

Formas do Afeto: Um Filme Sobre Mário Pedrosa, directed by Nina Galanternik (Gala Filmes, 2010)

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To assess Mário Pedrosa's (1900-1981) historical relevance, we could simply review his engagement with politics and culture, both in Brazil and abroad. An active Leninist and then militant Trotskyist, Pedrosa was exiled during Brazil's Estado Novo period and had a prominent role in the Fourth International in the years preceding Leon Trotsky's assassination. During Brazil's military dictatorship, he was forced into exile once again, and only returned late in life. In recognition of his impressive political biography, Pedrosa, then 79, was invited to be the first signatory of the founding manifesto of the Worker's Party (PT).

Remarkably, Pedrosa's role as an art critic can be said to have been even more outstanding. His activity from the 1940s to the 1970s is too extensive to be properly presented here. He wrote regularly for different newspapers (including the *Tribuna da Imprensa* and *Jornal do Brasil*), was the organizer of various editions of the São Paulo Biennial, and its director in 1961. In 1959 he organized the extraordinary conference of the International Art Critics Association (AICA) – entitled *The New City, The Synthesis of Arts*, which attracted a host of leading international intellectuals to Brasília, prior to the inauguration of the new capital.

One of the main virtues of Nina Galanternik's short documentary film *Formas do Afeto: um filme sobre Mário Pedrosa* [Forms of Affection: a film about Mário Pedrosa], is that it focuses precisely on one aspect of Pedrosa's trajectory that cannot be fully grasped simply by marvelling at his vast experience, or by reading his writings: his fundamental social role as an intellectual catalyst. The film focuses on Pedrosa's correspondence, and on places that were crucial settings of his social interactions. The most significant of these

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locations, which appears right at the beginning of the film, is Pedrosa's apartment, where friends, colleagues and pupils frequently gathered. Incidentally, as the poet Ferreira Gullar recalls, this is also where his two areas of interest were intertwined. Gullar remembers spending time in one room of the apartment, often in the company of young artists, while Pedrosa's politics friends sat in another. The critic's open-door policy is shown to have been crucial to the formation of Rio de Janeiro's artistic avant-garde in the 1950s, and especially to the Neoconcrete generation of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape – all of whom figure prominently in the film – and of Gullar himself. The poet even credits Pedrosa with the ability to “ignite other people's imaginations.” The film tracks some of Pedrosa's exchanges with these artists, and others, frequently invoking his critical comments as we are introduced to skilfully filmed examples of their work. A portrait is created of an energetic critic highly committed to artistic experimentation, even if the little actual footage of Pedrosa himself shows an aged and weakened man.

Another important place mentioned in the film that is also related to artistic experimentation is the Engenho de Dentro psychiatric hospital. Painter Almir Mavignier – the subject of Galanternik's previous film – ran an artistic workshop for the hospital's patients. As the work of sociologist Gláucia Villas Boas (who was the film's research coordinator) has stressed, this seemingly unremarkable workshop was actually one of the beginnings of Rio de Janeiro's Concretist movement.² In *Formas do Afeto*, Mavignier and artist Abraham Palatnik discuss Pedrosa's interest in the workshop and recall how he conceived his ground-breaking thesis on Gestalt Theory at that time, often testing his ideas by reading parts of the text to them and to the third artist involved in the workshop, the painter and future Concretist leader Ivan Serpa (the title of the film actually alludes to that of his thesis, *Da natureza afetiva da forma* [On the affective nature of form]).³

This plethora of different voices the film enlists is remarkable, and is further enriched by the inclusion of leading representatives of a younger artistic generation, such as Antonio Manuel and Cildo Meireles. Pedrosa's militant closeness to artists of different ages and orientations is clearly

2 See Gláucia Villas Boas, 'A Estética da Conversão: O Ateliê do Engenho de Dentro e a Arte Concreta Carioca (1946-1951)', *Tempo Social: Revista de Sociologia da USP*, volume 20, number 2 (2008), pp. 197-219.

3 The text appears as a chapter in Mario Pedrosa's *Arte/forma e personalidade*, São Paulo: Kairós, 1979, pp. 12-82.

depicted. Palatnik's and Manuel's accounts, for instance, give us the sense of how closely the critic followed their moves, often responding with lapidary formulations (his trademark saying that "art is the experimental exercise of freedom" was originally a comment on Manuel's work). This is all the more important due to a recurrent aspect of recent documentaries about art: the constant privileging of the single, authorial voice, in ways that often mystify the subject and decontextualize artistic languages. *Formas do Afeto* salutarily breaks with this logic.

And yet, this is only one side of the story: if I were to choose one significant oversight – keeping in mind, of course, that this is only a 33-minute film – it would be the lack of critical voices from Meireles's and Manuel's generation. This would have added a further layer of historical complexity to the film, since the 1970s marked a renewal in Brazilian art criticism, with many of the new authors who appeared in that period – most notably Ronaldo Brito – looking up to Pedrosa as their most vital forerunner. Other interesting aspects of Pedrosa's biography that could have been addressed are his profound engagement with Brasília, which peaked during his involvement in the extraordinary AICA congress (this is the context of his famous verdict about Brazil being a country "condemned to the modern"), and his early connection with French Surrealism (Pedrosa's wife, Mary Houston, was the sister-in-law of the Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret).

As it happens, Gullar is the only critic in *Formas do Afeto*, and its most complex character. As earnest as it is, his praise of Pedrosa nevertheless betrays signs of the competitive dimension that also marked their relationship. The poet jokingly casts Neoconcretism as a "coup d'état" performed during Pedrosa's trip to Japan. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, Gullar's own writings on art at that time both display their indebtedness to Pedrosa and try to affirm their independence from the latter's critical vocabulary.⁴ One of the film's major contributions (at least from an art-historical perspective) is to bring to light hitherto unknown correspondence between the two, in which Gullar discloses to an absent Pedrosa his plans for the forthcoming *Neoconcrete Manifesto*.

In general, *Formas do Afeto* is a cleverly edited documentary that focuses

4 See my 'Phenomenological Openness, Historicist Closure: Revisiting the *Theory of the Non-Object*, in *Third Text*, number 114 (January 2012), pp. 79-90.

on Pedrosa's role as a social denominator among artists of different generations. As such, it is undoubtedly valuable as an introduction more to the critic's active public presence, and to the timeliness of his activity vis-à-vis an emerging and institutionally marginal avant-garde, than to his intellectual trajectory per se. By fleshing out such a central and polyvalent historical character, the film helps us to perceive that the core of Brazilian post-war art history is composed not only of fierce polemical debates between well-defined camps (although such debates have taken place every once in a while), but also, and perhaps more importantly, of intimate and porous exchanges carried out in experimental settings.

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