

Manoel de Oliveira |

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than in previous films. Oliveira continues his predilection for offering images of paintings and ornate interiors. At one point, for example, he cuts from Camila smiling at José Luciano from her window to the rather diabolical smile on the face of a baroque angel, thus subtly revealing her duplicity. The beautiful landscapes of the Douro region, particularly establishing shots and shots from the moving train, also play an important role, rooting the film in the land and the conventions of its society.

Um Filme Falado

Um Filme Falado (A talking picture; 2003) constitutes a reflection on the present and future of civilization, particularly within the context of the long-standing tension between Christianity and Islam. In this sense, it takes up some of the issues dealt with in *Non ou a Vã Glória de Mandar* in 1990. The narrative structure Oliveira uses for this strikingly profound and timely discussion is the following: Rosa Maria (Leonor Silveira), a university history professor, takes her daughter, Maria Joana (Filipa de Almeida), on a cruise to meet her husband and the girl's father in Bombay. Along the way, the mother explains the significance of the places they visit or pass by—Ceuta, Marseilles, Naples and Pompeii, Athens, Istanbul, Suez, and Aden—as well as such things as the meaning of myth, legend, and civilization. As they stop at ports along the way, three prosperous and well-known women of different nationalities board the ship: the entrepreneur Delphine (Catherine Deneuve) in Marseilles, the model Francesca (Stefania Sandrelli) in Naples, and the singer Helena (Irene Pappas) in Athens. The first half of the film is dedicated to Rosa Maria and Maria Joana's educational tourism; the second half to multilingual conversations at the dinner table of the ship's American captain, John Walesa (John Malkovich).

The date of the voyage, given in an explanatory title as the ship sets sail, contextualizes it implicitly in relation to 9/11: "In July 2001 a little girl accompanied by her mother, a distinguished history professor, crosses thousands of years of civilization while on their way to meet her father." *A Talking Picture* opens with a high-angle shot of people on a dock in Lisbon waving goodbye. Most immediately, they are waving goodbye to their friends and loved ones who are departing on a voyage to a yet-unknown destination. Metaphorically, they may be waving goodbye to Western civilization as we know it today. As Yaniv Eyny and

A. Zubatov have written, “[B]y the film’s end, we begin to realise that Oliveira’s reflections upon the past are actually reflections in a different sense: the film’s many reference points in our early history and in the present-day voyage . . . stand as mirror-imaged bookends at the extreme ends of a long shelf sinking at a centre no longer able to withstand the pressure of its weighty volumes and illustrious titles.” In Marseilles, the travelers’ first port of call, Rosa Maria and her daughter walk toward a dock near the city center, and they see a small dog tied to a boat. The movement of the waves pulls the dog perilously close to the edge, and it struggles not to be pulled into the water. The dog’s Sisyphean efforts to pull back from the brink constitute a wonderful visual metaphor for the state of Western civilization. It is not accidental that the dog is untied and “saved,” so to speak, by a person associated with a knowledge of history, nor that the dog becomes associated with the little girl, upon whose shoulders the future rests. Nor is it coincidental that the ship captain, the one in charge of the voyage, is an American, a fact that is not particularly reassuring within the context of the film.

A Talking Picture offers multiple layers of historical, political, and cultural meaning through what might superficially seem to be a kind of cinematic travelogue. Not surprisingly, the most immediate historical reference involves Oliveira’s native Portugal. As the ship leaves the Tagus River in Lisbon on its way to Bombay, Rosa Maria points out the Monument to the Discoveries on the banks of the river, with the figure of Prince Henry the Navigator, the “moving force” behind the voyages of discovery, at the forefront. In an allusion to the opening lines of Camões’s *Lusiads*, she explains to her daughter that the navigators discovered new worlds “sailing hitherto unexplored waters.” She then points out the Torre de Belém fortress, which was built between 1515 and 1520 to commemorate Vasco da Gama’s voyage to India, which began in July 1497. Taking place during the same month, departing from the same city, and with the same destination—albeit via a different route—the voyage in *A Talking Picture* represents a modern echo of Vasco da Gama’s journey, but in a different world with very different results.

The difference is prefigured in this initial sequence through another historical reference. It is a misty day, and Rosa Maria tells her daughter that the mist reminds her of the myth of King Sebastian, who would one day emerge from the mist to restore Portugal to its rightful place



Leonor Silveira and Filipa de Almeida in *A Talking Picture* (Madragoa Filmes).

in the world. She briefly explains that Sebastian disappeared in Alcácer-Kebir, a battle that was part of the king's crusade to convert the world to Christianity, starting with Muslims in northern Africa. Structuring the film from the outset, therefore, are the age-old conflict between Christianity and Islam and the question of imperial expansion or the spread of Western civilization.

As they sail by Ceuta, Rosa Maria explains that the Portuguese took the city from the Moors more than five hundred years earlier (in 1415, to be exact), although it is no longer Portuguese. In Marseilles, a plaque on the sidewalk commemorates the Greeks' arrival there in 600 BC, spreading civilization. In their visit to Pompeii, the film contrasts political or religious conflicts with natural cataclysms over which human beings have no control. In Athens the professor and her daughter visit the Acropolis, where they meet a Greek Orthodox priest. In Istanbul, the focus is on the Hagia Sophia cathedral, which was built in 537 by the Byzantine emperor Justinian and converted into a mosque in 1453. Inside, the camera lingers on Christian and Muslim iconography. As if to emphasize the film's concerns, hanging outside the cathedral, which is now a museum, is a banner announcing a photographic exhibit by Ahmed Ertu drawn from the book *Hagia Sophia: A Vision for Empires*.

In Suez, where they meet the actor Luís Miguel Cintra, playing himself, they discuss the European construction of the canal and the festivities that commemorated its inauguration.

Sailing through the Red Sea, Rosa Maria explains the biblical origins of the Arab people, descendents of Ishmael, son of Abraham and the slave girl Agar, and the later formation of nation-states through wars. When her daughter asks why men are so bad, Rosa Maria explains that the lust for power leads to war, which is precisely the point Oliveira broached in *Non ou a Vã Glória de Mandar*. In Aden, Rosa Maria explains that the Portuguese tried unsuccessfully to conquer the city to facilitate the sea route to Africa. In this sequence, the film again offers a visual contrast between Western and Islamic culture, primarily in terms of dress.

During the voyage, Delphine, Francesca, and Helena engage in multilingual conversation over dinner at the captain's table. These conversations, which begin at almost precisely the midway point of the film, constitute the second major component of *A Talking Picture*. The dinner guests speak, each in his or her own language (French, Italian, Greek, and English), about love, relationships, work, solitude, art, and theater. All four of them are childless, and Francesca and Helena in particular express regret at not having had children. Indeed, in the conversation the following evening in which Rosa Maria joins them, Francesca expresses deep sadness at the fact. As Eyny and Zubatov note, almost all of the characters Rosa Maria and her daughter encounter during the voyage are childless, starting with the fishmonger in Marseilles. In this sense, Maria Joana occupies a privileged space. "If the history lesson and the film are primarily hers, she is certainly burdened with an awesome responsibility as the single vessel capable of preserving the legacy of the past for the future" (Eyny and Zubatov). In this sense, Maria Joana represents more than a single little girl.

The dinner conversation soon turns toward such matters as language, civilization, and relations between the West and Arab countries. They find it strange, but somehow natural, that they are all speaking their own language and that they fully understand each other. The American captain says he knows fragments of languages, but he doesn't really need to use them, since almost everyone speaks English. It is no coincidence that the person in command is an American, whose language is later described as

"implacable." Helena points out that although Greece is the birthplace of civilization, it is now largely forgotten. Delphine concurs and adds that the values of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity—have also been forgotten, particularly in light of the clash between the West and Arab countries, with its attendant fundamentalism.

The next evening, the captain invites Rosa Maria and Maria Joana to join them at his table. He gives Maria Joana a gift he purchased in Aden: a fully veiled Arab doll. After a brief conversation, again about language and, implicitly, power, the captain asks Helena to sing for the guests, and she agrees. She sings a nostalgic song about change that evokes a simpler age, which is reinforced by a panel of a grape harvest on the wall. The winds that blow, however, do not blow gently; they blow with a fury.

The final ten minutes of *A Talking Picture* transform it in such a way as to bring everything said about the clash of civilizations into high and horrific relief. While Helena is singing, an aide calls the captain and they leave the room. The captain returns a few minutes later and informs his dinner guests that in Aden terrorists managed to place two time bombs on board. A few minutes later comes the call to abandon ship, and the passengers leave the dining room to put on their life jackets. Rosa Maria and Maria Joana do the same, and they begin to follow the other passengers to the deck. Suddenly, Maria Joana breaks away from her mother and runs back to her cabin, where she has left the Arab doll. Rosa Maria frantically runs after her. When she reaches the cabin, she sees her daughter kneeling by the bed telling the doll, "Don't be afraid. I'll look after you." By the time they get to the deck, it is too late and all of the other passengers have embarked on lifeboats. From one of those boats the captain sees that they are still on the ship, and he yells for them to jump. Again, it is too late. The film ends with a freeze frame of the captain's face, looking in horror at what has happened, illuminated by the fire of the explosion.

Many things in *A Talking Picture* can be read allegorically: the crowd waving goodbye in Lisbon, the dog on the wharf in Marseilles, the childlessness of most of the characters, the ship commanded by an American. One should not overlook the fact that the doll—perhaps an exotic trinket for some—is a gift from the captain. But the girl's role at the end, her attempt to save and protect her doll (obviously analogous to her own

mother's role), also involves contact between cultures that, as the film shows, have long been in conflict. The doll is fully veiled; Joana Maria is wearing the Arab dress that her mother purchased in Aden. On one level, this contact represents a visualization of Helena's words during dinner concerning the need for a convergence of values between the West and the Arab world. Otherwise, it may be too late.

Oliveira links the events of the film and recent acts of terrorism not only to the history of Western civilization but also, and more specifically, to the history of Portugal. On the dining room wall behind the captain is a painting of what appears to be Lisbon as it might have looked at the time of Vasco da Gama's voyage to India. When Maria Joana runs back to get her doll, she and her mother pass a large painting of Vasco da Gama three times. Each time, the camera lingers on the painting. In *Non ou a Vã Glória de Mandar*, Lieutenant Cabrita refers to the voyages of discovery as representing one of Portugal's great gifts to the world. In his view, they were humanism in practice, if not theory. The painting on the wall is one of optimism and promise, with da Gama looking out toward the future, and the sun's rays forming a cross as it shines over an island in the ocean. *A Talking Picture* shows how distant that hope is from the reality of the contemporary world.

O Quinto Império: Ontem como Hoje

With *O Quinto Império: Ontem como Hoje* (The Fifth Empire: Yesterday as today; 2004), Oliveira revisits the work of José Régio and questions of history and utopia that he had explored in diverse ways in *Le Soulier de satin*, *Non ou a Vã Glória de Mandar*, *Palavra e Utopia*, and *A Talking Picture*. The film is based on Régio's three-act play *El-Rey Sebastião* (1949). The change in title, however, points toward a reading in light of present circumstances in which dreams of empire and utopia, at times based on a supposed predestination, involve age-old conflicts between cultures and religions. When the film was screened in Venice, some associated Sebastian with George W. Bush, and Oliveira himself has said that Bush has a "Sebastianist" inclination in his expressed desire to spread democracy and freedom around the globe in his own version of the Fifth Empire (Câmara; Dacosta; Neto).

Whereas in previous films Oliveira included sometimes extensive references to King Sebastian I (1544–78) in the course of narratives