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Mysteries of Lisbon and Intermedial History-Telling[1]
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Raúl Ruiz's copious cinematic production has been treated as a single never-ending film due to his notorious disregard for narrative closure. Adrian Martin (2004, 47), for example, muses:

> Where does any one [of Ruiz's films] start or end, and does it make any sense to talk at all of starts and ends – why not, as many commentators do, just plunge into de Ruizian sea (fragments of films, fragments of ideas and principles) and forget the individual works?

One could add to these questions: could these individual works not be films, but Ruiz's life itself? For, having over a hundred feature films to his credit and an equal number of theatrical plays and novels, artistic creation did not seem to be for him a "job", but simply a way of life. As well as unceremoniously intruding upon their maker's life, Ruiz's films opened themselves to the invasion of other media (theatre, literature, painting, music, sculpture) and artistic activities the director might be circumstantially engaged with, remaining always only partially "cinema".

I however hesitate to look at the magnificent *Mysteries of Lisbon,* under scrutiny here, through a lens that magnifies the auteur figure to such an extreme, due to the exceptionality of this piece within Ruiz's oeuvre. In the first place, this is the most overtly commercial of the director's outputs, which remain otherwise the privilege of a niche of select aficionados. Granted, *Mysteries of Lisbon* is the lengthiest film Ruiz has ever made, consisting of a monumental adaptation (4h26min as a film, 6h as a TV series) of Camilo Castelo Branco's eponymous novel in three volumes, in which interconnected narrative strands multiply wide and deep across generations.[3] However, all of these strands in the TV series, and most of them in

the film, come to a logical resolution, wrapping up with the romantic novel's traditional closure, i.e. the death of the hero and first-person narrator. Thus, the protracted length in *Mysteries of Lisbon* derives from the chosen genre, the feuilleton, both as adopted in Castelo Branco's nineteenth-century novel and in its contemporary spin-off, the televisual soap opera, rather than being the consequence of an open-ended work or "opera aperta" as Umberto Eco (1989) had defined the porous narrative style of modern literature.

Moreover, the film's artistic quality is certainly not the exclusive result of a single genius at its helm, but of the joint efforts of the extraordinary crew and cast gathered around Ruiz, starting with Carlos Saboga and his masterly adaptation of an extremely complex novel, defined as "the product of a truculent and incontrollable mind" by Castelo Branco's greatest specialist, Alexandre Cabral (in Castelo Branco 2010). The exquisite settings and costumes in the film are the work of experienced art director Isabel Branco, another precious asset in the film. The dazzling, ballet-like, at times contortionist camerawork, in turn, is conducted by the then 30-year-old Brazilian cinematographer André Szankowski, whom Ruiz co-opted from the advertising branch. Jorge Arriagada, Ruiz's faithful composer, was in charge of the rapturous orchestral music. Finally, the cast included a host of celebrities, such as Ricardo Pereira, the first non-Brazilian actor to feature in a Globo TV network soap opera, as well as a special appearance by current screen sensation Léa Seydoux.

On the other hand, it would be mistaken to discard the auteurist approach entirely, given Ruiz's spellbinding trademark gimmicks strewn throughout *Mysteries of Lisbon*. Here we retrieve the static characters that move through invisible sliding or rotating stage devices and postproduction tricks, as seen in Ruiz's *Time Regained* (*Le Temps retrouvé, d'après l'oeuvre de Marcel Proust,* 1999); or the feverish, distorted visions which account for the otherworldly quality of *Thee Crowns of the Sailor* (*Les Trois couronnes du matelot,* 1983); or the paintings whose characters come to life then freeze back into artworks, which make the core of *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (*L'Hypothèse du tableau volé,* 1978). As Isabel Branco confirmed in an interview with me (Nagib 2017), these stylistic procedures were all devised by Ruiz in the first place, and although they contribute to moving the various plots and subplots toward a coherent conclusion, they also serve as distractions, even disruptive elements, preventing a sense of progression and calling attention to the reality of the medium and, not least, that of the author(s).

My hypothesis here is that these self-reflexive procedures, questioning the medium and its hierarchic position among other media, also bring storytelling close to reality and history-telling by creating holes in the narrative mesh through which the spectator can catch a glimpse of the incompleteness and incoherence of real life. In

this context, the film's constant intermedial morphings become "passages" to the real, through which drawings, paintings, sculptures and murals change into live action and vice versa, silently subverting the idea that the story could have one single end, or an end at all. Indeed, the term "passage" has often been utilised to signify Ruiz's most prominent authorial trait, even featuring in the title of a book in his honour, *Raúl Ruiz: Images of Passage* (Bandis, Martin & McDonald 2004). I would go as far as to suggest that this feature purposely denies human beings a privileged place within the world order by infusing inanimate objects with a kind of magical autonomous agency, whilst also abolishing any teleology across the different periods in world and film history.

In any case, intermedial passages in the film do not clash against the feuilleton or soap-opera genres, in which extraneous interventions and ancillary products play a major role. As Gardner (2014, 290-291) observes, serial novels, in their nineteenth-century form, cannot be reduced to plot devices or characterisation:

> What united them was the unique practice and pleasures of serial production and consumption, which invited an ongoing and interactive relationship with readers and required the consumption of the serial novel in conjunction with a range of periodical paratexts around a series of scheduled deferrals and interruptions. Alongside the serial novels were always other features, equally important to the reading experience, including illustrations, historical essays, and editorial columns—all of which necessarily affected the experience of reading the serialized fiction...The serial novel, that is, was always a messy, interactive, and cacophonous affair.

Thus one could say that Ruiz's never-ending storytelling through a continuous chain of open-ended films finally found an ideal home in the protracted soap-opera genre, derived from the polymorphic romantic feuilleton novel as had been practiced by Camilo Castelo Branco in the nineteenth century. The perfect fit between Ruiz's creative penchant and the feuilleton genre was in fact cleverly intuited by producer Paulo Branco, who first proposed the adaptation of *Mysteries of Lisbon* to him.

Needless to say, the episodic narrative harks much further back than the nineteenth century, being found most notably in *The Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights),* a compilation of multicultural tales from ancient and medieval times that Ruiz time and again goes back to in order to describe his own style. He also compares *The Thousand and One Nights*' spiralling structure with that of *Mysteries of Lisbon* (Goddard 2013, 173), and both with the telenovela genre, in that "the destiny of the characters does not depend on the structure, it depends like in life on chance; curiously they are more realistic because they are completely unbelievable" (Goddard

2013, 172).[4] Jorge Luis Borges, whose "postmodern baroque" style bears striking similarities to that of Ruiz (Goddard 2013, 6), dates the birth of romanticism from the moment *The Thousand and One Nights* was first translated into French by Antoine Galland in 1704, introducing freedom into "the rational France of Louis XIV" (Borges 1980). The tales contained in this collection could never end, because narrator Scheherazade's own life, which makes the frame story, hinged on their continuation so as to indefinitely postpone her impending death by the hands of her husband-ruler Schahryar. The possibility of indefinite storytelling coinciding with one's life span is the source of fascination for Borges (1980), who states:

> I want to pause over the title. It is one of the most beautiful in the world…I think its beauty lies in the fact that for us the word *thousand* is almost synonymous with *infinite*. To say *a thousand nights* is to say infinite nights, countless nights, endless nights. To say *a thousand and one nights* is to add one to infinity.

Like Borges, Ruiz had a particular appetite for the idea of infinity as a mathematical model, albeit only as a creative tool devoid of any pretence to scientific accuracy. In his interviews and writings, there are repeated references to his mathematician friend, Emilio Del Solar (see Martin 2004, 50; Ciment 2011), with whom he used to discuss Abraham Robinson's infinitesimal theory. He seemed to find an application of this theory to the soap-opera structure, and consequently also to *Mysteries of Lisbon,* in that this genre is more open to chance than the conventional three-act narrative. Though the irruption of chance is not at all obvious in the meticulously planned visual and aural fabric of this film, be it the TV series or the theatrical version, the tentacular plot and, most interestingly, the autonomy awarded to inanimate objects on set provide the clue to the unique kind of timeless, historical realism emanating from this piece. In what follows, I shall examine how intermedial passages in the film repeatedly attempt to anchor it in the physical real, and how the "messy" multimedia nature of the feuilleton and the soap-opera genres here serve to change storytelling into atemporal history-telling.

Intermedial Passages

As much as in *The Thousand and One Nights, Mysteries of Lisbon* is made up of a frame story enveloping multiple stories within stories. The frame story starts in the mid-nineteenth century, guided by the voiceover of João, a 14-year-old boy who at that point ignores his origin and surname, and lives at a boarding school under the protec-

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[4] Interesting to note here is the attraction of the never-ending narrative style of *The Thousand and One Nights* in recent Portuguese cinema, with the notorious example of Miguel Gomes' *Arabian Nights* volumes 1, 2 and 3 (2015), a faux adaptation stretching for six hours of open-ended storytelling, intermingled with long non-narrative episodes.

tion of Father Dinis. The victim of constant bullying by other pupils, João suffers a seizure and takes ill, prompting the visit of his estranged mother, Ângela de Lima (the Countess of Santa Bárbara), first in a feverish dream, then in reality. Ângela's apparition unleashes an avalanche of subplots that reveal João's actual identity to be Pedro da Silva and Father Dinis himself to be the orphan Sebastião Melo adopted successively by Italian and French aristocrats, then turned soldier under Napoleon before finally becoming a priest, with intermittent periods as the gypsy Sabrino Cabra. Despite the temporal zigzags involving a myriad characters and generations, both the TV series and the film are remarkably easy to follow, with suspense created and sustained throughout by means of romance, intrigue, crime, jealousy, and all customary ingredients of the mystery novel. Although the long take – a key element in so-called "slow cinema" – is used liberally, the sense of speed and dynamism is secured through an extremely mobile camera, uninterrupted music, and a quick succession of highly dramatic events.

But there is no denying the complexity of the intergenerational relations, multiple identities, and plot twists. To orient her through her work on the film, art director Isabel Branco had to draw an elaborate map of the characters with a corresponding timeline (figure 1). In an analysis of *Mysteries of Lisbon*'s theatrical version, Marshall Deutelbaum (2014) found an interesting way of reducing the film's "labyrinthine", "neo-baroque" mode of storytelling to what he calls a "remarkably simple" structure. To that end, he resorted to the Russian formalist distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* as adopted by David Bordwell in his book *Narration in the Fiction Film, fabula* corresponding to the chronology of the events and *syuzhet* to the order in which they are presented. Deutelbaum argues that, whereas the former is extremely intricate, the latter is clearly organised in non-chronological but mirroring events across Parts I and II of the film, inviting viewers "to reconstruct mentally its events into their correct chronological order" (Deutelbaum 2014, 241). One eloquent illustration he finds for this is a scene involving a mysterious "Brazilian" (played by heartthrob Ricardo Pereira, in a nod to the actor's work in Brazilian soap operas), a former hitman once going by the name of "Knife-Eater", who amassed a formidable fortune through the slave trade and piracy, turning consecutively into Leopoldo Saavedra in Paris, Tobias Navarro in Brussels, and finally his current self, Alberto de Magalhães, now residing in Lisbon. In the scene, set in Lisbon's opera house (Teatro São Carlos), the Duchess of Cliton drops a message on the floor in front of Alberto de Magalhães (her former lover) and his current wife, Eugênia. Magalhães quickly tears the message in pieces, while the camera captures the bits of paper from under what seems to be a glass floor. Some other attendees then try to piece the note together, though its content is left for the viewer to guess. The way in which a transparent glass floor maintains the opacity of the message thrown onto it

perfectly illustrates the dialectics informing the film's aesthetic organisation as a whole. Its purpose seems to be to decompose the medium into the elements involved in its making, creating intermedial and historical passages that cast suspicion upon the film's linear, finite storytelling.

Figure 1: Art director Isabel Branco's map and timeline of *Mysteries of Lisbon*
(© Isabel Branco)

This strategy can be gleaned from the outset, as the film opens with sets of traditional Portuguese tiles of Moorish origin, called "*azulejos*", as a backdrop to the initial credits. Because the tiles represent scenes later enacted by live characters, it soon becomes clear that they cannot possibly be real pre-existing *azulejos.* Indeed, a closer look reveals them to be fragments of the film's storyboard, artfully painted then tricked into the appearance of traditional tiles – the frieze with floral motif around each set being the only real *azulejos* in those opening images (Nagib 2017).

Let us inspect the first set of tiles, which shows a living room with a macaw on a perch and a man in his morning robe sitting and holding a teacup close to his lips, while two formally dressed men stand in the background (figure 2). More than an hour into the film, this scene is replicated in an eighteenth-century Hans Christian Andersen-style toy theatre (figure 3), which in turn preludes its live re-enactment through the modern medium of film (figure 4). This consecutive display of artistic mediums from different eras finds a parallel in the film's historical context, describing a world in transition in which the feudal European aristocracy struggles to remain in power after the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the

ascension of the merchant bourgeoisie. The scene's protagonist is the aforementioned Alberto de Magalhães, who summarily dismisses the seconds of nobleman Dom Martinho de Almeida sent in to challenge him to an honour duel, a ritual turned meaningless for this representative of the ascending merchant class. Curiously, the three human characters are pushed to the background by the magnified presence of the blue-and-yellow macaw in the foreground. This piece of undisguised, uncontrollable living reality is a wonderful, heart-wrenching end result of the previous intermedial and historical passages. A bird typical of Brazil (a former Portuguese colony) and now an endangered species, the macaw squawks painfully from time to time as if to remind us of its captive condition. Though placed seamlessly within the narrative flow, the way this scene is preceded by the *azulejos* and the toy theatre draws attention to the many artforms at the base of the film medium and the various eras contained in the present moment. Most notably, the magnified macaw, whose squawks distract the attention of one of the standing men, opens up for, and gives prevalence to, chance events, whose capture is an exclusive indexical property of recording media such as film.

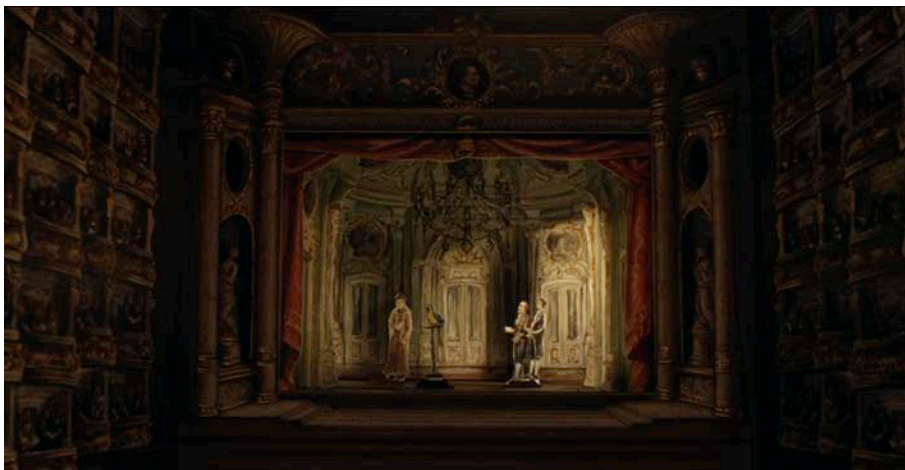Figure 2: The fake *azulejos* that introduce *Mysteries of Lisbon*.

Figure 3: The same scene is staged on a toy theatre.

Figure 4: Finally the characters come to life.

Waldo Rojas (2004, 14), a prominent Chilean poet and Ruiz's close collaborator, states that:

> Since its inception, the cinema has taken the novel's mode of narration and its recurrent conventions as a model. Despite everything, cinematic narration has pushed the novel's limits to the place where reality and fiction meet... What is seen, what is offered to the look, dulls the force of the story's "argument", and finally devours it. Ruiz pushes this potentiality of the poetic imaginary to a critical point.

One could say that the macaw sits precisely at this critical boundary between fact and fiction, its visual and aural impact superseding the fable and imposing itself as irreducible reality.

Intermedial interludes such as this proliferate in the film to further effects, an example being a scene that has already been the subject of my attention (Nagib 2014). In it, Father Dinis, his assisting nun Dona Antónia, and Pedro's mother Ângela are in conversation, unaware that Pedro is watching and overhearing them through his bedroom window. The priest is urging Ângela to travel to Santarém in order to grant forgiveness to her tyrannical husband, currently lying on his deathbed. Placed in the position of a film spectator and unable to interfere, Pedro is radically opposed to this plan that he rightly fears will tear him apart from his mother once again. At that moment, the technological medium of film reverts back to the earlier artisanal form of toy theatre, with the characters of Ângela, Father Dinis, and Dona Antónia changed into cardboard cut-out miniatures whom Pedro flips down with mere finger flicks (figure 5).

Figure 5: Characters are turned into cardboard miniatures in order to enable spectatorial participation.

Ágnes Pethő (2009, 50) observes, about the intermedial procedures in *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, Agnès Varda, 2000), that:

> Collages always bear the physical marks of manual craftsmanship: by assembling bits and pieces, the materiality of the medium of expression is shown up as integral part of a palpable reality.

The toy theatre here, as much as the fake *azulejos* at the beginning, is a material testament to the human craftsmanship that precedes and constitutes cinema. Its intended self-reflexive effect is evident in that spectatorial participation within the scene is enabled through scale reversal, which turns powerful flesh and blood characters into cardboard miniatures that Pedro, the onlooker, can then defeat.

Manipulation of scale and proportion that magnifies or shrinks figures at will is a fundamental property of photography and cinema, with the close-up being the most radical distortion of the real enabled by these media. The effect of such distortions on the spectator is one that Mary Ann Doane directly connects with the growth of capitalism, as the subject is situated as "epistemologically inadequate" and "incapable of ever actually mapping or understanding the totality of social forces that determine his or her position" (2009, 63). She says: "Although the miniature appears completely intelligible and knowable, the gigantic... exceeds the viewer's grasp and incarnates the limited possibility of partial knowledge" (2009, 63). Deleuze has also focused on scale dialectics in the cinema in terms of the emphasis on large or small forms as found in montage or action ("classical") cinema, examples ranging from Eisenstein for the large form to Chaplin for the small form (Deleuze 2005, 145). For Pethő, however, the paradoxes derived from the acknowledgement of mediation are "a defining feature of modernist aesthetics" (2009, 50). In *Mysteries of Lisbon*, the breaking down of the film medium into its different

artistic components, combined with the manipulative act of scale reversal, intervenes self-reflexively to reveal genre as genre, fiction as fiction, but also playfully, appealing to the spectator's intelligence without detracting from his/her enjoyment of the film's exquisite artistry and excellent acting. One could call it Brecht against the grain, or modernity undone through its own means, though the question would rather be whether categories of classical, modern or postmodern, or any teleological understanding of history, may apply to such an unclassifiable mode of storytelling. This question is the subject of the next section.

Atemporal History-Telling

Raúl Ruiz was no stranger to academia, having taught at Harvard University in the late 1980s and gathered high-profile devotees within the American filmmaking and film studies scene, including the likes of James Schamus and David Bordwell. He is also the author of a two-volume collection of essays on film, *Poetics of Cinema 1* and *2* (2005; 2007), resulting from a stint at Duke University in 1994 on invitation from Fredric Jameson and Alberto Moreiras. His films are usually surrounded by prolific writings and interviews with him, and *Mysteries of Lisbon* is no exception, being accompanied by a "preface" which starts by quoting, and actually challenging, what he refers to as "the David Bordwell paradigm":

> The American professor David Bordwell considered that all narrative strategies that can be applied to modern films are based on a certain notion of verisimilitude (or narrative evidence)...In modern drama, structure and construction dominate, even beyond the poetic incoherence or the irrelevant facts it supposes...But what happens if we apply these sacrosanct rules to the film adaptation of the novellas that constitute *Mysteries of Lisbon*? From the hundred or so characters that find and lose each other in Castelo Branco's Lisbon, not a single one of them is capable of explaining the why of his actions; actions that are almost imperceptible, with impalpable consequences and an indecipherable future. (Ruiz 2010)

A blatant confusion immediately catches the eye in this quote, in that Bordwell's theory of causality refers to what he defined as *classical* Hollywood cinema and not at all to *modern* cinema. In a blog entry entitled "Ruiz, Realism and... me?", Bordwell (2011) very graciously tried to dispel this misunderstanding, stating:

> I don't know what Bordwell's Paradigm is, so how can anybody else? I suspect the label has to do with my characterization of classical Hollywood cinema, but who knows?...I think that Ruiz and I might disagree about how much *Mysteries* owes to psychological causation, and about whether labyrinthine trails can converge, let alone become highways. Both of us use metaphors of linearity, so maybe our disagreements are basically about whether the detours and paths are truly dead ends. Maybe I think his plotting is tighter than he does.

> Still, I expect that we'd agree that much of the pleasure of the film is its delight in apparently capricious digression. (Bordwell 2011)

Elsewhere, Bordwell (2010) reminisces on Ruiz's disregard of evolutionary models as applied to film and art in general:

> Ruiz's appetite for narrative is almost gluttonous…He once told me that he thought that Postmodernism was simply a revival of the Baroque in modern dress. From *Mysteries of Lisbon*, it's clear that he sees in many older narrative traditions affinities with our tastes today. Network narratives? They've been done, and maybe better, centuries ago.

Considering that for Bordwell network narratives, as practiced in films such as *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993) or *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), are the prototype of postmodern cinema, Ruiz's style could be said to be at once postmodern in its self-reflexive take on fiction and baroque in its timeless and cosmogonic embrace of storytelling – let alone its total-artwork endeavour encompassing a flurry of intermedial relations.

In this sense, nothing could be more appropriate to it than Camilo Castelo Branco's labyrinthine feuilleton narrative as deployed in his three-volume novel *Mistérios de Lisboa*. As prolific as Ruiz, the nineteenth-century writer (1825-1890) is the author of over 260 books, including novels, plays, and essays sharing and transcending the romantic style of his time. *Mistérios de Lisboa* (1854), which unfortunately remains untranslated in English, is a sweeping conflation of past and contemporaneous novels and styles, all nominally cited and mocked by the author in a staggering anticipation of the postmodern sense of the end of history and storytelling. The reference to "mysteries" parodies a genre that started with Ann Radcliffe and her sprawling gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* published in 1794, as well as the Udolpho spin-offs, starting with Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842-43), which established the feuilleton novelistic genre and launched the "city mysteries" fashion that subsequently spread around the world. Whilst borrowing from them, Castelo Branco sneers at novelists from the Renaissance to his own time, from Honoré d'Urfé to James Fenimore Cooper and Alphonse de Lamartine, not just because, according to him, it is "impossible to be peninsular and novelist", referring to his particular Portuguese context, but also because novels are just "a pack of lies" (2010, 17). For this reason, *Mistérios de Lisboa,* he states, is not a novel but "a diary of suffering, true, authentic and justified" (2010, 17), a phrase which serves as an epigraph to the film *Mysteries of Lisbon* as follows: "This story is not my child, nor my godchild. It is not a work of fiction: it is a diary of suffering…" As we know, the diary – here in the form of Pedro da Silva's "black book" – is one of the most traditional literary genres, and Castelo Branco himself does not hesitate to unveil its artifice. Halfway through the book, he intervenes with his own voice to observe an inconsistency in the

continuation of the narrative beyond the death of the novel's first-person narrator, which he ascribes to the freedom now enjoyed by the modern writer:

> Meaning no offence to art or truth, I continued the novel and refrained from attributing to the gentleman who had died in Rio de Janeiro what was mine in form, though his in substance. These two entities (substance and form), with which scholastic philosophy in the Middle Age was deeply concerned, will hopefully not disturb the current order of modern literature. (Castelo Branco 2010, 301)

Needless to say, "modern literature" for Castelo Branco here refers to the literature of his time, rather than to literary modernity as it became known in the twentieth century. In fact, Castelo Branco's sense that it is impossible to be "peninsular and novelist" leads him to promote a temporal and geographic bracketing of his literature in view of Portugal's marginal situation with relation to Europe. This condition was also interestingly favourable to Ruiz's filmmaking. Portugal is famous for its highly original and uncompromising auteurist cinema, being a forerunner and funder (at least until very recently) of what became known in our day as "slow cinema". Ruiz shot some ten feature-length films in this safe cinematic haven, even though this atemporal refuge was for him, as much as for Castelo Branco, the place of doomed characters and inevitable catastrophe, as announced in this passage of the novel:

> Everything will fall apart in Portugal. The day is not far off when life here will become, for many, boring and disgusting. Principles will be overturned, civil war will not content itself with a small tribute of blood, there will be no losers or winners; anarchy, after the war, will penetrate the government, whichever it is, and the foundations of a new edifice will be the corpses and ruins of many fortunes. Lucky those who will be able to watch from afar as the motherland falls into the vulture's claws. (Castelo Branco 2010, 160)

Inevitably, *Mysteries of Lisbon* as a film and TV series is also a story of doomed characters, but one that fits the soap-opera genre like a glove. Thus, though postmodern in its irreverence and virtuoso cannibalism of arts of all forms and periods, the film is also, and not least, in its lifelong breadth, aimed primarily to entertain, having become Ruiz's greatest commercial success and demonstrating that for him modernity is imbedded in the classical form and vice versa.

Finding the Real

Alain Badiou says of cinema that:

> It is effectively impossible to think cinema outside of something like a general space in which we could grasp its connection to the other arts. Cinema is the seventh art in a very particular sense. It does not add itself to the other six while remaining on the same level as them. Rather, it implies them – cinema is the "plus-one" of the arts.

It operates on the other arts, using them as its starting point, in a movement that subtracts them from themselves. (2005, 79)

Mysteries of Lisbon seems to chime with this thought in that, as much as modernity is denied a superior status to what came before it, the technologically advanced medium of film is stripped of its standing as an evolution with relation to the other arts, being instead dissected into the various artistic components at its origin. Ruiz himself (Piazzo 2009) enjoys playing with the idea of an "anticinema" that he claims to have practiced in his early work in Chile. When film stock became too expensive, he and his colleagues would experiment with making films without film or even without a camera. Thus, filmmaking starts for him with the act of artistically transforming whatever is available in the material world before any modern technology comes into play.

Indeed, Isabel Branco revealed to me (Nagib 2017) that the entire interior and exterior shooting of *Mysteries of Lisbon* was carried out on real locations, which were transformed to a major or lesser degree according to need. Numerous palaces and *quintas* in Portugal were utilised to that end, including Palácio Foz (where the scene with the macaw and Alberto de Magalhães takes place), Palácio Quintela, Palácio da Mitra, Quinta da Francelha, Quinta da Ribafria, and others. The addition of draperies, furniture, paintings and sculptures were the magic wand that breathed life into these old, often decaying settings, before they were photographed by a dynamic camera in extremely choreographed, often acrobatic, long takes and long shots that preserved their spatial integrity. It was thus, from the film's inception, the real locations and artworks that gave life to the characters, rather than the other way around, as illustrated by the tile paintings and toy theatre from which the macaw, Alberto de Magalhães, and Dom Martinho de Almeida's seconds spring to life. Anabela Venda, the artist who painted the fake *azulejos,* makes a brief but suggestive cameo appearance as an English painter who has just finished drawing the portrait of the schoolboy then only known as João. In the scene, she claims that her model had sat motionless for hours in front of her. Once confronted with his own picture, however, he suddenly becomes alive, running away with the drawing and not parting from it until the end of his days (figure 6). The same procedure is repeated throughout the film, with the scenes enacted with the toy theatre subsequently re-staged with live actors, paintings that come to life when looked at by the characters, and sculptures that pre-empt future events in the film.

Figure 6: Pedro takes on life through a portrait of him and will not part from it until his death.

This attitude toward the world and the film world would perhaps be amenable to a reading in light of the recent philosophical current known as "Speculative Realism" (SR), developed on the basis of Quentin Meillassoux's idea of "object-worlds" consisting of an "absolute outside" which is not relative to us and exists "whether we are thinking of it or not" (2016, 7). One exponent of this current of thought, Graham Harman, goes to the extreme of identifying a "weirdness" in objects that exist "in and of themselves" and which "perception or sheer causation can never adequately measure" (2005, 74). Speculative Realism and its trust in science is a welcome alternative to psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches which have allowed for a narcissistic subject, that is to say, an idealised or embodied spectator, to gain a disproportionate weight in film studies. Meillassoux further claims that "all those aspects of the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the object in itself" (2016, 3). To an extent, Ruiz is responding to such a claim when he resorts to mathematics, albeit of an artistic rather than scientific kind, in order to open up storytelling to infinity beyond human perception and existence, where objects acquire independent agency and intentions. *Mysteries of Lisbon* seems to be composed of and dominated by these mysterious, animated objects.

There is however a political element which brings the film's possible realism closer to André Bazin's foundational approach, according to which a film's disclosure of the other artforms at its base is a realist procedure. In his "Impure Cinema" article (1967, 54), Bazin applauds, for example, Robert Bresson's decision to film *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Le Journal d'un cure de champagne,* 1950) by following the Bernanos novel page by page, because this demonstrates the director's fidelity to the reality of the original literary style on which the specificities of the fable rely. In the same piece, Bazin (71) famously states that "we must say of the cinema that its existence

precedes its essence", a phrase stemming directly from Sartre's anthropocentric phenomenology as expressed in this passage:

> Atheistic existentialism, which I represent... states that, if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man or, as Heidegger puts it, human reality. (Sartre 1987,15)

Bazin's adherence to Sartre, here as elsewhere in his writings, had the aim of indicating his disagreement with essentialist ideas of film as a self-sufficient medium. Bazin's very use of the term "cinéma impur" was a direct response to the "cinéma pur" project, very much in vogue during the 1920s and 30s among avant-garde and Dada artists and filmmakers, who proposed to draw exclusively on the techniques inherent in the film medium, such as movement, lighting, contrast, rhythm and – most in conflict with the Bazinian thought – montage. *Mysteries of Lisbon* epitomises impure cinema in the way it places film on an equal footing with all other non-technological art-forms and even with animals and inanimate objects, suggesting that, rather than a new invention, cinema is an art latent in all human expressions as well as in post or pre-human objective reality, thus responding to both the subject and object-centred approaches.

Isabel Branco told me (Nagib 2017) that because real contemporary Lisbon could not possibly feature in a period film, the crew decided to replace it with a popular *cordel* theatre staging, during which a large canvas depicting Lisbon's famous aqueduct is raised in the background. A self-reflexive, possibly "modern" procedure, revealing the reality of both the theatre and the film mediums, this procedure also abolishes all hierarchies across different eras, traditions, and aesthetics. Deleuze (2002, 39) explains that, for Bergson "past and present must be thought as two extreme degrees which coexist within duration, the former of which is defined for its state of distension and the latter, by its state of contraction". As a result, "the present is only the more contracted degree of the past" (40). Ruiz's cinema seems to respond to this principle by turning storytelling into a timeless history-telling that ultimately finds what Sartre calls human reality – but also the reality of things and animals like the poor macaw.

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