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Book Review

José Duarte, Filipa Rosário (ed.), *ReFOCUS: The Films of João Pedro Rodrigues and João Rui Guerra da Mata*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 232 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4744-6080-4

The volume put together by José Duarte and Filipa Rosário, two well-established scholars in the domain of film studies, provides a collection of new insights into the cinematic and artistic work of Portuguese directors João Pedro Rodrigues and João Rui Guerra da Mata. A ground-breaking decision since the vast majority of academic criticism published so far tends to focus solely on Rodrigues, due to his directorial prominence, failing to cover Guerra da Mata's invaluable contribution to the creative process, mostly as writer and as art director. The inclusion of the volume in the ReFOCUS series positions and solidifies the duo as “international *auteurs*” (p. 4) within the global film arena. To its credit, it is also the first academic reference work devoted to “[t]he filmic and artistic production [...] of a creative partnership lasting more than twenty years” (p. 2) and whose “thematic and stylistic consistency” (p. 2) has seen continuing and growing critical acclaim.

Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata's daring and disruptive cinematic projects emerge in a peripheral “small nation” still coming to grips with the tensions between democracy's call for the respect of civil liberties and the spectre of Catholic traditionalist views. Adding to this Janus-faced reality, which is brazenly integrated in the duo's queer narratives, Portugal also struggles to acknowledge its idiosyncratic subaltern colonial past, as documented by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his influential essay “Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Inter-identity” (2002). The fact that Portugal, by the 18th century, was both a colonizing country and an informal colony of England, contributed to Portugal's semiperipheral condition, not only on an economical level, but “also at the social, political, juridical, and cultural levels” (p. 11). This is something that Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata are all too aware of, as the duo's cinema and art installations also intervene in debates about history, nation, and politics, while examining the relation between sexuality, gender and national identity in a postcolonial era.

The volume consists of 11 contributions, arranged into four sections. The first three are organized by specific topics, namely “Queer (Dis)placements, Exquisite Bodies”, “Cinematic Landscapes and Territories” and “Art Practices”. As for section four, it

closes on a high note with an interview with Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata, shedding light into the idiosyncratic imprint of the two artists within Portuguese cinema. Since the contributors are a mix of academics and artists, this makes for a great variety of approaches. However, themes like identity, sexual politics, queer imaginings, journey as metamorphosis, and cinematic geographies tend to roam amidst most chapters.

The introduction very tastefully resorts to *Turdus merula Linnaeus, 1758* (2020), a short ornithological documentary shot by Rodrigues during a COVID-19 lockdown, to introduce specific stylistic choices which are consistent in his and Guerra da Mata's filmic narratives while, simultaneously, using it as a metaphor for contemporary Portugal. This opening statement then sets the tone for a more comprehensive overview of the two filmmakers' *oeuvre*.

Fran Benavente and Glória Salvadó-Corretger's essay has the body as a complex, liminal and plastic entity as its central point, an approach that allows them to tackle Portugal's Catholic and postcolonial stance. Bodily transformation is also dealt with in Olivier Cheval's article, yet it does so by looking through the lens of the two directors' "figurative work with Catholic imagery" (p. 29) as well as Christian iconographic choices. José Bértolo's essay postulates that *Two Drifters* (2005) is "a [metamorphic] ghostly love story" (p. 46) which borrows from Manoel de Oliveira's "perception of life as artificial and unreal" (p. 42). Andrija Filipovi's follows a Deleuzian and Guattarian approach in his analysis of Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata's film landscapes and soundscapes while expanding on the concept of *becoming-queer*, which defies binary understandings of the world and instead offers a "third way" that endorses a disruptive "image of the world that is irreducibly multiple" (p. 65) and that defies the viewers to engage in a transformative process themselves. António Fernando Cascais similarly argues that Rodrigues' cinema favours a representation of the Self that is fragmented and non-binary by resorting to the tropes of metamorphosis, sometimes in close alliance with that of the journey. Hyemin Kim turns to the Deleuzian concept of "the Baroque" to analyse the mythopoetic elements and the genre hybridity present in *The Ornithologist* (2016). Juan Antonio Suárez engrossing chapter on Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata's Asian Trilogy addresses present-day Macao's contradictions as manifested via the filmic practices adopted in the three films. Concomitantly, it draws heavily on Guerra da Mata's memories of Macao from his youth to debunk a number of lingering colonial mythologies that mirror Portugal's "subaltern colonialism". No less engaging is Carlos Alberto Carrilho and Rita Gomes Ferrão's essay on the duo's cinematic gaze over the urban landscapes of the two filmmakers' preference (Lisbon and Macao) as it provides valuable context to understand contemporary Portuguese cinema as well as Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata's place in it. Lastly, Catarina Cucinotta's and Filipa Rosario's individual essays offer an insightful perusal of the art practices adopted by the two directors, both in their films and art installations, pointing to the careful consideration given to detail in order to extend the rhetorical power and symbolic significance of the props, costumes and overall aesthetic composition of their works.

Given that Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata only have six fiction feature films to their names, these tend to be greatly favored by the contributors, thus overshadowing the directors' short films and proving to be repetitive at times given the repetition of film synopses. Nevertheless, this publication still manages to break the mould, when compared with essays published elsewhere, in as far as the presence of short films' coverage is concerned, thus contributing to rebut their undeserved reputation as minor works.

To end, this volume boosts the international status and visibility of smaller players, allows for a larger audience to have access to the work of these two artists while, simultaneously, justifying the international acclaim they have already earned. While the specificities of working and living in a particular small nation are made apparent throughout the essay selection, so is the transnationality of the stories told. Overall, the volume highlights the transformative input of João Pedro Rodrigues and João Rui Guerra da Mata in the Portuguese cinematic landscape.