for a woman. A very old woman. Dying; connected to several machines and with serum entering her arm. Even so, the old woman smiles, first; then laughs, laughs a lot, can't stop laughing. We only see her laughing, as if she had lost control. (Tavares, 2011, p. 15)<sup>11</sup>

We recognize the fundamental structure: the chronological evolution (first the man, then the woman laughing, finally the woman laughing wildly),

11 "Um homem com uma máscara de gás na cara. O rosto disforme. Como se fosse um monstro. Ele faz depois os gestos de um chimpanzé. Põe as mãos curvadas e simula os pequenos saltos e movimentos do chimpanzé. O plano abre-se. Vemos para quem ele está a fazer aquilo. É para uma mulher. Uma mulher muito velha. Moribunda; ligada a várias máquinas e com soro a entrar no braço. Mesmo assim, a velha mulher sorri, primeiro; depois ri, ri muito, não consegue parar de rir. Só a vemos a rir, como se tivesse perdido o controlo".

the height of the shots (explicitly in the second paragraph, forcing the transition from the individual to the interpersonal relationship), and finally the need to interpret, to explain these unusual circumstances from an encompassing narrative. As we read (or see, or hallucinate), the shots become more open and the information more generous: only in the second paragraph we understand to whom the man from the first lines of the text was addressing. The parts are explained by the whole, the action is clarified by the context.

But there are two important caveats. First: even the most open shot remains enigmatic (why the gas mask? why imitate a chimpanzee? why is all this so fun for the woman?). Second, we only begin to understand the first paragraph when we read the second; but to understand the second, what third paragraph would be necessary? In these *Short Movies*, a close-up only makes sense in the light of a medium shot; a medium shot, in the light of a full shot; a full shot, perhaps in the light of a long shot... The condition of knowledge would be: to know an object, one must know its context. But how can one know the context of the context of the context..., in other words, how to extend the shot to infinity? And when would we be able to say: our shot is already long enough: our point of view already encompasses just enough world?

In his "Little history of photography", Walter Benjamin (1999, p. 527) writes: "It is no accident that Atget's photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene?" These phrases suggest that the imaginary, the capacity for suspicion, the work of hermeneutics is not the exception, but the rule. In the labyrinth of human relations, one must infinitely suspect latent violence, analyse each image as a detective, aspire to a perfect shot, because our knowledge of the world depends on the framing, the vision and the clairvoyance, the capacity to hallucinate, to read the lines and to suspect between the lines. Perhaps this is the final lesson of *Short Movies*: a long learning of suspicion, an infinite interrogation of the image<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> I am deeply grateful to Marinela Freitas for the careful revision of this translation

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