

THE AMBIGUOUS GEOMETRY OF RELATIONSHIPS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF *HOW TO DRAW A PERFECT CIRCLE* AFTER AN AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY BY MARISA ALVES PEDRO

 CATARINA MAIA

University of Coimbra
maia.catarina@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Following *Marisa Alves Pedro's audiovisual essay as a roadmap*, this brief analysis explores some narrative and aesthetic features of Marco Martins' film, *How to Draw a Perfect Circle*.

Keywords: Incest; Family relationships; Morality; Marco Martins; *Mise-en-abîme*; Duration.

In the middle of the circle there is incest, a universal taboo. From the ancient Greeks to the Bible, from Shakespearian stories to 19th century realism of our very own Eça de Queirós, the motif of incest runs through the history and folklore of the majority of societies. Parallel to a “natural” or inborn repulsion against sexual intercourse between relatives there also appears to be an irresistible fascination with the topic. In *How to Draw a Perfect Circle*, Marco Martins gives us his take on the subject as he chooses to explore the intimate relationship between twin siblings, Guilherme (Rafael Morais) and Sofia (Joana de Verona), who are now in their late teen years.

Growing up together in a convoluted and destructured family context, brother and sister developed a sense of dependency on each other for warmth and security. However, when we find them at the beginning of the film, it seems like what was maybe once an affectionate bond between the two has now become more of a parasitic relationship. Although the focus is on Guilherme’s gaze as he thoroughly follows his sister on the dance floor or while she’s making out with some boys, the camera also shows us the poignant despair of this young man, isolated in the middle of a partying crowd. And just like that, we understand that a unity was broken, Guilherme and Sofia are in very different frames now – both literally and figuratively.

In the audiovisual essay *The Imperfect Sides of a Perfect Circle (morality towards love)*, Marisa Alves Pedro tackles exactly this formal feature of Martins’ film and uses it as a trope in her own work. By splitting the screen, Marisa Alves Pedro was able to juxtapose the shot and reverse shot of Guilherme and Sofia on the same frame creating an interesting tension that heightens the sense of tragedy that the original film already holds. Fatally tainted by sexual desire, the love between brother and sister carries the burden of anxiety and guilt, which ultimately condemns it to a slow death.

And finally, we arrive at this junction where love, desire and morality share and dispute the same ground. While the film never presents its audience with a clear moral compass, we still get some hints given by the use of tightly framed shots and low-key lighting, for example in the scene where Guilherme asks his sister if she remembers what she had promised, that is, if she remembers the pledge to lose her virginity to him. In this moment, the actors’ faces are partly hidden in the shadows, possibly mirroring the dark and manipulative nature of the situation. While Guilherme tries to pressure Sofia by making her feel bad for not keeping her word, accusing her of having sex with someone else, she tries to break off the conversation by getting up and leaving the frame, only to be followed by him. Later, Guilherme goes to her room where she lies in bed wearing a Tweety bird t-shirt (a childhood symbol), he turns on the lights and starts touching her breast. With her posture, Sofia invites him to lie down beside her, on the edge of the bed, and watches him while he masturbates. The camera focuses on his face, but we can still see a brief smile on Sofia’s lips. Feeling humiliated, this time, he’s the one leaving the frame, while she pretends not to acknowledge the significance of the situation. In a way, both characters seem to be playing a very twisted

power game where no one really gets the upper hand – at least not for long.

Going back to the beginning of Marisa Alves Pedro's audiovisual essay, that is, to the scene where the twins are sitting at home with their mother (played by Beatriz Batarda) watching Godard's *Band of Outsiders* on TV, we notice the use of a kind of *mise-en-abîme*. Anna Karina (as Odile), Sami Frey (as Franz), and Claude Brasseur (as Arthur) do the Madison – a line dance popular in the late '50s and early '60s – and the seemingly omniscient voice-over narrator tells the audience that it is time to describe the sentiments of the characters. Arthur, the narrator stresses, keeps watching his feet, but his mind's on Odile's mouth and her romantic kisses. Odile wonders if the two men notice the movement of her breasts under her sweater. And lastly, Franz thinks of nothing and everything. He wonders if the world is becoming a dream or if the dream is becoming the world. This scene shows us that despite the fact that they are doing the same thing, repeating the same dance steps, they are all thinking and feeling very different things.

Something similar happens with our other trio of outsiders watching TV. In fact, only the mother seems to be paying attention to the movie, she smiles and smokes her cigarette while caressing both children sitting on her lap. Sofia is only half there, eating cookies and getting lost in her thoughts. Guilherme is the one who's really enjoying this moment to the fullest. His mother caresses his hair and his nose, sometimes blocking his eyes, but he doesn't care. He's actually watching his sister from the corner of his eyes. He's with the two women of his life (the third one is his grandmother, played by Lourdes Norberto). Like the old and decaying house where they live, Guilherme became trapped in the past where care and abuse coexist.

In the end, the only way to break this vicious circle is for the reluctant sister to submit herself to her brother's incestuous desire. With approximately 10 minutes, it feels like the sex scene was shot in real time. Sofia is in her room playing with an old music box when she sees Guilherme standing at the doorway. She invites him in and leads him by the hand. They are both silent. She helps him to undress and kisses him softly on the lips. The room is low-lit but we can see that she's crying. When she lays down on the bed and he gets between her legs we get this terribly beautiful image of her young naked body covered by a golden veil of light and his crouched figure visible against the blue glow of the night. From then on, the camera moves much closer to the actors leaving no room for us to find a neutral position. Slowly, the scene gets more violent and confusing, we hear Sofia's cry of affliction and pain, but Guilherme won't stop until he's finished.

The extended duration is a crucial element of this scene. Without it, we risk losing sight of the true cruelty and transforming potential that this moment represents in the film. In a way, unfortunately, that's what happens when Marisa Alves Pedro chooses to keep the split screen to show different shots of the characters and, by doing so, breaking the unity of time and space. In an unexpected turn, she also chooses to "change

the ending” by preferring the image of Guilherme’s game of tic-tac-toe instead of Sofia’s symbolic final act. These choices raise some questions about the ambiguous geometry of family relationships and, hopefully, serve as starting points for further discussions.

REFERENCES

Barnes, E. (ed.). (2002). *Incest and the Literary Imagination*. University Press of Florida..

Oliveira, R. (2013). Marco Martins: Gosto de trabalhar o orçamento para decidir onde gasto o dinheiro. In Mendes. J.M. (Ed.) *Novas & Velhas Tendências no Cinema Português Contemporâneo* (pp-264-269) Gradiva.

[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.