

MEMORY LANDSCAPES IN RODRIGO AREIAS' FILMS. AFTER AN AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY BY NUNO DIAS

 **RAQUEL RATO**

Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Instituto de História Contemporânea
raquelrato@fch.unl.pt

ABSTRACT

This essay aims at an analysis and deconstruction of *Movement, Framework, Cut* (2019) an audiovisual essay by Nuno Dias, that edits shots from *Corrente* (2008), *Cinema* (2014) and *O Guardador* (2015), three short films directed by Rodrigo Areias. Dias looks for intersections in these works. What draws them together? What is the role of *landscape* in these films? What is more important in cinema: what one sees or what is hidden? The aesthetics of image and sound as ways to cut across the incommensurable. *Characters-being* emerge in shots as metaphors of memory. The *character-being* in *Corrente* floats the waters of the river. In *O Guardador*, the *character-being* floats, with a lantern, the museum rooms, between objects of the past. In *Cinema*, the *character-being* carries over his shoulders the weight of memory in abandoned old cans that hide fantasies in a “cinematic bunker”. It is inaccessible to the common mortal, but that he is allowed to spy.

Keywords: landscape-décor; Memory; Mise-en-scène; Rodrigo Areias; Audiovisual Essay.

The most important thing I learned when I was twenty something years old was that images are also ideas. I took some time to figure that out. (Sokurov in Madeira, 1999, p.131)

In this article we approach the cinematic language used by Rodrigo Areias in these three short films: *Corrente* (2008), *Cinema* (2014) and *O Guardador* (2015). And also, its *landscapes-décor*¹, in what regards their plasticity, namely colour, framework, movement, light and sound. How can *characters-being*² become prototypes of a *collective memory*? We will try to understand the metaphors built by Areias and its (re) creation in Dias audio-visual essay *Movement, Framework, Cut*.

In *Corrente* (2008), Areias takes us to a place that is both interior, inhospitable, and exterior, in nature. This is Panasqueira's Mines, used for the extraction of wolfram, situated in between the counties of Fundão and Covilhã. The director emphasises this reality. Why this place? Areias discovers the *landscape-décor* of these mines in the moment he was looking for places to shoot another film. He met the inhabitants and miners of this place and was interested in them, their way of life and in how he could reveal the social and working conditions of miners, similar to those in the 20's and 30's. All the extras in the film are local people, and only Victor Correia and Inês Moitas are professional actors. The director told, in an interview, that he wanted to direct a film without artefacts, a film that drew near the crude reality (Halpern, 2008).

Considered by the author as a fiction film, we see in it a documentary aspect. Would we able to label it as a docu-fiction? We defend that, because it shows us "real" images, transporting us to the silent soviet cinema, where Areias alternates, in the editing, images of industry machines with workers. At the beginning of the film, miners come out of "earth's heart" at the end of another day's work. We are almost, again, in the same imaginary of *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895) by the Lumière Brothers, or *Berlin - Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927) by Walter Ruttmann.

In its cinematic language, Areias uses many fixed shots and a few pans. In his frameworks we see diagonals made with *character-objects*, structures in iron, bridges, and industrial machines. When the *character-being* floats the stream of the river, or when it goes everyday towards it, it enters and closes the frameworks as a ghost-being. The first time we see the *landscape-décor*, it transforms itself in a flat-image, evoking Aleksandr Sokurov, as mentioned by Dias in his audiovisual essay. What is far seems near.

¹ We designate landscape-décor as a duplication of the meaning of Landscape. Landscape in the sense of nature – exterior environment – by also as décor – or interior landscape. This permits us also to highlight how characters emerge and submerge from them.

² We designate character-beings (plural) or character-being (singular) to refer to the protagonists of these short films. The meaning of being comes from how these characters look like in the films. In a way, being can here be interpreted as these characters that find themselves in a state of limbo, nor existing entirely in the past, neither in the present. They are ghosts of themselves.



Figure 1 – Still from *Corrente* (2008) by Rodrigo Areias.



Figure 2 – Still from *Mat i syn* (1996), by Aleksandr Sokurov.

Daily, at the end of a day's work, the *character-being* submerges in the stream of the river as a purification act, purging the “plunders” he has to deal with every day. Trying to purify, he ends up metamorphosing as a castaway, stuck to a past from which he cannot release himself from. Maybe the love encounter, with an exchange of looks, the current of the river's waters will take them to another place, freeing them from the metal chains that surround them. Everything is accompanied by the beating sound of a machine – suggesting the pulse of the land – the heartbeat of the *character-being*. As Bresson writes, “noises must become music” (2000, p.29).

In Dias' audiovisual essay, *Corrente's* movement is somehow duplicated. What is inside the framework is in constant motion. Either the machines that expel black matter, or the white sand that hovers in the air, the river streams, the eyes that cross, the faces that are divided into *chiaroscuro*, or the bodies gliding. Everything is conceived by a black curtain that cuts across the images – a painting roll embedded in black paint –, drawing diagonals as a painter that prepares his canvas for a

new painting. This is the way Dias found to highlight the links between the different Areias' short films.

In *Cinema*, we are not inside the industry of mining, but the one of cinema. The *character-being*, represented by Acácio de Almeida, also moves outside the framework, opening and closing the doors of the *landscape-décor*, in an abandoned cinema. While in *Corrente*, the contrast was caused by the lack of colour, here it is done by the *chiaroscuro*, the light and the shadow of the image. The *character-being* enters the shadowy *landscape-décor* through doors that illuminate the place with natural light. As we can read in Jacques Aumont,

The light is accompanied by shadow, and viceversa (...). The image of a film starts with light, it is the law of representation; but in another sense, image also starts with shadow (...) (2011, p. 101-2)

In *Cinema*, Areias works with synchronous sound, real, crude, and we can hear the doors shutting, the steps of the *character-being*, or the objects being thrown into the ground.

In *O Guardador*, besides the synchronous sound, Areias uses again the metallic sound of *Corrente*, when the *character-being* glides, at night, with the light of a lantern through the *bunker* warehouses that guard the *industrial memory* of a city. Coming back to *Cinema*, the dark colours of the walls, the colours of the old pillows on the chairs, scattered along the big movie theatre and also the old coloured tins, stick out. All these details are like brush strokes in a painting. Here, it prevails the spaces fragmented by blocks that create horizontal lines, opposing the diagonals of *Corrente*. We can notice this, when, at the opening of *Cinema*, Areias opens the framework in horizontal and vertical lines, generating divisions (doors) through where the *character-being* crosses. Bresson again comes to mind: "See your film as a combination of lines and of volumes in movement apart from what it represents and signifies" (2000, p. 79). We don't know if Dias was aware, but his essay takes us with his "painting roll embedded in black paint", to a closing curtain, unfolding from top to bottom and viceversa. As if we are watching a change of scenery, or the cutting from scene to scene in a silent film. Dias, by creating this movement, produces a breadth of framing, drawing a *cinemascope* screen. And, at the same time, opens up *his roll*, so that the *character-being* moves inside the shot. Where Areias expands his frames, Dias encloses them to highlight the *landscapes-décor*, the path of the *character-being*, the objects, and so forth.

Throughout the audiovisual essay, Dias cuts Areias' framework into different parts, as if working with paintings. We can observe diptychs, triptychs, "the cinematic image is always dividual" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 26). In them, the *chiaroscuro* of *mise-en-scène*, the details of the *décor*, the objects, the faces and gazes. Dias looks for, almost obsessively, for the gold section ³ in Areias' cinematic images. The use of side lighting coming from the windows and doors is very much used in these films. This technic, that is defined by the use of a single light, was worked very

³ The section or gold number means the composition and equilibrium in the image. Here, the bigger portion of the image is equal to the minor portion multiplied by the number of gold which is 1,618. If the bigger

intensively by Nestor Almendros, master cinematographer that greatly influenced the work Acácio de Almeida's own lighting.

O Guardador ends up being the most singular film among the three worked by Dias, even if resorting the same type of frameworks. It is not a silent, speechless film as *Corrente*. Here, we witness “the ejaculatory force of the eye” (Bresson, 2000, p. 23) between the main characters. In *Cinema*, the *character-being* roams, lost, around the remains of an abandoned film theatre. In *O Guardador*, the *character-being* has a voice, almost inaudible when he is reading Alberto Caeiro's poems (*The Keeper of Herds*). In *O Guardador*, Dias continues looking for the lines that preside over the *landscape-décor*. And here, he also finds doors and windows that open up, so that Rodrigo Areias may tell his story of collective memories. Dias “sieges”, with his “painting roll embedded in black paint” all of Areias' *character-beings*, trying to show that all of them are interconnected by their individual memory across spaces, landscapes, museum locations that come alive, and abandoned cinemas that project films in our imaginaries.

Dias' audiovisual essay ends with a shot from *Cinema* that is able to assemble all the *memory-space* work engraved in these films by Rodrigo Areias. The shot is acted by Acácio de Almeida (fig.3) that peeps the disappeared past from a nostalgic present point of view. Consciously or not, Areias “takes us back” to Robert De Niro's gaze in *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) by Sergio Leone (fig. 4), when he spies once again a past, where once everything was possible with the sole and major love of his life. In a second moment, Dias creates a “siege” around Acácio's gaze (fig. 5) and here we can find all the dichotomy of time, inscribed in the *landscapes-décor* of Areias' films. As in Manoel de Oliveira's *Past and Present* (1972) (fig. 6), where we witness the past and present of a “landscape that beyond the visual, reminds us of the open wounds in people's eyes and spirits”

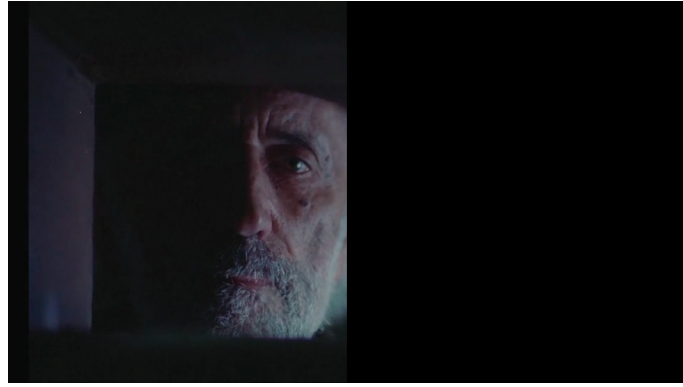


Figure 3 – Still from *Cinema* (2018), by Rodrigo Areias



Figure 4 – Still from *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), by Sergio Leone.

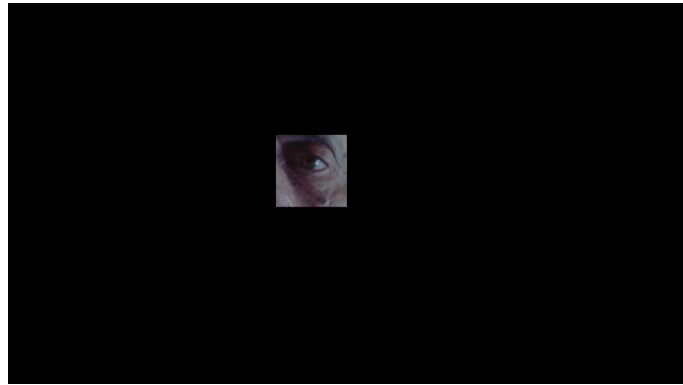


Figure 5 – Still from the audiovisual essay *Movement, Framework, Cut* (2019), by Nuno Dias.

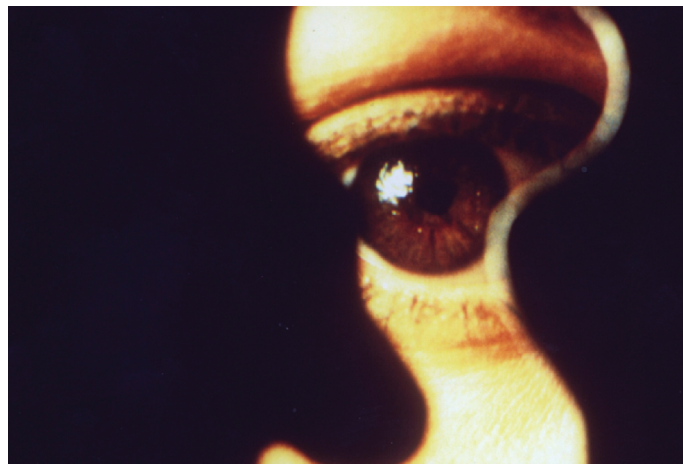


Figure 6 – Still from *Past and Present* (1972), by Manoel de Oliveira. (Black cardboard cut to look like a door lock).

We close this essay with this quote by the researcher V. Gomes (2017, p. 240) that sums up many of the ideas mentioned above:

(...) cinema appropriates itself, in a particular way, from space and time through textures of set, editing, light, sound and editing. Therefore, landscape, as a writing of imaginary and social memory, integrates cinema in its movement of permanent recreation (...).

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