

OUR FAMILIES BY MARTA PINTO. AN AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY ON A PORTUGUESE FAREWELL AND TOKYO STORY

 ANA ISABEL SOARES

Algarve University
Arts and Communication Research Centre
asoares@ualg.pt

ABSTRACT

Marta Pinto's audiovisual essay on *Tokyo Story* (1953) and *A Portuguese Farewell* (1985), two central works in the filmography of Yasujiro Ozu and João Botelho, evinces the influence the 1953 film had on the Portuguese director. However, more interestingly the essay shows the extent to which both works differ in their approach to war. Not only are the plots in the two films presented in distinct perspectives but their formal modes are dissimilar despite the affiliation assumed by João Botelho. A reading of those differences, underlined by formal aspects of the visual essay, considers also the role of spectators in the complex relationship between cinema and the recent history of a nation.

Keywords: Comparative cinema; War; João Botelho; Yasujiro Ozu

Bringing forth what is not visible in a film must be triggered by an underlining of that absence. War is conspicuously absent in Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (東京物語, *Tōkyō Monogatari*, 1953). The inner struggles of the characters — moral, emotional, spiritual — are rather significant elements in the film. However, the Asia-Pacific international conflict is never straightforwardly represented. It is mentioned in very few specific conversations, and indirectly referred to in the scene when the elderly parents face the photographic portrait of the son they lost in that war. The backs of the wife and the husband turn away from the audience while the young man in the photograph stares into their eyes and those of the spectators.

Marta Pinto's three-minute audiovisual essay takes the hint that in making *A Portuguese Farewell* (1985) João Botelho was inspired by *Tokyo Story*¹ and sets the corresponding shot in Botelho's work next to the Japanese image. The difference becomes striking: while Shukichi (the father) and Tomi (the mother) fill the screen, as if embracing the empty space left by the son's disappearance, the Portuguese couple's bedroom is shown devoid of the living, and their son is left to the solitude of the portrait: no one within the plot of *A Portuguese Farewell* is shown to face the image of the soldier who died in the "Ultramarine War".

It may seem a paradox that assuming the latent quality of war (as Ozu's film proposes) allows for overcoming its trauma more efficiently than denoting it. One often expects that the reenactment of trauma helps dealing with it. But the Japanese characters do not appear stuck in the memory of the war or in the mourning of their dead: the deaths and the war trauma are part of the drama in *Tokyo Story*, which in fact revolves around other dilemmas in the lives of the survivors. After one of his drinking buddies complains about losing his two sons in the war, Shukichi rightfully point out that "it must be difficult to lose one's sons; but dealing with the living is hard, too". He implies that the hardship of living does not hinge solely upon mourning and overcoming losses, but in the challenge of managing the routines of the living.

By including the characters in the scene of the photo frame, Ozu implicates them in the dynamics of the mourning. In other words, the plot in *Tokyo Story* comprehends the characters dealing in a positive way with their traumatic past. Conversely, Botelho's film offers the explicit images of the war, but these are not accessible to the present-day characters and are shown exclusively to the spectators: a family member refers vaguely that Lima died "in an accident" (allegedly, a war hazard), while viewers watch the death on screen and know that its cause was Lima's carelessness lighting up a cigarette at night when the group was ambushed.

Spectators are the only witnesses of the colonial conflict, the only viewers of its mementoes (such as the portrait); they are therefore the only ones effectively allowed to mourn. Living, present-day characters in *A Portuguese Farewell* seem to be stuck in a permanent grief about the trauma, having to go through it in silence and isolation (although the widow has moved on and has another relationship, she refuses to tell her

1 The parallel storylines would suffice to guess the relationship between the two films, but the director claims the source (see Botelho, 2018), and critics such as João Araújo dwell on the topic (see Araújo, 2017, p. 312).

in-laws). For Botelho, the toil but also the relief that mourning consents is ascribed only to film viewers; it is us who can and must go forward with life. Botelho's film, as its title poem describes, confines present-day characters to the annulment of time and to the impossibility of progression symbolized by the stagnant waters of the closing shot.

Marta Pinto begins her essay with images of Botelho's work filling the whole screen. At 00:36, she starts a sequence of parallel shots aligned side by side of the two films, each shot occupying a similar space on each side of the rectangle. This parallelism suggests more than a similitude between the two works. Michel Foucault defined "*convenientia*", one of the "Four Similitudes" in *The Order of Things*, as "denot[ing] the adjacency of places more strongly than it does similitude" (1994, p. 17). These comparable shots are brought together to share the same space: the sequence of parallel images is long and relevant enough to highlight the overlapping of their meaning. Yet, by opening with Botelho's isolated black and white sequence supplemented by a voice over, and by moving away from the parallelism after 01:54, Pinto's take on both features draws attention to their contrast rather than to what they have in common. The essay denounces the idea that the two films operate differently on trauma and memory. Only after the Portuguese visual and sound tone is established does the essay call upon Ozu's images to place them side by side with Botelho's. The episodes recalled in this parallel sequence stress the equivalents between both narratives, their modes, and formal structures, focusing on resemblances and repetitions: tombs in cemeteries; both couples sitting down to eat, or strolling with the Portuguese or the Japanese sea in the distance; the passage of time, indicated by a wall calendar in a Japanese train station, or in a wall clock in the Portuguese family estate.

Nevertheless, more subtle differences also become evident with the side-by-side alignment. The train speeding from the couples' small home villages toward the countries' capitals to visit their children and the sons' widows are distinct: the Japanese dark train moves from the left to the right of the screen crossing it obliquely, aptly framed within the narrative limits. Ozu offers frontal, clean-cut shots to the sitting viewer: spectators are given the necessary narrative information with an economy of signs. In *A Portuguese Farewell*, the train moves from the bottom of the frame, as if it came from within the film room, and it is seen fading into the superior limit of the screen, somehow remaining in touch with the space of spectatorship; the viewer must thus keep the image of the train in mind, as if it never really abandoned a wider, mental frame. Lynne Kirby set the concept of the train as an "apt metaphor" for cinema "in its framed, moving image [...], the radical juxtaposition of different places, the 'annihilation of space and time.'" (1997, p. 2) In my view, Botelho's train shot insinuates the annihilation of the barrier between the space and the time of the narrative and the time and space of the viewers. The film thus brings viewers and narrative tighter together, reinforcing the complicity its title and epigraph generate outside of the plot: the spectators are simultaneously the readers of Alexandre O'Neill's 1958 poem

“A Portuguese Farewell”² and the interpreters of its atmosphere against the narrative background.

Marta Pinto’s essay points at similar traits between the two films. But above all it reveals disparities in both narratives and formal characteristics that show the extent to which the Portuguese film openly and permanently invites a dialogue with the viewer about his/her recent national History while representing the emotional lethargy of society. In *A Portuguese Farewell*, the somber, enclosed tone of black and white footage in the dark “African” forest appears to diverge from the colorful, hopeful, present-day narrative and to suggest the possible overcoming of the war trauma. However, as Pinto’s essay reminds the viewer, the ending of Botelho’s film — also the last shot of the essay — shows lush vegetation reflected on a pond of stagnant water, the “small Portuguese pain / so quiet almost vegetable” of Alexandre O’Neill’s text.

REFERENCES

Araújo, J. (2017). Nostalgia pelo futuro. [sobre Um Adeus Português (1985) de João Botelho]”. In C. Natálio, J. Araújo, L. Mendonça & R. Lisboa (Eds.), *O Cinema não Morreu: Crítica e Cinefilia À Pala de Walsh* (pp. 311–313). Linha de Sombra.

Botelho, J. (2018, December 6). LEFFEST’18 *Um Adeus Português – Apresentação por João Botelho e Marcello Urgeghe* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXwi3biCA0g>

Foucault, M. (1994). *The Order of Things*. Random House / Vintage Books.

Kirby, L. (1997). *Parallel Tracks: The railroad and silent cinema*. Duke University Press.

O’Neill, A. (2007). *Poesias Completas*. Assírio & Alvim.

Stiegler, B. (2019). Photography and forgetting. *Electra*, 8, Winter, 53–66.

[Creative Commons Attribution License](#) | This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.