# STILLNESS, FASHION AND THE MYTH OF MODERNITY IN FILMS BY MANOEL DE OLIVEIRA[1]

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**Abstract**: The two films by Oliveira that I propose for analysis — *Doomed Love* (*Amor de Perdição*, 1978) and *Abraham's Valley* (*Vale Abraão*, 1993) — besides putting forward the issue of representing on film the body, beauty and the ideal, are also "staging" concepts of modernity as formulated by Baudelaire's essay *The Painter of Modern Life*. For Oliveira film is the par excellence modern medium, a paradigmatic representation of "stability and futility", "eternal and contingent" characteristic to modernity, due to its constant oscillation between tradition (literary, painterly, photographic) and new technologies, as well as between movement/action (narrative illusion) and static images. This latter is accomplished by representations of characters 'framed' as portraits and tableaux, or, mostly in the case of the second film, as fashion mannequins. I aim at demonstrating that a *pose* is not only transforming the body into a picture, an 'object of desire' but also, by halting the action and movement, it is a manifestation of the death drive of the narrative (Mulvey 2006), its tendency to regress to the stillness of the image, a source of endless poetic possibilities for Oliveira.
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In his essay *Acte de filmer et conscience filmique dans mon cas particulier* Oliveira specifies his *ars poetica* as an intention "to restart everything, but armed with the whole inherited baggage" [3] (2009, 38). No definition of cinematic modernity or modernity in general could be more to the point: it touches upon the constant affinity of modernity to a classic heritage while relentlessly trying to move on, relying on new technologies. In the case of film, an ambiguous relationship to both filmic and literary tradition, first of all the romantic heritage has been repeatedly pointed out by theorists of cinematic modernity. This is what John Orr calls the paradox of modern cinema: "recurrence as completion of form through technology" (1993, 3). Baudelaire in his famous essay *The Painter of Modern Life* (1862) already defines modernity as "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (1964, 13). After 150 years, this puzzling essay is

[1] This article has been completed with the financial support of the FCT, Portugal.
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[3] "tout recommencer, mais muni de tout bagage hérité" (translation by me, H. K.)

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still referred to by theorists of cinematic modernity, visual culture, phenomenology, feminist film theory, related to concepts like "the body", "spectacle", "mise-en-scène", "glamour", "search for perfection", the "issues of the self", "performance", the "look/gaze", in general the complexity of cinematic image. With titles like *The Man of the World*, *The dandy*, *Pomps and Ceremonies*, *Cosmetics*, *Women* and *Prostitutes*, *Carriages*, Baudelaire's essay is seen by many as an anticipation of the visual mass culture and film.

Philosopher Stanley Cavell identifies in Baudelaire's compelling presentation of aspects of modernity the myths of film, the modern medium being the only capable to satisfy "the specific simultaneity of presence and absence", of stability and futility, stillness and movement (1979, 42). Moreover, according to Cavell, Baudelaire is having a prophetic hallucination when describing the "mysterious and complex grace "of movement of carriages, difficult to note down in shorthand (if not impossible), but which is the essence of cinema and the "pleasure that the artistic eye obtains ...from the series of geometrical figures that the object in question... successively and rapidly creates in space" (1979, 43-44). Just as carriages, cars and machines in movement have become metaphors of the moving image, the modern, individual woman became the driving force of both film narration (the recognition of her sexuality grants her independence and the freedom of movement and action) and filmmaking/production. As Cavell puts it: "Remarkable directors have existed solely to examine the same woman over and over through film. A woman has become the whole excuse and sole justification for the making and preserving of countless films: in many of Garbo's films, or Dietrich's, next to nothing may be memorable, or even tolerable, but these women themselves. The miracle is that they are enough" (1979, 48). John Orr, when discussing the paradox of modern in film, comes to a similar conclusion: "While male roles often continue to display older forms of patriarchy and authority, the modern female persona challenges these conventions dramatically. Thus both modern cinema and its modern women spring from changing forms of modernity, but both subsequently challenge existing forms of modernity" (idem, 9).

The movement-stillness opposition, closely related to and dependent of a strong belief in the poetical possibilities of the single image (often that of a woman) are at the very core of the whole work of Manoel de Oliveira. In what follows I will focus on two films, *Doomed Love* (*Amor de Perdição*, 1978), from the *Tetralogy of Frustrated Loves* and the more recent *Abraham's Valley* (*Vale Abraão*, 1993), which seem to recycle the main titles of the Baudelaire-ian essay and modernity by focusing on the concept of movement and stilled movement, fashion, glamour, in one word more on visual attractions than on narration and story. Both films are re-mediations of 19th century novels and represent an original approach of modern film to the romantic myth of love. Both were made after Oliveira's return to filmmaking after some 25 years of almost complete silence, and belong to a long series of films on frustrated loves and aborted marriages, a topic characteristic to modern film, in which, as John Orr points out, "The loss of romantic love often portrayed as irreversible has drawn responses... ranging from stoicism and acceptance to irony and despair" (1993, 9). In the first film *Doomed Love*, the still image or rather the images of stilled movement — *tableaux vivants* — are metaphorically doubling the story of a fatal love, causing the illness and ultimately the death of the protagonists. I will argue that these two films, as well as the whole *Tetralogy* and beyond prove to be more about the *fatal attraction and frustrating relationship between image and movement*, a recurrent topic in film theory, most prominently in phenomenological approaches and the theories of the spectator[4]. For Oliveira "restarting" filmmaking doesn't mean technological updating, but rather a conceptual approach to cinema: all his films marking his return and granting him international recognition can be conceived as a series of allegories of film as a par excellence modern medium, as a private philosophy on the tensioned marriage between image and movement and, respectively, narration.

### *Doomed Love*: Melodrama as a Stillness-Movement Dynamics

Oliveira missed most of the period of cinematic modernism, as stopped making

[4] See, for example, Laura Mulvey (2006a, 2006b), Vivian Sobchack (1992, 2004) and most recently an overview by Justin Remes (2012).

films in 40s and returned to active filmmaking at the beginning of the 70s. He could have caught up with the late modernism by simply adopting a modernist style. But he is rather going back to the original definition of Baudelaire and is re-enacting the myth of modernity *on film and by film*, staging its paradoxical position between the stability and stillness of plastic artworks — paintings and statues — and the futility represented by the moving image. The 19th century literary works he is adapting also stand for the romantic tradition in relation to which modernity always tried to define itself in a love and hate relationship. This tendency is evident in the modern melodrama where the story is always reflected upon or deconstructed by a well defined style of the camera movement, acting, lights and editing. Oliveira is staging the relationship of film to this tradition not by using a style reflecting on the story (either ironically or parodically) and neither by alternating the story by representing alienation as a modern version of melodrama. *Doomed Love*, as well as all his melodramas, doesn't fit in either of the filmic genre of classic or modernist melodrama as presented by András Bálint Kovács (2007): the style is vaguely minimalist-modernist, reminding of Bresson's model theory, Rohmer's *Marquise de O...* (1976) or Alain Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), but lacking both a drama of the modern subjectivity or social alienation at the level of the story. Instead, the alienation happens between image and narration, style and story: Oliveira creates a film language completely alienated from the story, as if representing modern film's incapacity to get hold on the romantic tradition of the genre, too distant thus inaccessible. As one of his critiques has rightly put it about his *Doomed Love*, in most of his films there is a "gap between the character and the actor, the actor and the model, the frame and the scene and the world, the image and the text"[5] (Denis Lévy 1998, 51-53). This is also evident in the much emphasized discrepancy between the *voix-off* narration and images in *Doomed Love*: the former is not interpreting images and images are not illustrations of the *voix-off* narration. We can rather talk about a complementary relationship between two independent entities. There is also a

[5] "L'écart entre le personnage et l'acteur, l'acteur et le modele, entre le cadre et la scene et le monde, entre l'image et le texte" (translation by me, H. K.)

gap here between the literary tradition of romantic melodrama and film: as Francis Ramasse points out, the tuberculosis as vector of melodrama is not plausible anymore in 1978. We can say, by referring to Susan Sontag's essay *The Illness as Metaphor*, that sickness appears here rather as a metaphor of the death drive that Laura Mulvey identifies in melodramas, manifested in a tendency of filmic action and movement to slide into non-action, stillness and ultimately death (Mulvey 2006, 67-81).

Clara Rowland and Abel Barros Baptista, following Lawton's analyses of the novel (1964 and 1985) has pointed out in a revision of Castelo Branco's novel that in contrast to the second part, the first part of it is very dynamic: we are acquainted with an action-hero Simão, who is impulsive, destructive, has revolutionary ideas, and finally kills his rival in revenge (Rowland 2009, 58-80 and Baptista 2009, 81-112). After being injured and jailed following the murder, we are witnessing a gradual sliding into stilled-ness, an almost catatonic state, lack of any bodily expression, manifested in a frontal representation of the characters, in a sort of application of the Bressonian model-theory. As Laura Mulvey points out, stillness stands for a tendency of film to return to the photographic stage: "Stillness may evoke a 'before' for the moving image as filmstrip, as a reference back to photography or to its own original moment of registration" (2006, 67). The death drive, defined by Freud and present in all melodramas negotiates between the narrative and cinema, including, as it does, movement towards an end as the desire to return to an 'earlier' state. So there is an analogy — if not a metaphoric relationship — between death drive, narration's movement towards a final halt and the inclination of the moving image towards stillness. Oliveira's film is masterly reproducing the turning point from movement and action into non-action and meditation that occurs when Simão sees Teresa through the window and falls desperately in love with her. This structure also corresponds to Simão's personality, impulsive and melancholic at the same time, which also gave way to such critical assumptions that Simão doesn't fall due to his love and social

circumstances, but his personality[6]. Assuming this revised approach of the novel Oliveira turns the bipolarity of the hero into a play of action and stilled movement marking a Deleuzeian distribution of movement and time images, these latter defining "a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent" (1989, 126-129). As Francis Ramasse pointed out, in the second part of the film "participation gives place to contemplation, emotion to intelligence and what has been proper melodramatic pleasure becomes intellectual pleasure"[7] (1979, 65-66). By repeatedly transforming the moving image into tableau vivant, he is not only referring to film's indebtedness to plastic arts and photography, but is also modelling the double face of modernity, oscillating between "the eternal and immutable" and "ephemeral and fugitive." Beauty and emotional power, linked by Lord Byron with "an element of the sinister or at least the doomed and the damned"[8] is transformed into visual power manifested in a systematic and excessive use of frames (windows, doors, mirrors and jail bars),[9] symbolic compositions meant to be deciphered by a cinephile spectator.

**Fashion, Pose and Cultural Symbolism in *Abraham's Valley***

Baudelaire defines modernity as a correlation of beauty, happiness and fashion, responsible for its ephemeral aspect: "By modernity I mean Fashion itself that appears as a symptom of the taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-a-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain: as a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation" (1964, 31).

In *Abraham's Valley* Oliveira finds another way to celebrate the aesthetical potentials of the still image: fashion and subsequently *posing* become, once again, allegorical representations of the oscillation between stillness respectively stability and movement or contingency, characteristic to both modernity and film. Ema, the protagonist is constantly posing and looking

[6] See, for example, Baptista 2009, 81-112.
[7] "La participation cède la place à la contemplation, l'émotion á l'intelligence, ce qui était proprement le plaisir mélodramatique devient plaisir intellectuel." (translation by me, H.K.)
[8] Quoted by Wilson 2007, 96.
[9] See more on this in Király (2013).

into mirrors: she is "half doll, half idol,"[10] a female dandy. Dandyism, as described by Baudelaire and fashion theorists as a "performance", a "mise-en-scène", is presenting "one's self as a work of art": a dandy's solitary profession is elegance, "the eternal pursuit of happiness" (Baudelaire 1964, 26). Ema sets off on a "displaced search for perfection" (Wilson 2007, 98), love and happiness by creating herself a glamorous image mesmerizing all her entourage. According to a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary, cited by Elizabeth Wilson, the meaning of the very term *glamour*, of Celtic origin, is closely related to "occult learning and magic" (grammar, gramarye): "when devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast a glamour over the eye of the spectator" (idem, 96). Her posing, at parties or during her long discussions with one of her admirers is evoking the femme fatale image of the Hollywood star system, she *is turning herself into an image*. As Laura Mulvey puts it, a pose is evoking the nature of photography and "allows time for the cinema to denaturalize the human body", "is a tool of delaying cinema, resisting narrative linearity, addressing a fetishistic spectator more fascinated by image than plot" (2006b, 164). In this respect becomes the title of *Doomed Love* a definition, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has half-mockingly observed, of *acute cinephilia,* valid for most films by Oliveira (1979, 66).

In *Abraham's Valley* fashion also becomes one of the main factors of the opacity of representation. It is impossible to detect the time period of the story: the costumes, decorations, cars represent different ages, trends and social backgrounds. This lack of referentiality is not compensated by a symbolic level of meanings, but produces a "third meaning", a "noise" revealing the medium of film[11]. Fashion as visual excess is replacing the narrative and emotional excess of melodrama. This is also Oliveira's original discourse on the paradox of fashion revealing the culturally changed female body by covering it. Fashion, as a phenomenon making absence (the body) visible through excess, is a central subject of modernity and, as Baudelaire emphasizes in his *The Painter of*

[10] See more about the "fin de siècle" visual culture and fashion in Valérie Steele's essay (2004).
[11] On the third, non-referential and non-symbolical meaning see Roland Barthes (1985).

*Modern Life* — of the new trends in visual representation of women (1964, 31-33).

In this particular film the paradox of the modern woman, moving on, but haunted by the phantoms of the past and that of modern cinema stuck between literary and visual tradition and new narrative technologies are thoroughly intertwined in a metaphorical relationship. The oscillation between the traditional role of housewife staying at home and that of the independent, modern woman crossing her boundaries is doubled by still images, *tableaux vivants* getting on movement and images of action freezing into stilled movement. The independence of Ema is largely indebted to fashion, as it gives her the sensation of control by creating a "better self" in a society characterized by hypocrisy and mediocrity. Fashion, glamour and dandyism in her case become, as Baudelaire put it, "the last spark of heroism amid decadence" (1964, 28) Fashion is also "blurring the boundaries between le monde and le demi-monde, the respectable bourgeois woman and the actresses/prostitutes:" the "mise-en-scene", the surface exhibition, the pure appearance, that used to characterize the courtisane, aiming at getting close the man who pays her[12]. This oscillation between respectability and immorality is thematized in Bessa-Luís' novel and the Oliveira film, where Ema's social status as a wife and/or a courtesan is a constant dilemma. This is plastically represented in the film by a contrastive repetition of the image of a family altar, a triptych (as symbol of her religious education) and a three-fold mirror, the same composition, in which she is constantly watching her new, fashionable self. Moreover, in one of the last scenes, we see an ageing Ema with a heavy make-up looking into an oval mirror juxtaposed with a photo of her young self. When she moves away, another body becomes visible in the same frame: that of Christ on the crucifix [see Images 1-4].

*Abraham's Valley* is a Portuguese-Oliveirian version of *Madame Bovary*: as frequently in his career, Oliveira is using the intermediation of Agustina Bessa-Luis's homonymous novel, ordered, in fact, by him, as another tool of distanciation from the 19th century literary tradition. Flaubert's novel,

[12] See on this the definition in Larousse dictionary, cited by Bernheimer (1989, 97).

contemporary with Baudelaire's essay, is also about the role of fashion in the pursuit of happiness and independence — Ema is trying to set herself free from her small bourgeois lifestyle by buying extravagant clothes and fashion articles which will cause her debts and ultimately leads to her suicide. She can't escape her traditional role as wife and cannot move on as a courtesan whose debts are paid by her lover. So after a short but intense adventure of freedom, fuelled by the desire of happiness she is regressing to the stillness of death. In *Abraham's Valley* her difficulty to move on is symbolized also by her limp, another allusion to the above discussed issue between image and movement: the glamorous image is meant to hide the "motoric imperfection" of narration and is targeting a spectator who wants to get hold on the image and contemplate it. For Ema a party-scene or a social event often functions as a catwalk: she walks in, not looking at anybody while everybody is watching her, then she stops, posing, as if in front of the voyeuristic, fetishistic gaze of the "possessive spectator" (Mulvey 2006, 161). In this film the pose, turning the body of the character into a still image stands for the "surprise principle" of the Oliveirian cinema, constantly slowing down and freezing movement to reveal the "real", painterly and photographic nature of the medium.

**Conclusion**

Oliveira's cinematographic return with films on "frustrated loves" can be actually interpreted as an original conceptual approach to film as a par excellence modern medium. He is constantly staging on film and by film a drama of modernity stuck between the eternal and ephemeral, tradition and fashion, stillness and movement. Instead of referring to a melodramatic, emotional excess, the denomination of "frustrated love" is rather standing for the tension between image and movement, as well as the ambivalent relationship between romantic literature and modern film. Viewed from the perspective of Baudelaire's essay, celebrating the "double face of modernity", stability and tradition together with movement and fashion, thus having a prophetic premonition about visual mass culture, *Doomed Love* and *Abraham's Valley* are thematizing some central theoretical issues of cinema, constantly

torn between narrative illusion and the magic of the still image. While "death drive", a Freudian concept applied by Laura Mulvey to melodramas, is responsible of turning action into stillness, fashion, glamour and pose are delaying cinematic movement and narration, hiding their imperfections. Both films end with the image of water, a symbol, as Laura Mulvey points out, of narrative halt (2006b, 78-79). Only the image remains, in accordance with Oliveira's declared intention of "affecting and moving spectators without any dissimulation of the artifice" (2009, 38).

Images 1-4: In Abraham's Valley Ema's social status as a wife and/or a courtesan is a constant dilemma, plastically represented in the film by a contrastive repetition of the image of a family altar, a triptych (as symbol of her religious education) and a three-fold mirror, the same composition, in which she is constantly watching her new, fashionable self. Moreover, in one of the last scenes, we see an ageing Ema with a heavy make-up looking into an oval mirror juxtaposed with a photo of her young self. When she moves away, another body becomes visible in the same frame: that of Christ on the crucifix.

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