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FIELDS OF VISION: CAMPOS AND THE QUESTION OF THE IMAGE

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Resumo: Os estudos sobre o Modernismo ainda ignoram em grande parte os aspectos visuais, a não ser se dedicados às artes visuais. Uma análise de textos de Pessoa, como os assinados por Álvaro de Campos e Bernardo Soares, incidindo na importância assumida por imagens, pode servir para iniciar um esboço de uma possível reavaliação dos estudos pessoanos e do Modernismo.

Palavras-chave: Fernando Pessoa; Álvaro de Campos; Imagens; Estudos Visuais; Modernismo.

Abstract: Studies of Modernism still tend for the most part to ignore the visual aspects, except when dedicated to visual arts. Analyzing Pessoa's texts such as those of Álvaro de Campos or Bernardo Soares and drawing out on how important images are in them can serve to start sketching out a reevaluation of Pessoa studies and of Modernism itself.

Keywords: Fernando Pessoa; Álvaro de Campos; Images; Visual Studies; Modernism.

“Nada de estéticas com coração: sou lúcido.

Merda! Sou lúcido.”

Álvaro de Campos, “Vilegiatura”

1.

Let us start with a small, unpretentious, and irreverent text signed by Álvaro de Campos and addressed to Ophelia Queiroz in 1929:

Exma. Senhora D. Ophelia Queiroz:

Um abjecto e miseravel individuo chamado Fernando Pessoa, meu particular e querido amigo, encarregou-me de comunicar a V. Ex^a – considerando que o estado mental d’elle o impede de comunicar qualquer coisa, mesmo a uma ervilha secca (exemplo da obediencia e da disciplina) – que V. Ex^a está prohibida de:

- (1) pesar menos grammas,
- (2) comer pouco,
- (3) não dormir nada,
- (4) ter febre,
- (5) pensar no individuo em questão.

Pela minha parte, e como intimo e sincero amigo que sou do meliante de cuja comunicação (com sacrificio) me encarrego, aconselho V. Ex^a a pegar na imagem mental, que acaso tenha formado do individuo cuja citação está estragando este papel razoavelmente branco, e deitar essa imagem mental na pia, por ser materialmente impossivel dar esse justo destino á entidade fingidamente humana a quem elle competiria, se houvesse justiça no mundo.

Cumprimenta V. Ex^a

Alvaro de Campos

eng.º naval

25/9/1929

Until recently, and perhaps still now, the predominant view on the love correspondence between Fernando Pessoa and Ophelia Queiroz was fairly dismissive, both of the texts in themselves and of the role played by Ophelia in the relationship and in the playful manipulation of images and characters spun by Pessoa. Indeed, to my knowledge, only Anna Klobucka has contested those views by succinctly and forcefully arguing for a much stronger presence of Ophelia in both documentary and textual-fictional terms. As in so many other aspects of Pessoa scholarship, and beyond any particular divisions into specific critical camps and preferences, the continuous publication of more materials related to Pessoa as well as different epistemological traditions can be adduced to change long-held misconceptions. One of those that should be gladly discarded is of an Ophelia as some sort of *bourgeois ingénue* at the hands of an almost perverse Pessoa. Another, and that will be the focus of this brief essay, is the systematic devaluation of the visual in relation to Pessoa, a critical blindness that is not peculiar to Pessoa scholars at all but rather can be said to characterize modernist studies in general. The reason why I have chosen the above letter might be self-evident. In it, Campos not only superimposes himself to Pessoa by writing to Ophelia, but does so doubly – as usual – by pretending to convey a message of Pessoa's: specific instructions to Ophelia on how she should conduct her life, while at the same time also enjoining her to discard whatever mental image she might have formed of Pessoa. In a sense, this brief and playful text enacts in a very condensed form some of the key aspects of Pessoa's modernity, be it in the multiplication of the Self, be it in the continuous negation that reaches its culmination in the *Book of Disquiet*. Its use of the notion of image, and of a specific type of image, a mental image that would be the only possibility of actually discarding the subject in the very concrete fashion suggested, by throwing it down the sink,

is also complex and a suggestive entry point to an exploration of the function of images in Campos' texts.

In order to start exploring that complexity, and remain within a playful tone, let me bring out another set of related images, a series of discarded drawings that had been meant for inclusion in a graphic novel on Pessoa but remained unused. This set of five pages, drawn by Eloar Guazelli for *Eu, Fernando Pessoa em quadrinhos*, published by him and Susana Ventura in 2013, includes a representation of another text sent by Pessoa, signing as *Íbis*, to Ophelia, with the specific mention of having received the authorization of Campos and including another set of instructions, this time on how to read. My contention is that both texts must be seen as part of an elaborate game between the two lovers in which Ophelia, far from being the *ingénue*, or the little girl – as Klobucka rightfully points out, at the time of her second relationship with Pessoa, from when these texts date, she was thirty years old – critics like to imagine, was a partner in an elaborate construction of multiple identities and roles. The text in question is a nonsensical poem in which again the “pia”, or sink, is given a prominent place. The graphic novel authors decided to place the row of sinks within the French Hospital, to which we see Pessoa entering, at the end, in yet another ironic allusion, in this case to Pessoa's death. The transposition of Pessoa and his texts to a graphic novel or to film or to paintings and drawings must also be examined in terms of what it means to visualize Pessoa and how such visualizations, starting with Almada Negreiros' famous paintings, also have contributed to the image and myth of Pessoa, or how they can question and problematize it. But for now I would like to limit myself to a few of the issues raised by Campos' texts and their deployment of what one could refer to as a regime of seeing. As such, I still want to briefly consider the instructions for reading the poem that were sent to Ophelia. Like the poem, the instructions can be said to be nonsensical. Yet, by focusing on the absence of

light, the instructions actually form part of that continuous negation that, I would like to argue, must be seen as constitutive of Pessoa's poetics. In a sense, what the instructions for reading entail is a refusal of reading that culminates in the practical, though still playful or nonsensical uses to be given to the paper on which the poem was written. Writing on this specific text, George Monteiro has interpreted it as a move on the part of Pessoa to distance himself from Ophelia, in a sense to use the figure of Campos to "scare" Ophelia away. This is Monteiro's interpretation:

When Pessoa decided to bring his renewed courtship to its close, this time for good, he again resorted to playing on his fear of renewed (or constant) madness. . . . This time Pessoa chose to dismiss not only their chances for marriage but even the mere continuation of some sort of relationship. He sent her a poem ("Poema Pial"), just composed, that would have the effect of certifying his mental instability. (35)

As an interpretation it is plausible within the parameters of what was known in 1987 and still remains of interest today. But it also, besides avoiding the issue of Ophelia's agency, imputes motives to Pessoa that simple chronology fails to sustain. This poem could still be read as if it were indeed meant to convince Ophelia of Pessoa's madness and as such dissuade her from entertaining any prospects for a future together given its date of 1930 and the short duration of their second relationship, which Pessoa started breaking already on 29 September 1929, when he announces his need to dedicate himself exclusively to his literary work. However, the other text, the letter sent by Campos, still at the start of their renewed relationship on 9 September 1929, should not be seen as such a threat even if, on its surface, it would appear much more antagonistic, with its injunction for Ophelia to throw away the

image of Pessoa down the sink. Rather, one must see that both texts, the one signed by Campos and the one signed by Íbis, as well as Ophelia's answers directed to both Campos and Pessoa in separate missives, are interlinked plays with that same notion of the "mental image" of the poem that Ophelia supposedly is advised to discard, and to which one perhaps would not be wrong to add the by now famous postcard with Pessoa drinking a glass of red wine and which re-kindled their relationship when he sent it to Ophelia with the playful caption: "Fernando Pessoa em flagrante delitro".

2.

The systematic devaluation of the visual in relation to modernity and modernism has been identified and mapped by Giovanni Cianci in his essay on "The New Critical Demotion of the Visual in Modernism" from 2007. Obviously, as he also points out, there have been many individual studies of this or that writer who have paid attention to visual elements, and here I would like to cite just a few that have been particularly relevant for me, such as Carolin Duttlinger's *Kafka and Photography* (2007) or Rosa Martelo's *O Cinema da Poesia* (2013). Nonetheless, it is still rare to find studies of modernism that take into account the visual unless specifically dedicated to visual arts as such. And there is no comprehensive study of the importance of the visual in modernism, just as usually any such comprehensive studies tend to limit themselves to Anglo-American modernism, only occasionally straying further afield to consider usually highly recognized figures of high modernism such as Kafka or Proust. Even the recent volume specifically on *Portuguese Modernisms: Multiple Perspectives on Literature and the Visual Arts*, edited by Steffen Dix and Jerónimo Pizarro, still shows how overwhelmingly the focus is on the textual rather than the visual. The absence of

Pessoa from more general studies of modernism is an anomaly that can perhaps be explained given the insignificance of Portugal and Portuguese in world affairs and their eccentricity even in the more restricted panorama of European literature, but which it is important to redress as it might serve to reconsider anew some of the predicates of European modernism. The ignorance, not to say downright hostility, on the part of some critics to engage Pessoa in such wider and different perspectives, still holds sway and, in spite of some challenges posed by the incursion of younger scholars into the highly contested field, much ground must still be claimed and it is imperative to watch out for a return to a renewed emphasis on national culture even when bare of nationalist claims. For all of the importance to understand any given writer within his or her specific intellectual tradition – and Pessoa’s was especially broad –, I find it symptomatic when a well-known critic, even with a comparatist background, in a just published review of the latest study of Pessoa, erects a canon of the best five books on Pessoa and excludes all but Portuguese scholars. The inclusion of a book by Eduardo Lourenço, his *Pessoa Revisitado*, or the contemplation of Mário Cesariny’s provocative *O Virgem Negra* ameliorate the charge of conservatism but do not explain the lack of reference to Brazilian, German, and American scholars or even to preeminent Portuguese ones such as Maria Irene Ramalho and José Gil. Or one could consider Rita Patrício’s *Episódios: Da Teorização Estética em Fernando Pessoa* (2012), certainly essential reading for anyone concerned with Pessoa’s relation to aesthetics, and arguably one of the most significant books on Pessoa at the moment, which still does not properly address the question of the image and its importance, or the visual in general in the writings of Pessoa.

Perhaps what I am advocating is not so much a focus on aesthetics – even as that cannot be ignored – as an attention to what Jacques Rancière has termed *aisthesis*, going back to its original meaning as

involving a form of understanding predicated on a synergy of the senses and focusing on the visual, or ocular. In any case, in both *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss* (2013) and *O silêncio das sereias* (2015) I tried to start an examination of the importance of the visual and specifically of the image in the *Book of Disquiet*. In both cases I focused on photography and film, and I am aware of the limitations of my own discussion of either medium in relation to Soares. In a sense, it was that very notion of the inadequacy of my work that has propelled me to try to narrow my focus and to enlarge my scope simultaneously. In the studies of the *Book of Disquiet* I was driven primarily by the desire to make sense of that text as a key theoretical text, or, to be more precise, to try to start answering Alain Badiou's call for us to become contemporaries of Pessoa. That is, to accept that Pessoa had already raised some of the key questions of modernity, questions which had not yet been fully answered and to which it should be our task to turn our attention, especially if one values a socially relevant approach to the study of culture in general and of philosophy and literature in particular. At the risk of simplifying too much, let me just briefly cite one of Badiou's key statements on Pessoa, which I tried to develop with the help of other interventions, such as those of Silvina Rodrigues Lopes and Maria Irene Ramalho, and which apply exactly to the process of negation contained in the injunction by Campos for Ophelia to discard the image of Pessoa:

. . . Pessoa is the inventor of a quasi-labyrinthine usage of negation distributed throughout the verse such that there is no guarantee that the negated term can ever be *fixed*. We can thus say that, in contrast to the strictly dialectical usage of negation in Mallarmé, there is in Pessoa a *floating negation* destined to infect the poem with a constant equivocation between affirmation and negation, or rather, that there is a very recognizable species

of affirmative reticence that ultimately vouchsafes that the most explosive manifestations of the power of being come to be corroded by the more insistent renegotiations of the subject. (Badiou 2005: 39)

As part of my reading of the *Book of Disquiet* and its emphasis on images, I had to contend with what must be seen as arguably the most important studies of the time, Walter Benjamin's very well-known essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and his equally important, if less cited, *Arcades Project*. One of my claims is that Pessoa, even a few years before Benjamin, was already grappling precisely with very similar theoretical questions, even if not articulating them in as systematic a way as Benjamin. In many ways the project of the *Book of Disquiet* bears many similarities to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, especially in its emphasis on the fragmentary as constitutive of modernity. My point is not one of precedence, irrelevant as far as I am concerned, and especially so since Pessoa's texts to a great extent remained unpublished until many decades after. But in pursuing that line of comparison it became evident that much more attention should be paid to the question of the visual in Pessoa. Focusing on Bernardo Soares has allowed me to sketch some provisional and temporary answers to the questions I think Pessoa's own power and intellectual range force us to pose. It also showed the inadequacy of confining the inquiry to Bernardo Soares. Expanding it to other Pessoa texts such as those signed by Álvaro de Campos is a necessary step and even if I might not be able by myself to carry that work through to its logical conclusion given the sheer vastness of materials, I think that by drawing on both Soares and Campos as two of the closest heteronyms to Pessoa himself, it might be possible to expand my own limited field of vision.

3.

On a first impression, references to vision and seeing appear more concentrated and developed in Soares than in Campos. The *Book of Disquiet*, after all, can be seen as Pessoa's most intense theoretical work, beginning with its fragmentation and the impossibility of ever concluding it. For all of Campos' acid take on life, Soares' seemingly more mundane, quiet, and effacing tone might be more radically indicative of an infinite modernity, a modernity rightfully understood as a project still incomplete and always renewed, in Habermasian terms. Campos' strident manifestos in a sense are much more tied to a specific period in time, even if it could be argued that the time for a new radicalism has never been more needed in Europe. For the moment I would like to bracket such conjectures. Indeed, I will limit myself to the assertion that, although understanding and sharing a monumental frustration at witnessing the reactionary and crippling effects of the abuse, devaluation, and then emptying, of the term modernity by conservative elements all across Europe as highlighted by Fredric Jameson in *A Singular Modernity* (2002) and Cristopher Prendergast in "Codeword Modernity" (2003), I retain the hope, deluded as it may be, that lessons might still be drawn from the past and applied towards the future.

The first line of inquiry that must be applied to a consideration of Campos' use of the visual is to try to clarify exactly what is meant by "image" and how Campos uses it. Any writer, but certainly a poet, will always depend on the use of images and metaphors in order to communicate. In the brief letter with which I opened these reflections, Campos asks Ophelia to discard the mental image she has of Pessoa. As such the term "image", as used there, is not properly a concrete object, it is not a photograph or painting or film. Nonetheless such an image is also not a simple metaphor and much less an abstraction. It is meant to stand in for the individual

himself who could not, properly speaking, be discarded down the drain. But neither can the mental image itself – unless what is at stake is understood as a complex process of substitutions, in which the image stands in for the material individual and at the same time also stands in for the representation of such an individual. In other words, this too can be understood as yet another instance of the same process identified by Badiou. Here, the absence of the concrete individual and its replacement by the mental presence of the image is what enables the discarding action Campos recommends to Ophelia and which, in a sense, is part and parcel of that other substitution of a presence by an absence, the letter for the person, Campos for Pessoa.

Even if perhaps less numerous or less developed in Campos than in Soares, the references to vision, to eyes, to seeing, to images, even directly to photography and cinema, are very frequent. As such, I think that even though not to be categorically separated from the use of metaphors, the reliance on more concrete forms of images in the discourse of Campos offers a more assured line of inquiry. At the same time, I would also like to bring in dreaming in connection with the visual, as I did in the case of the *Book of Disquiet*, since dreams are often presented as a kind of imaging process. In this regard I think that a comparison to other European modernists might also be profitable. Indeed, given the fact that modernity has been associated so strongly with different forms of large scale social dreams, the varied utopias and dystopias on the left and right, as well as with the radical understanding of the Self emblemized in Freud's work on dreams, it is only strange to think that dreaming has not yet been made a major element for any study of modernism as a whole. Laura Marcus, who is one of the few to call attention to the visual in modernism, in her just published *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (2014), promises to start changing that particular gap, even if still somewhat limited in scope. Of all

references to dreams in Campos is there any better known than the opening of “Tabacaria”?:

Não sou nada.

Nunca serei nada.

Não posso querer ser nada.

À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo. (199)

The references to dreams are never far from an understanding of dreaming as a visual form of knowing as when, in the second of the “Two Fragments of Odes”, we read: “Platão, sonhando, viu a idea de Deus” (61). Dreaming, both good and haunting, is a privileged way of being, as in this verse of “Ode Marítima”: “E fazendo-me ver e sonhar isto tudo só com a pele e as veias” (89), or in “Ode Marcial”:

Eu o proprio abysmo que sonhei,

Eu, que via em tudo caminhos e atalhos de sombra

E a sombra e os caminhos e os atalhos estavam em mim!

Ah, estou liberto. . .

Mestre Caeiro, voltei á tua casa do monte

E vi o mesmo que vias, mas com meus olhos,

Verdadeiramente com meus olhos,

Verdadeiramente verdadeiros. . .

Campos’ relationship to the outside world is preeminently visual:

Chego á janella e vejo a rua com uma nitidez absoluta.

Vejo as lojas, vejo os passeios, vejo os carros que passam,

Vejo os entes vivos vestidos que se cruzam,

Vejo os cães que tambem existem. (203)

But so is memory, which practically always is expressed as a form of seeing again, as this mention of the memory of his master Caeiro makes more than clear: “Meu mestre, meu mestre, perdido tão cedo! Revejo-o na sombra que sou em mim, na memória que conservo do que sou de morto... (454).

The weariness so typical of Campos is extremely well condensed in a poem, signed by Pessoa himself, with the suggestive title of “Dreams, Systems, Ideals...” In this brief poem the importance of vision is again inescapable:

Fito a água insistente contra o cais,
E, como flocos de um papel rasgado,
A ela dando-os como a um justo fado,
Sigo-os com olhos em que não há mais
Que um vão desassossego resignado.

Fredric Jameson, who has written extensively on both modernity and film, has never paid special attention to how the visual is constitutive of modernism itself. Nonetheless, in *Signatures of the Visible* (1992), he advances a series of reflections on the visual that I would like to draw on, not for a study of film but in order to apply to Campos and Pessoa’s use of the visual as a form of being and being in modernity. Jameson typically starts with a rhetorical flourish when he says that “[t]he visual is *essentially* pornographic,” a deliberately excessive claim that can be left for that – even though Campos at one point also maintains that “seeing, for him, is a sexual perversion”: “Ah, olhar é em mim uma perversão sexual!” (53). Seeing, as Jameson maintains, has become pervasive of our contemporary society and in a sense already was becoming in Pessoa’s time. To a certain extent perhaps, the denigration of the visual in mid-century might not have been anything more than a belated reaction to what was coming to dominate our modes of perception. Jameson’s preoccupation with

an ontology of the present, which would “demand archaeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past” (Jameson 2002: 215), is already adumbrated by Campos too when he deploys yet another form of seeing: “Ólho e o passado é uma especie de futuro para mim” (I look and the past is a kind of future for me) (63). Vision and fields, the vision of fields, for Campos, and for Pessoa, is not just a form of relating to reality and to the past but also of knowing and dreaming all his possible selves, of multiplying the fields of vision: “Funde n’um campo teu todos os campos que vejo” (Fuse in a field of your own all the fields that I see, 57).

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