

Júlio Bressane and his *Sentimental Education*

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Brazilian writer and filmmaker Júlio Bressane assembles films aware of their form. By exposing the gears and fuel of the moving machinery, the filmmaker re-evaluates his primary passion —the making of cinema. Perhaps disillusioned by a film history that has depended on the eagerness and effort of individuals without rigorous financial support (a chronicle of censorship, favoritisms, and exile), Bressane ponders films' aesthetics and their philosophical fundamentals. He searches for the intellectual episteme that defines the linkage between sensibility and survival: what it is that we call beautiful, what is the inner engine that keeps both mortals and celluloid in orbit, what are the literary roots that have attempted to make sense of the world since the beginning of time.

The main characters of *Sentimental Education* are like the human representation of the two sides of the moon. Their names are only one letter different, but their personalities, earthly and ethereal, differ as only opposite magnets can. They are Áureo (Bernardo Marinho), a shy and silent student whose name derives from the Latin *aurum*, gold, and more directly from the young Frédéric Moreau of Gustave Flaubert's nineteenth century novel; and Áurea (Josi Antello), a volcanic and talkative teacher whose role refers to the French drama's older woman Madame Arnoux. The encounter between the two will cause an irrepressible attraction of both inner and outer forces towards revolution and renovation.

Unexpected juxtapositions spread a patina of surrealism (Jean Cocteau, Joseph Cornell) that reacts against reality. The sounds of a heartbeat, of the moving waters of a river, and of a trotting horse accompany a close up of Áureo's hand holding a magnifying glass. Through this glass we see the title of the literary classic *Sentimental Education*, a book of promises, of the wisdom of youth, disillusionings, the ruling passion, and the eternal feminine. In its first volume, Madame Arnoux explains to his spellbound student:

«Don't talk to me about your hideous reality! What does it mean—reality? Some see things black, others blue—the multitude sees them brute-fashion. There is nothing less natural than Michelangelo; there is nothing more powerful! The anxiety about eternal truth is a mark of contemporary baseness; and art will be-



come, if things go on that way, a sort of poor joke as much below religion as it is below poetry, and as much below politics as it is below business»¹.

For Bressane the making of cinema is a means to revolution, and only showing its artificiality one can break from the ubiquitous and reigning storytelling. A 13-second close up of a handheld shotgun microphone becomes a sequence that represents the external wilderness, the sound of birds that we cannot see, but can hear. The characters navigate through different stages of their relationship (and of the film narrative) moving forwards and backwards, enigmatically, in the hands of the director. The tools of filmmaking, even celluloid itself, are visible mediators of reality, part of what is told. Shot on 35mm film, *Sentimental Education* is a nostalgic love letter to the beauty of the transparent, flammable, magic of cinema. «Film has today an archaeological value», Áurea reflects. «It will soon be at the Museum of lost sensibilities. [...] (Like) a sweet memory». Bressane, representative of the underground cultural reaction, shows the crew working behind the scenes, as well as the technical failures and repeated attempts to achieve the final composition of light, expression, intensity and form.

1 Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, Dover Publications / New York 2006, p. 33.



In *Sentimental Education*, the camera explores and meticulously frames the dance of the bodies. It is a study of movement, as much as an exhibition of filmmaking tools beneath a spherical, lunar light that remains fixedly rotating throughout the shots. Like the camera obscura that turns all things from the outside inwards and upside down, Áurea is the moonlight that alters the world of Endymion —the first human that, in Greek mythology, noticed the movement of the goddess Moon. Each night, during his sleep, the satellite *looks at* him, waning in her kiss, and this contemplation is not other than a representation of blatant love. In the same way, Bressane's camera offers the gift of long observational shots from a position that does not disturb the characters' dreams. When Áureo, in a hypnotized state, devotes himself to her light, she explains to him the contradictions of life, and the impossibilities of the revolution of the senses within a society's game of rules that is just a show of sham: «Before us is the infinite. Life is there. Here, it's a long paroxysm on a short day».

Words, written and spoken, are essential in this film, and sharp pencil wordplay becomes a constant critique on the established system where there is no room for *sensitividade* (in Portuguese, a compound word made of *sensitivity* and *life*). The use of *pagar* (to pay) versus *apagar* (to forget) seems to be appropriate here for a film industry dependent on governmental subsidies —with the implied contradictions of being true to one's motivations and passions. For these characters, love and anger, instead of conformism, are the triggers of creation, rather than destruction. They recognize madness as a necessary ingredient to transcend and transform, but also as the cause of suffering

and subsequent death for many Brazilian poets of the nineteenth century. These artists are ghosts of seduction and eroticism, as much as of the soul—«as if poetry and talent were a curse», Áurea reflects, and names a few examples: the ultra-romantic Laurindo Rabelo, who died at 38; Luís José Junqueira Freire, poet and monk, dead at 23; Manuel Antônio Álvares de Azevedo, “the Brazilian Lord Byron”, dead at 21; poet Casimiro José Marques de Abreu, also dead at 21; and Antônio Frederico de Castro Alves, writer of abolitionist poems who died at 24. Reciting this list of names from the past, Áurea and her student appear framed by a small triangular area shaped by red theatrical curtains. Bressane reminds us that we are just audience seeing the world through half open doors. We try and pretend to understand the themes that inform human nature, «habit, resemblance, contingent, cause», from a very partial and narrow perspective.

The scenario of the couple’s conversations, though not always visible at first, incorporates paintings of mysterious Bella Donnas of striking appearance, and window shades. The framing and chiaroscuro lighting that surrounds teacher and student make of each shot a painterly scenario. It is an image within an image within an image, a dream of dreams that shows overlooked parts of our past. Áureo builds matte frames of pyramidal and circular forms, through which we contemplate their faces, as if looking into an improvised peephole. Often surrounded by a theatrical tableau, Áurea shares stories from the Renaissance about literature, philology, imagination, astrology, and the language of laughter. These narratives are explained as examples of a time when people actively exercised their ability to explore, create their own opinions, and develop critical thinking—an «unordinary world». Áurea’s voice exudes a dramatic and pompous intonation, charged with didacticism and courtship, as when she describes her father: «In the depths of his connection there was a misunderstanding, something unsaid. It just came to light and his connection was broken. What came from the light was part of a shadow that reigns within all of us, an odd feeling, a dryness in our hearts». Spoken word is cyclically abandoned, followed by sequences where the soundtrack is of children playing outdoors, and of Áurea’s naked feet walking on crisp green leaves or dancing on the floor. During these sequences, visual movement becomes a priority. The primitive gesticulations of Áurea’s hands, abrupt contortions of the body, twisted expressions of her eyes and nose, and disturbing tongue askew seem to be inexplicable effects conjured by the Cosmos. These gestures point to existential questions concerning notions of decay and worthlessness, frenzy and infinitude—all mysterious, tidal powers.

Though protected by familiar surroundings, the characters live and grow within the Amazon rainforest and tropical, oceanic influences. They are part of the *forces of*



nature, the fires and flooding. Sensuality is the inner river that keeps them connected to the earth. Sexuality is a sound combination of water and breathing. The movement of the body is a dance of constant seduction within the encircling and embracing space—and so Áurea hits the doors with a round move of her hips, and dances alone for us, in circles, in front of the camera. The editing of the film, like a serpent biting its own tail, progresses in imaginary circles that move from one room to another at different moments in time, but simulating a continuous dance to the rhythm of the crackling celluloid. The expressivity and physicality of the film itself, and of Áurea's voice, body, and entranced movements are a manifestation of freedom—one that accesses an integral education that values the arts at least as much as everything else. This liberation additionally arises from the ability to listen to the unknown, the unconscious, and one's intuition, being self-governed, and self-determined to draw a unique score. In this sense, the film is an homage to the lunatics, lovers and poets who live, decaying but surviving, in authenticity. In other words, it is an ode to the fragile souls who love learning and do so with trust, illusion, and enthusiasm: «Sensitive souls are like Jacob's ladder, wanting to know».

Influenced by painting, experimental music, and theater (especially the French poet and playwright, Antonin Artaud), more than by his filmmaking contemporaries, Júlio Bressane has remained true to himself and devoted to the exploration of freedom throughout his creative life. In a stage of liminality, his characters fall into a consciousness of nothingness—excluding their own luminous fervor. His films exhibit

an awareness and criticism of cruelty, of the tyranny of narcissism, hypocritical social commands, egocentric politics, and of an educational system that discards human beings based on economic interests and devaluates the arts. As a response to the logics of mayhem, Bressane rescues the sensibility and passion that can still be found in a polarized planet of sanity and lunacy, while looking at the past (another time, another world) with what for many would be *irrational* nostalgia. With his film, he asks us, «Did you feel it?». For him, a sentimental education, especially during times of cultural twilight, is after all the one factor that holds our memories and makes us who and how we are. In the end, the voice of the narrator in John Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956) becomes part of Bressane's soundtrack, «Long days and nights we strained at the oars while a white whale freely on, widening the waters...».