

# REVIEW: ANTÓNIO REIS: THE LIFE OF FORMS AND A FORM OF LIFE

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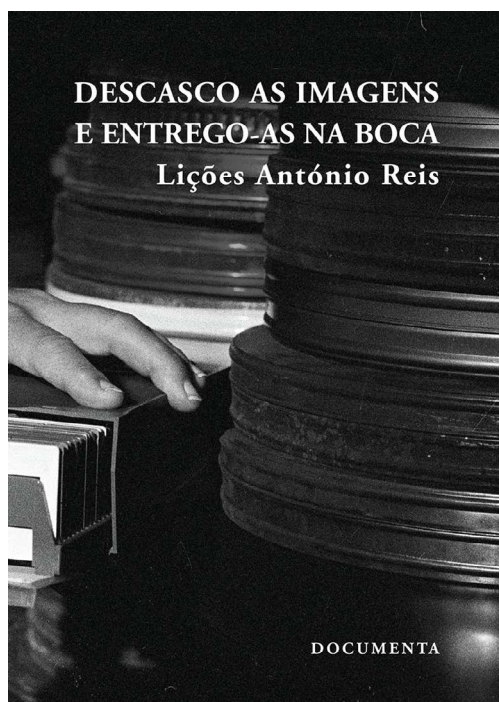
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## ABSTRACT

This book compiles revised and enlarged versions of conferences presented in October 2018 as part of a homage to the director, poet and teacher, that took place at Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema (ESTC-IPL), Lisbon; an enlarged biographical note by Fátima Ribeiro and also presents, by Maria Patrão, a series of slides from Reis' classes unearthed from ESTC's archives. As we will see, all the essays present a clearly aesthetical approach to Reis' works as filmmaker, poet and teacher, which makes it unprecedented: Maria Filomena Molder and Manuel Guerra's essays are mainly focused on the film *Jaime* (1974); Nuno Júdice analyses António Reis' main poetry book and José Bogalheiro explores the relation between Reis' filming praxis and his propaedeutic approach.

Keywords: António Reis; Cinema; Poetry; Propaedeutic; Aesthetics.

**BOGALHEIRO, J. & GUERRA, M. (EDS.) (2020). *DESCASCO AS IMAGENS E ENTREGO-AS NA BOCA – LIÇÕES DE ANTÓNIO REIS*. DOCUMENTA**



Titled *Descasco as imagens e entrego-as na boca – Lições António Reis* (a verse by Reis himself, that could be translated as *Peeling the images and delivering them to the mouth – António Reis' Lessons*<sup>1</sup>), the book compiles, in the first chapter – António Reis' Lessons –, revised and enlarged versions of conferences presented in October 2018 as part of a homage to the director, poet and teacher, that took place at Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema (ESTC-IPL), Lisbon, where Reis' taught between 1977 and 1991, until he passed away. The second chapter – *Homage* – includes an enlarged biographical note and the third and final – *Continuation* – presents a series of slides from Reis' classes, unearthed from ESTC's archives. This book's edition is itself a major event because, despite being nationally and internationally acclaimed by film critics and his pairs, for decades Reis and Cordeiro's works were voted to a certain invisibility<sup>2</sup> which seems to be ending little by little. Moreover, the majority of these texts present, as we will see, a clearly aesthetical approach to Reis' works both as filmmaker, poet and teacher, which makes it unprecedented.

*Causes that Follow the Effects or Golden Plums with Dum* by Maria Filomena Molder is centered on the film *Jaime* (1974) and trails the director's speech in an interview conducted by João César Monteiro and published in Cinéfilo magazine, in 1974. The author starts by emphasizing Reis' aversion to the possibility of directing a panoramic shot on Hospital Miguel Bombarda; since it was a circular panoptic such view would be "almost offensive, a kind of a seizure of the power from that place" (Molder, 2020, p. 20). An important idea that echoes further in the text when Molder (2020, p. 54) argues that Reis "removes from the images the

1 All translations by the author.

2 And some symptoms are: his main poetry book published in 1967 was only re-edited in 2017 while his youth poems are hardly known; the screenings of his and Margarida Cordeiro's films have suffered several limitations, both technical and cultural, throughout the years, especially in Portugal (now the films have become more accessible after being digitalized by ANIM – Arquivo Nacional das Imagens em Movimento) vide Baptista, T. (2018) *Notas Para Uma História Material do Cinema de António Reis e Margarida Cordeiro*. In *Como o Sol/ Como a Noite* (pp. 12-25). Porto/Post/Doc; Torres, A. R. (1991, October/ 1992, May). *Estética da Invisibilidade*. In *A Grande Ilusão*, nº 13/14, pp. 10-11; Mourinha, J. (2018, December 2). *Os segredos de António Reis e Margarida Cordeiro estão aí para ser descobertos*. In *Público*, p. 21; the catalogue *A Poesia da Terra*, also published in 1997, and an intensive repository blog managed by António Neves continue to serve as almost exclusive references for researchers.

whole psychiatric ideology, the whole antipsychiatric discussion, the whole metapsychiatric reading”, peeling them.

Throughout the essay, Molder borrows different principles from Robert Bresson’s *Notes On The Cinematographer* to comment *Jaime*, such as: “don’t let your backgrounds absorb the faces you apply to them” (Molder, 2020, p. 21); the dispersion that must be brought back to unity (Molder, 2020, p. 23) or “let the cause follow the effect, not accompany it or precede it” (Molder, 2020, p. 47), that actually gives title to the text.

In the absence of Jaime’s voice, Molder underlines the clear orality of his written texts that appear on the film. Orality and musicality that also play an important role in Reis’ poetry. Since there’s a lack of punctuation, “to recite is a demand” to understand his poems (Molder, 2020, p. 27). Molder (2020, p. 29) describes Reis’ poetry as, not pessimistic nor fatalistic, but as an “acceptance of our ephemeral duration”, an Hölderlian sobriety, according to the author, that can be found in both Reis’ poetic and filmic acts. Further on, Molder (2020, p. 56) explores again this relation between Reis’ poetry and cinema arguing that in his poems “the cinema is already being prepared” and that a “cinematographic manner is found in most of the poems”. The author underlines the elliptical trait of the poems and a “strong presence of love” (Molder, 2020, p. 58), as in *Jaime*.

Actually, the main ideas of Molder about Reis’ work are two and related: on one hand, the production of a system of offerings – “[...] between him and *Jaime*, between him and the earth”, etc. (Molder, 2020, p. 60) – and, on the other hand, the relevance of the unexpected, that precisely “comes to us as an offering” (Molder, 2020, p. 48). Bearing Bresson in mind, Molder states that, against any causal system, the work by António Reis “has to do with effects that precede causes”, favoring the unexpected: “[...] the pickaxe is not the cause of the discovery of gold [...] The pickaxe hits the cement and suddenly, without warning, the gold appears [...]” (Molder, 2020, p. 48). So, even when they are “ready”, his films are always “in preparation” (Molder, 2020, p. 49).

*A Poetry Close to Life*, by Nuno Júdice, focuses on the poetry by António Reis in *Poemas Quotidianos* (Daily Poems). Júdice keeps Reis’ poetry away from the neo-realist movement because rather than “messages calling for revolution and denouncing oppression” (Júdice, 2020 p. 69), Reis – alongside with Herberto Helder, António Ramos Rosa, among others – proposed a poetic “that followed the direction of modernity in the expression of themes and forms” (Júdice, 2020 p. 69).

Far from the expression of a “collective voice”, the poems by António Reis are, for Júdice (2020), strongly characterized by an individual expression. Reis is then considered as a “narrator” of ordinary episodes that happen in everyday life, a “collector of moments” that are captured by the poem. The “synthetic expression” of Reis’ short verses leads the author to draw a parallel between his poetry and Japanese elliptical poetry and Anglo-American imagery (Júdice, 2020, p. 70). For Júdice (2020, p. 70) the originality of António Reis’ poetry lies essentially in a “word image” which is based on the “photographic quality” of the poetic form, which favors details, that is to say, “film frames”, rather than “explanatory” excesses.

The author also draws several analogies between the poetry of Reis and other contemporary artists, poets and filmmakers, underlining the dehumanised landscape of Antonioni's films; Castello-Lopes' photographs; or even Edward Hopper's paintings, bearing in mind their patent immobility (Júdice, 2020, p. 72). Júdice (2020, p. 73) also highpoints the hyper-realistic aspect of Reis' poetry, in which "nothing refers to any symbolic or metaphorical dimension" and identifies two symptomatic series in his poems: the objects and the body. Although aside from the neo-realist movement, Júdice does not fail to mention that the "daily journey" of Reis took place "under the Dictatorship, grey and monotonous" (Júdice, 2020, p. 76). The author takes up the idea of an "humanism" present in Reis' poems, "that puts all men on an equal footing", referring to the following verses by António Reis: "And I say/ that are also men/ the traitors// although I don't love them// although/ upon them/ silence/ and pains// stroke" (Reis, 2017, as cited in Júdice, 2020, p. 77). As Júdice (2020, p. 77) states: "to point out what he sees is enough".

The article by Manuel Guerra, *Of Fiery Attention*, presents an important contribution to the divulgation of António Reis' first poetry, "youth poems", written between the ages of 20 and 25, that were published in seven books. These editions – prior to *Poemas Quotidianos* (1957), *Novos Poemas Quotidianos* (1960) and *Poemas Quotidianos* (1967) – were omitted "in most of his biographies" (Guerra, 2020, p. 92) which is why they are hardly known, as well as particularly inaccessible, to general public. Manuel Guerra (2020) introduces each one of the books pointing out the main themes and Reis' stylistic variations along the years and includes reproductions of the covers and drawings. As Molder, Guerra also focuses his text on the film *Jaime* and the poetry by António Reis. From an Augustinian reading of a non-chronological time – the eternalized present –, Guerra seeks to unveil Reis' ways of "fiery attention" to the terrain present, which would be ruled by the "law of metamorphosis", the transformation of forms, and which would allow Reis to "see the whole phenomenon". (Guerra, 2020, p. 127) Enlightening this idea, the author evokes a crucial sequence of *Jaime*, in which the vital lines of Jaime's medical records give way to the mountain landscape lines and, finally, to the horse's back line. This is how Jaime Fernandes would escape to "the voracity of time [...] through the unusual and visceral attention that António Reis pays to the present, to the cinematographic field, to what Jaime had painted, scratched and written." (Guerra, 2020, p. 127) Rather than keys, the author offers possibilities to the film as long as he affirms the always fugitive character of Reis' work taking up the words by Reis himself: "The film had always run from us. Jaime also seemed to run." (Guerra, 2020, p. 127)

*A Torrent Called Life*, by José Bogalheiro, is divided into nine moments and aims to make known and reflect upon Reis' working methods in its different dimensions, as well as their inextricable relationship with that torrent called life. "To the school he came like a torrent; so that those who listened to him would understand: cinema is not a stream"<sup>3</sup> (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 135) – this is the main image for this essay and illuminates Reis' conviction that cinema is not a matter

<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese *corrente* means both chain and stream.

of continuity. For Bogalheiro (2020, p. 143), Reis would be a “swimmer between two words”, between two waters, who manages to “maintain the course”. As a torrent, António Reis came to the film school and presented an approach that differed from the “canonical exercise [...] aimed at learning continuity – whether in narrative, enlightenment, or shot’s scale.” (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 144) That institutionalized practice was called by António Reis as “doors-traversing” and should be tackled since cinema was, for him, a “life or death matter.” (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 144)

After emphasizing the oral condition of Reis’ classes, linking it to a philosophical tradition, Bogalheiro (2020, p. 145) reveals the teaching methodology, with the students around a film editing table: then a confabulation started from an image on. A pedagogical approach, or a “propaedeutic” as the author calls it, that privileges a “relationship of heterogeneity with the sign – not to do as someone, but to do with someone”, quoting Deleuze on this (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 146). In Reis lessons’ as in cinema, “everything is played in the relationship [...], in the form” (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 145) – therefore the curricular program was exceptionally brief – and also the filming method shall be adopted to teaching. As the author suggests, a “propaedeutic of gaze” (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 153) in Reis is then constituted by: a tabula rasa positioning (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 151); the Deleuzian idea of pulling out a truly image from a cliché; and finally by either searching “for a just position to a point-of-view” as a man-of-the-camera (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 153) and for a “juxta position of the fragments.” (Bogalheiro, 2020, p. 162)

Between image and words, Bogalheiro (2020, p. 147) also evokes Pasolini’s idea of a cinematographic screenplay – “structure that wants to be another structure” –, which is at the same time done and yet to be done, and that requires a visual completeness from any reader. Moreover, a vital approach drives the essay (as the title suggests), from the Foucauldian idea of art as a *pratique de soi* to the idea of a film shot as an indicium of life by Andrei Tarkovsky, or the Francis Galton’s notion of composite portrait.

In the second chapter, “Homage”, Fátima Ribeiro (2020) presents an extensive chronological biography titled “António Reis, Our Master”: since Porto’s days when Reis worked as an office employee, had collaborated with Cineclube do Porto, wrote his first poems and travelled to Alentejo for recording popular poetry and songs; throughout the 60’s and his collaborations in the films by Paulo Rocha and Manoel Oliveira; then moving to Lisbon and working at Casa Guérin, and the shooting of Jaime, in 1974, with Margarida Cordeiro; then, teaching at the film school, since 1977, and co-directing *Trás-os-Montes* (1976), *Ana* (1982) and *Rosa de Areia* (1989). Mostly visual, in the last chapter, Continuation, Maria Patrão presents “Half-Light”, a research project based on 32 slides, part of the ESTC’s archives, conceived by Reis and executed by his students. Some reproductions of Jaime’s slides can be found in the book but there are others: “several paintings photographed by António Reis’ students: Klee, Limbourg...” (Patrão, 2020, p. 191)

On the whole, shared points can be found throughout the essays as: the refined, sober and elliptical style of writing; the constant “preparation” and unveiling aspect of the works, open to the unexpected; a regime of indicality in both filming and writing practices; and a cinematographic appeal of his poetry. The book is a key contribution to a necessary wider discussion of António Reis’ transdisciplinary work, namely in the fields of aesthetics and artistic studies. Being an edition about the professorial legacy of António Reis, and therefore under the sign of his figure, there is a predominance over his poetry and the film Jaime. However, it is also a reminder that there is still much to be done in the study of António Reis’ work, for instance, in the analysis of his first short films, co-directed with César Guerra Leal: *Painéis do Porto* (1963) and *Do Céu ao Rio* (1964).

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